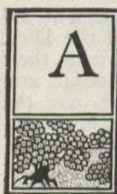


# Gagtooth's Image

## A Weird Tale with a Local Touch to It

By JOHN CHARLES DENT



ABOUT three o'clock in the afternoon of Wednesday, the fourth of September, 1884, I was riding up Yonge Street, in the city of Toronto, on the top of a crowded omnibus. We had just passed Isabella and were rapidly nearing Charles Street, when I noticed on my right hand a large, dilapidated frame building, standing in solitary isolation a few feet back from the highway, and presenting the appearance of a veritable Old Curiosity Shop.

I had no sooner arrived abreast of the gateway leading to the southward, than my eyes rested upon something which instantly caused them to open themselves to their very widest capacity, and constrained me to signal the driver to stop; which he had no sooner done than I alighted from my seat and requested him to proceed on his journey without me.

From my elevated seat on the roof of the 'bus, I had caught a hurried glimpse of a commonplace-looking little marble figure, placed on the top of a pedestal, in the yard already referred to, where several other figures in marble, wood, bronze, stucco and what not, were exposed for sale.

The particular figure which had attracted my attention was about fifteen inches in height, and represented a little child in the attitude of prayer. Anyone seeing it for the first time would probably have taken it for a representation of the Infant Samuel. I have called it commonplace; and considered as a work of art, such it undoubtedly was; yet it must have possessed a certain distinctive individuality, for the brief glance which I had caught of it, even at that distance, had been sufficient to convince me that the figure was an old acquaintance of mine. It was in consequence of that conviction that I had dismounted from the omnibus, forgetful, for the moment, of everything but the matter which was uppermost in my mind.

I lost no time in passing through the gateway leading into the yard, and in walking up to the pedestal upon which the little figure was placed. Turning it upside down, my eyes rested on these words, deeply cut into the little circular throne upon which it rested:—JACKSON: PEORIA, 1854.

At this juncture the proprietor of the establishment walked up to where I was standing beside the pedestal. "Like to look at something in that way, sir?" he asked—"we have more inside."

"What is the price of this?" I asked, indicating the figure in my hand.

"That, sir; you may have that for fifty cents—of course without the pedestal, which don't belong to it."

I paid over the fifty cents; and, declining with thanks F's offer to send my purchase home to me, I marched off with it down the street, and made the best of my way back to the Rossin House, where I had been staying for some days.

From what has been said, it will be inferred that I—a stranger in Canada—must have had some special reason for incumbering myself in my travels with an intrinsically worthless piece of common Columbia marble.

I had a reason. I had often seen that little figure before; and the last time I had seen it, previous to the occasion above mentioned, had been at the town of Peoria, in the State of Illinois, some time in the month of June, 1855.

There is a story connected with that little praying figure; a story which, to me, is a very touching one; and I believe myself to be the only human being capable of telling it.

In the year 1850, and for I know not how long previously, there lived at Peoria, Illinois, a journeyman-blacksmith named Abner Fink. He was employed at the foundry of Messrs. Gowanlock and Van Duzer, and was known for an excellent workman, of steady habits, and good moral character. But he was still more conspicuous (on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle) for another quality—that of reticence. It was very rarely indeed that he spoke to anyone, except when called upon to reply to a question; and even then it was noticeable that he invariably employed the fewest and most concise words in his vocabulary. If brevity were the body, as well as the soul of wit, Fink must have been about the wittiest man that ever lived, the Monosyllabic Traveller not excepted.

And yet this utter lack of sociability could scarcely have arisen from positive surliness or unkindness of disposition. Instances were not wanting in which he had given pretty strong evidence that he carried beneath that rugged and uncouth exterior a kinder and more gentle heart than is possessed by most men. Upon one occasion he had jumped at the imminent peril of his life, from the bridge that spans the Illinois river just above the entrance to the lake, and had fished up a drowning child from its depths and borne it to the shore in safety. At another time, hearing his landlady say, at dinner, that an execution was in the house of a sick man with a large family, at the other end of the town, he left his dinner untouched, trudged off to the place indicated, and—though the debtor was an utter stranger to him—paid off the debt and costs in full, without taking any assignment of the judgment or other security. Then he went quietly back to his work.

In personal appearance he was short and stout. His age, when I first knew him, must have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of thirty-five. The only peculiarity about his face was an abnormal formation of one of his

front teeth, which protruded, and stuck out almost horizontally. One of the anvil-strikers happening to allude to him one day in his absence by the name of "Gagtooth," the felicity of the sobriquet at once commended itself to the good taste of the other hands in the shop, who thereafter commonly spoke of him by that name, and eventually it came to be applied to him by every one in the town.

My acquaintance with him began when I had been in Peoria about a week. I may premise that I am a physician and surgeon—a graduate of Harvard. Peoria was at that time a comparatively new place, but it gave promise of going ahead rapidly. Messrs. Gowanlock and Van Duzer's foundry was a pretty extensive one for a small town in a comparatively new district. They kept about a hundred and fifty hands employed all the year round,

### Some Old Mystery Tales Revived

HAVE you ever spent an interesting half-hour in an old book-store among old books—you know—the kind that are grouped together on one of the oldest shelves and marked: "Your choice, 10c."? And have you ever discovered, quite accidentally, some little volume that attracted you, for no reason at all, to such a degree that you parted with a dime and longed to get home to explore its yellowed pages?

That is what happened some thirteen years ago when; "The Gerrard Street Mystery and Other Weird Tales," was rescued from the ignominy of the ten-cent counter. It was published in Toronto by The Rose Publishing Co., Toronto, a firm no longer in existence. The author, John Charles Dent, has long since died. In his day he was ranked among the leading historians, chief among his works being: "The Canadian Portrait Gallery," "The Last Forty Years: Canada since the Union of 1841" and a "History of the Rebellion in Upper Canada."

What is most attractive about the little stories is their Canadian setting, in a period when our cities were distinctly in-the-making. For the most part, the scenes are laid in Toronto. They are illustrative of omnibuses and other reminiscences of early days.

We present the first of the series—"Gagtooth's Image" this month. This will be followed by "The Haunted House on Duchess Street," in the April issue. Each is complete in itself, each will compel your interest from start to finish. There is just enough of the weird, enough of mystery in them to fascinate.

—THE EDITORS

and during the busy season this number was more than doubled. It was in consequence of my having received the appointment of medical attendant to that establishment that I buried myself in the west, instead of settling down in my native State of Massachusetts.

Poor Gagtooth was one of my first surgical patients. It came about in this wise. At the foundry, two days in the week, viz., Tuesdays and Fridays, were chiefly devoted to what is called "casting." On these days it was necessary to convey large masses of melted iron, in vessels specially manufactured for that purpose, from one end of the molding shop to the other. It was, of course, very desirable that the metal should not be allowed to cool while in transit, and that as little time as possible should be lost in transferring it from the furnace to the molds. For this purpose Gagtooth's services were frequently called into requisition, as he was by far the strongest man about the place, and could without assistance carry one end of one of the vessels, which was considered pretty good work for two ordinary men.

Well, one unlucky Friday afternoon he was hard at work at this employment, and as was usual with all the hands in the molding shop at such times, he was stripped naked from the waist upwards. He was gallantly supporting one end of one of the large receptacles already mentioned, which happened to be rather fuller than usual of the red-hot molten metal. He had nearly reached the molding-box into which the contents of the vessel were to be poured, when he stumbled against a piece of scantling which was lying in his way. He fell, and as a necessary consequence his end of the vessel fell likewise, spilling the contents all over his body, which was literally deluged by the red, hissing, boiling liquid fire. It must have seemed to the terror-stricken onlookers like a bath of blood.

Further details of the frightful accident, and of my treatment of the case, might be interesting to such of the

readers of this book as happen to belong to my own profession; but to general readers such details would be simply shocking. How even his tremendous vitality and vigor of constitution brought him through it all is a mystery to me to this day. Suffice it to say that he recovered, and that his face bore no traces of the frightful ordeal through which he passed. I don't think he was ever quite the same man as before his accident. I think his nervous system received a shock which eventually tended to shorten his life. But he was still known as incomparably the strongest man in Peoria, and continued to perform the work of two men at the molding-shop on casting days.

DURING the twelve months succeeding his recovery, so far as I am aware, nothing occurred worthy of being recorded in Gagtooth's annals. About the expiration of that time, however, his landlady, by his authority, at his request, and in his presence, made an announcement to the boarders assembled at the dinner-table which, I should think, must literally have taken away their breaths.

Gagtooth was going to be married!

I don't suppose it would have occasioned greater astonishment if it had been announced as an actual fact that the Illinois river had commenced to flow backwards. It was surprising, incredible, but, like many other surprising and incredible things, it was true. Gagtooth was really and truly about to marry. The object of his choice was his landlady's sister, by name Lucinda Bowsby. How or when the wooing had been carried on, how the engagement had been led up to, and in what terms the all-important question had been propounded, I am not prepared to say. I need hardly observe that none of the boarders had entertained the faintest suspicion that anything of the kind was impending. The courtship, from first to last, must have been somewhat of a piece with that of the late Mr. Barkis. But alas! Gagtooth did not settle his affections so judiciously, nor did he draw such a prize in the matrimonial lottery as Barkis did. Two women more entirely dissimilar, in every respect, than Peggotty and Lucinda Bowsby can hardly be imagined. Lucinda was nineteen years of age. She was pretty, and, for a girl of her class and station in life, tolerably well educated. But she was, notwithstanding, a light, giddy creature—and, I fear, something worse, at that time. At all events, she had a very questionable sort of reputation among the boarders in the house, and was regarded with suspicion by everyone who knew anything about her, poor Gagtooth alone excepted.

In due time the wedding took place. It was solemnized at the boarding-house; and the bride and bridegroom disdaining to defer to the common usage, spent their honeymoon in their own house. Gagtooth had rented and furnished a little frame dwelling on the outskirts of the town, on the bank of the river; and thither the couple retired as soon as the hymeneal knot was tied. Next morning the bridegroom made his appearance at his forge and went to work as usual, as though nothing had occurred to disturb the serenity of his life.

Time passed by. Rumours now and then reached my ears to the effect that Mrs. Fink was not behaving herself very well, and that she was leading her husband rather a hard life of it. However, in the regular course of things I was called upon to assist at the first appearance upon life's stage of a little boy, upon whom his parents bestowed the name of Charlie.

The night of Charlie's birth was the first time I had ever been in the house, and if I remember aright it was the first time I had ever set eyes on Mrs. Fink since her marriage. I was not long in making up my mind about her; and I had ample opportunity for forming an opinion as to her character, for she was unable to leave her bed for more than a month, during which time I was in attendance upon her almost daily. I also attended little Charlie through measles, scarlet-rash, whooping-cough, and all his childish ailments; and in fact I was a pretty regular visitor at the house from the time of his birth until his father left the neighbourhood, as I shall presently have to relate. I believe Mrs. Fink to have been not merely a profligate woman, but a thoroughly bad and heartless one in every respect. She was perfectly indifferent to her husband, whom she shamefully neglected, and almost indifferent to her child. She seemed to care for nothing in the world but dress and strong waters; and to procure these there was no depth of degradation to which she would not stoop.

Charlie was a child made to be loved. When he was two years old he was beyond all comparison the dearest and most beautiful little fellow I have ever seen. His fat, plump, chubby little figure, modelled after Cupid's own; his curly flaxen hair; his matchless complexion, fair and clear as the sky on a sunny summer day; and his bright, round, expressive eyes, which imparted intelligence to his every feature, combined to make him the idol of his father, the envy of all the mothers in town, and the admiration of every one who saw him. At noon, when the great foundry-bell rang, which was the signal for the workmen to go to dinner, Charlie might regularly be seen, toddling as fast as his stout little legs could spin, along the footpath leading over the common in the direction of the workshops. When about halfway across, he would be certain to meet his father, who, taking the child up in his bare, brawny, smoke-begrimed arms, would carry him home—the contrast between the two strongly suggesting Vulcan and

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