

The Phial Of Dread By An Analytic Chemist

First Day's Journal

I BELIEVE that I am now safe. This part of Columbia Street is not much visited by any people who ever knew me. The other end is in Grand Street. I doubt whether any of my acquaintances have vivid recollection of that end either. As for myself, I was aware of neither end nor middle till three days ago. Being in Broadway, with an indefinite terror hanging on my shoulders like a cloak—starting at every louder voice of man, woman, or child—recoiling from every rapidly approaching stranger who looked me in the face—I naturally enough wished to get away—any where out of the bustle. On my left hand was Grand Street; to turn into it was the most obvious method of escaping from Broadway. So I *did* turn. For a block beyond Brooks's great limbo of possible but undeveloped pantaloons Grand Street keeps a fashionable air. Thus far are whiffs of Broadway sucked into its draft; thus far you meet Broadway faces; thus far you are reminded of Broadway—are not quite at ease with the idea of being out of it—may at any moment be accosted by somebody you have met before on the great pave. I walked faster, therefore. Broadway began to fade out; the Bowery character became slowly dominant. I reached—I crossed the Bowery. Now I began to breathe freer. I was pretty sure—growing surer—that I should not be recognized; and the cloak lifted from my shoulders. The terror did not leave me, but it followed quietly afar off.

A strange place is the part of Grand Street I was going through now, to be sure! Quite a Broadway by itself, though not *the* Broadway, thank Heaven! but a sort of shabby Broadway come to New York to visit its merchant-prince cousin; and not being recognized as a connection, going off in a huff and setting up for itself—the Broadway of the east to west, entirely independent of the north to south aristocrat. Or to the speculative mind it might seem an old shell shed by Broadway the Magnificent thirty years ago, while marble and Albert granite were unconceived—a shell captured by the hermit crab called Grand Street, and peacefully lived in ever since; the ghost of old Broadway, as known to our fathers, reappearing across the track of young Broadway, yet a ghost sociable, responsive, fearless of daylight, not to be laid. All such thoughts as these whirled through my brain as I strode along with nervous, devious feet, and they seemed to fight back for a short farther distance *the terror*. I hailed them gladly, therefore, and indulged them.

Here were tailors, from the plethora of their shops evidently rejoicing in abundant custom, famous, blessed, well-to-do; and all this within the world of Grand Street—elsewhere unknown. So many green-grocers, with fresh Bermuda potatoes and cucumbers piled up in front of them, supplying a class of citizens who never gave one thought to Washington Market. So many celebrated doctors,

all in black and gilt on the dull sides of the two-story brick houses. Dentists, on great door-plates of tarnished mock silver—and I had never heard of them before. Mouths tilled, teeth pulled, backs clothed, children educated—all trades and professions going on—even a wholesale dry-goods store taking up two numbers, like a Murray Street or Liberty Street firm, and selling dollars' worths to its small neighbors who did the pennyworth business; and evidently none of all these depended in the least on any other part of New York for its living. I breathed free in Grand Street, more and more.

All the baggage that it was at present convenient for me to carry was a carpet-bag, not over heavy. I had that in my hand. What, then, was to prevent my taking lodgings in Grand Street? I should not be traced here; the chances were a thousand to one against my ever seeing a known face; and these were the qualifications which just now would make the most miserable tenement worth double the most sumptuous parlor of the St. Nicholas. Why not take lodgings here?—yes, why not?

As I asked myself this question I stood, with the carpet-bag in my hand, vacillating from one foot to the other, and once or twice turning completely around. Take lodgings? Yes, to be sure. Why not?

But my eye struck a building somewhat taller than the rest, on the opposite side of the street. In its door stood a bent man, with the general air about him of being up all night, drinking beer and eating Limburger cheese. His poll was bald; in his hand was a dispensatory, and he peered downward over it through some very round spectacles, as if he were suspecting arsenic in the bricks and meant to sublimate it by a look; on his right was a great green bottle; over his head, a blue; on his left, a red one; and far up, under the third-story windows, in very black letters, was printed all across the house-front,

Deutsche Apotheke.

The cold sweat came out in large drops upon my forehead. The German on the opposite side lifted his eyes from the arsenical bricks and fixed them upon me! Was I—? No! He quietly put up his dispensatory, and drawing a meerschaum from the depths of his loose greasy coat, filled it, lighted it, and began to smoke. But he had given me a start—such a start! I would not have lived in that vicinity for untold gold. All trembling, I pushed on.

Supposing they had come in search of me even into Grand Street? Who? Why, any body—any body that I had ever known. Supposing they should track me even into that improbable locality, how would they seek me? By my affinities, no doubt. I was a chemist; among chemists they would seek me; and to be near that man of drugs there beyond were—well, to speak plainly, death! I hoped to Heaven he had not seen me clearly with those horrible round goggles of his!

Fleeing from him, I passed street after street, still keeping in Grand, when of a sudden, at one corner, my eye was arrested by the faded word "Columbia," in dead old paint, on a dead old billet, on a dead old brick wall. The rains had plowed its impress for how many years only the Heaven from which they came could tell,

scrubbing at it assiduously, but as yet not quite able, with all their housemaid energy, to obliterate the stain. "Columbia"—I paused and looked north. The street descends a little, as if it were going to lead down into pleasant valleys, then remembers itself, recalls the fact that it is a city street, and mounts to go staidly on again. But afar I could perceive signs of almost country quiet. There were some green trees—green still, while all the urban parks were taking their dust-baptism, and the lilac leaves, mad for thirst, in St. John's church-yard, might be written on with the finger and keep their record a week. There was one lazy omnibus utterly empty hurrying through it, far, far up, as if astray there by mistake, and running what seemed homeward with much bewilderment and sense of not having any business there. I saw no one on the east sidewalk as far as the eye reached. On the west a workman sat about midway between me and the farthest visible point, on the grass which sprung up along the curb, his feet in the dry gutter, eating his dinner out of a tin pail quite pastorally. He had not been building anything. He had only been taking down a row of decayed tree-boxes; they lay in a neat pile near him, waiting for some unlikely cart. When he went away business there would be none in that street.

My mind was made up. I would get lodgings in Columbia Street. If possible, just a little northward of the middle.

If I were a bank-defaulter—a traitor to government—a fallen clergyman—a gallant who had brought gall into the heart—oblivion upon the head of a once pure wife, and were flying the mad, tireless husband—if I were any thing disgraced—in danger—I would make this same point my aim—I would run hither to hide me. If I were a murderer—But oh, hush! that word is too awful!

For when people came to hunt me, the first supposition would be that I was escaping to foreign parts. That idea would draw off a large part of my pursuers in the direction of the steamers, the foreign police journals, efforts for extradition. There would be others who would say, "He is in the States—he is too cunning to try such a common, such a well-watched mode of escape as the steamers;" but being of a somewhat timid mind themselves, they would be little likely to conceive of a man in peril staying in the great, public city. These the suburbs and the country would draw off. A few astute, alert, resolute, fearless persons, clinging to the theory that I had never left New York, would stay here to unearth me. And by them I should be looked for through all the kennels of the lower wards—Leonard, Worth, Thomas streets, and such like, and the upper tenement houses, as in further West Thirty-first Street, for instance, and the ungraded streets still higher. I do not suppose that of those pursuers who remained in New York to look for me *three* would consider for a moment the likelihood of my being in the mid-heart of New York at the spot I mentioned. Grant even that these three together came on my trail through Grand Street. At the Bowery such an entirely different life and population from that of Broadway begins to appear—the side-streets lose so entirely all reference to the direction of that main artery, that two of the three would be drawn up or down the Bowery in pursuit of me through these branching ways, and to all of them it would appear most likely that I had involved myself in

this new current, this turbulent whirl, obeying no Broadway laws, to escape discovery. One, perhaps, perplexed with misgivings, would go on his lonely track, from mere perversity, through Grand Street. There is no transverse way into which I fancy he would be less likely to turn than this one. For, in the first place, the air of respectability and quietude about it would turn him away, on the ground that a man in peril of discovery might as sensibly put himself within range of the lynx-eyes and gossiping tongues of a country town as to come here—there would seem no burly-burly to merge one's criminal identity in. In the second place, he *would* have his attention attracted to the mysterious look of that billet on the corner wall, bearing the name—its blank, faded, sympathetic-ink appearance would certainly seem ominous to him—it has a theatrical likeness, seems full of secret meaning, and strongly attracts the man on a murder scent—on a defaulter's or a traitor's scent, I mean. But as he drew closer and read the name—read it and found it, after all its bad looks, to be something as patriotic, as frank, as world-wide as “Columbia,” he would say to himself, “Pish! I'm a fool! One would have expected such a piratical-looking signal to spell out Brinwillière Street, Tofana, Borgia, Burke, or Duval Street! Columbia! as soon expect to find the villain on the steps of the Merchants' Exchange!” And so, led by the force of his own false reasoning, made false at first by the disappointment of his sentiment of mystery, he would pass on and seek me in some of the streets parallel but nearer the river.

I am not a defaulter. I am not a seducer. I am not—Well, there are a great many things which I am not. But I am in Columbia Street. On the day when this clinging terror I have told of chased me from Broadway, I stole into Columbia Street as into a shadow—rather as a moose with the dog hanging to his flank will take to the water, deeper and still deeper, so that if he can not drown off his persecutor he can at least hear him easier in that denser fluid.

I could not content myself with any of the houses for a considerable distance from Grand Street. This one was too full of windows—this one had children playing in its front court—this had too much air of ostentatious mystery in its closed blinds, its dull-papered side-lights at the listed front door—and tying up the overgrown shoot of a straggling Madeira vine, a young girl, eager-eyed, bare-shouldered, flushed, and with lips half-parted, stood by a trellis just before this one. Oh! ugh! the terror-cloud wrapped me like a cloak of nightmare. I could not walk freely, but merely shuddered along. I moved away by palpitating like a sea-jelly rather than with feet like a man. It was a long way before I could recover myself at all. The terror would not endure the sight of a young girl. She was water to its hydrophobia!

By-and-by I came to a house two stories high—brick, and left unpainted, so that time had made its original scarlet a grave and staid dark red—shaded by two paper mulberries at the lower windows, and above catching shadow from the lime-tree on the street. The front fence was a picket—dark brown and rather higher than ordinary. I touched the gate, and it did not creak. On a dark door-plate, of old, silvery metal, with mourning lines about its rim, was the name John L. Jones. The door was grained in imitation of mahogany, and its *tout ensemble* was coffin.

You might almost expect, if you opened that door, to see John L. Jones lying pale and still in cerements behind it—a most respectable man with no nonsense about him—and dead. I was drawn to this house. Who would ever come to look for me in the house of a man named John L. Jones? Who would seek for me, the living, among the dead—or those who looked so dead as the inhabitants of this house must? Had there been a *morgue* in New York, among *its* dead they might have sought me, but not here—not here!

It suited me. I swung the noiseless gate and passed into the silent yard—over the sweating, mould-chinked flag-stones of the shady approach, that echoed not to the foot—up the damp, green-bordered steps of cracked freestone. Ah! there is a bell—a brass handle, very small, and lurking in a deep little recess by the architrave, as if it would not break the deadness by being pulled—hiding from the sound of its own tongue. And this alone took away from the coffin look of the entrance. But when my shaky, undecided hand pulled it I found it not so incongruous with the general keeping—a slow, long-measured succession of muffled tinkles followed the pull—a trickling of mournful drops of sound far down through some dank, cellary air—not a ringing, but a tolling, as if the ghost of some long-dead man had died a second time to become a still fainter ghost—a ghost of a ghost—and the spirits in the first stage—the undiluted survivors—were tolling their chapel chime at his funeral. Link—link—link—link—link.

It suited me better. Presently I heard the steady, unimpassioned tread of middle-aged foot-steps—the skeleton of a sexton walking in slippers of cemetery-moss, it might have been, coming to let me in to the burial-yard. The door opened like the gate, equally without creaking, and I saw a quiet, pale face looking inquiringly into my own—listlessly, not forcefully, inquiring—the face of a woman weary with long griefs which had worn out her resistance to them—a face forty in years, a thousand in cares.

“Mrs. Jones—Mrs. John L. Jones?” said I. The woman nodded faintly without change of expression.

“I have come,” I continued, “to ask if I can have a room in your house—a back one if possible—in which I may sleep and have my meals quietly by myself. I am willing to pay liberally. All I need is *quiet*, and you seem to have that here.”

“Myfi Cymraes—Shawad Sais Dembid.”

This, as nearly as I can spell it, was the sound that came from those wan, changeless lips in reply. I understood it to mean—“I am a Welshwoman, and speak no English”—for I had been with the Welsh, at their settlement in Remsen, in Middle New York, for a month of one summer, and caught just a smattering of their strange tongue. I brought all my vocabulary to the occasion, and rejoined,

“Bawach—Odur—Gwelly—Tan,” which is, being interpreted, “bread, water, a bed, and a fire.” This I intended as a concise symbol for my whole want of food and lodging, at the same time pulling a handful of silver and a roll of bills from my wallet to aid the intelligibility of the remark.

The woman motioned me in. I was left standing in the entry while she retreated to the basement; and then, from below, I heard her voice mix with a gruffer one,

which seemed to indicate that John L. Jones, contrary to all appearances, was *not* in his coffin, but at his dinner. After which she returned, and led the way up a narrow and greasy-carpeted flight of stairs. At the top of it she turned a knob, and disclosed to me a vacant room. No, not vacant in the sense of being unfurnished; but there was a dead smell in it, and nobody sat there; and the only fly on the window-panes was dead, and stuck steadily there, held by stiffened gluey moisture. There were clothes hanging on the walls on rusty iron hooks—coats, vests, pantaloons. And over the mantle-piece was a dim, bleared daguerrotype. It was a man's—a man who looked as Mrs. John L. Jones might have done when she was, a long time ago, young and handsome. On the frame was pasted a scrap out of some fine-print paper like the *Herald*. I drew close to it and read:

“John L Jones, Jun., in the 25th year of his age, being the last of twelve children born to his afflicted parents, John L. and Bendigedig Winifred Jones, died of heart complaint, at the residence of his father in this city, June the 12th.”

This was June the 19th, one week exactly.

As the woman saw me looking at it, she pointed first to it, then to the bed. It was the bed where her last son died! And our interview ended in my taking the room, at eight dollars a week, my food to be sent up to me, and my solitude never to be invaded by the sweeper, the bedmaker, or any living being.

I was suited. The position, as I said when I began this day's journal, strikes me, just as it struck me then, favorably in respect to safety. The hunters who chance to come after me, and in all this vast chaos of houses, this hive of involved yet separate and distinct cities, New York, track me out to No. — Columbia Street, must be omniscient! This number of all—this street of all.

I keep this journal, because if I hold my secret I shall go mad. I keep this journal, because to tell it but on paper were ruin—death. And I think in this way I shall be safe from pursuit—safe also from going crazy.

I have gone out of the house into the street but once since I came here. I crept forth this evening at dusk, and found, as far off from my lodgings as possible, a hardware store. I bought a saw, a screw-driver, some screws, a couple of gimlets, and a chisel. The saw is thin and fine, of that description known as a compass-saw. I then went to a grocer's and purchased a bottle of sweet-oil. Saws go quite silently well oiled, unless you strike knots. Lastly, I found a carpenter's shop, still open. There were journey-men doing jobs for themselves after hours, inside, and I easily got some nice pine boards of them, fair and smooth planed. I shall go to work to-morrow.

Second Day's Journal

I HAVE done good work to-day. I have put the memorial of my terror out of sight. It is safe; no one can know where it is but I.

Quietly, at dawn, I began operations. I am sure none of the family were awake. I listened at the key-hole of John L. Jones; he and his wife were in heavy slumber.