

A CALM MAN'S EXPERIENCE IN HIS COFFIN.

BY HERBERT NEWBURY, IN THE BOSTON CONGREGATIONALIST.

The trains collided. I am a calm man. I confess I was startled; but resigned myself manfully, and was calm. I got a thump on my spine and the back of my head. I lay beside the railroad track amid the dying and the dead. I felt pretty well, quite sensible and rational, was not in pain, but I could not move. Even my tongue refused to stir. My body seemed dead, my mind and spirit were in full life. "Remarkable state," calmly reflected I, "wonder what will come of it!"

What came? A doctor came. He chucked me under the chin, turned me the other side up and back again, put his ear to my chest, got no response, muttered, "Dead! Fatal blow on the head and spine," and considerably gave his best attention to the living. I am not only a calm man, but a just. I did not blame him, but inwardly remarked, "My situation is disagreeable—very."

I lay with the unclaimed dead a long while; yet not perhaps very long, for I remember that I calmly reasoned even then: "Time naturally moves slowly in such unpleasant circumstances; my friends will inquire for me when the railroad disaster is known." They did, and I heard snatches of conversation respecting myself as follows: "John Harkee was on the train!" "What was he West for?" "Dead!" "Telegraph back to family." "Charming young wife. Fine baby boy. Hope he leaves them comfortable. Shocking intelligence for her." "She is young and will soon get over it."

My calmness was tried, but I soothed me by reminding myself that I, who loved my Amy most, should least regret that she would so "soon get over it." Yet I tried hard to rise, to cry out, to do anything, to save her the "shock" of the telegram. Alas, my body was practically dead. I wondered if ever another were in a state so afflictive. I recalled recorded facts of persons brought to just such a state by the Syrian fever, who yet revived and lived. I did not quite despair, yet my future to my calmest view looked dark.

Time passed. Voices again said over me, "Telegram from the East. Harkee's remains to be expressed without delay." "No lack of means." "Beautiful corpse. Mercy he was not disfigured. Always was fine looking." "Appears as if asleep; almost as if he were alive and wanted to speak." "Painless death. Wonderful!"

For a moment I was tempted to curse calmness, but an instant's reflection convinced me that the awfulness of my situation demanded absolute self-possession.

Properly enshrouded and encased, I was "expressed without delay," and found myself in my own drawing room, the centre of attraction to a crowd of weeping, admiring, complimentary friends. Such appreciation was quite flattering to my pride. Only for a moment, however, for I calmly reflected that my warmest admirers in death had least appreciated my virtues in life. Among them were hard debtors, hard creditors, despisers of my adversity, envious of my prosperity; hardest of all, slanderers of my good name in life glorified it in death. The few who had been tender ever, and true, wept so silently that they passed my closed eyes almost unrecognized, save that, being very calm, I knew each by the smothered sob, the whispered name, the tender touch, the mysterious magnetism which reveals to the soul the presence of the loved and true. "This won't be edifying were my situation less precarious," reflected I, "but it is more than precarious, positively disastrous; calmness, however, is the part of wisdom."

Where is Amy? Somehow I looked for her love to rescue me—for power there is in such a woman's love. Could I lie there and let her break her heart in twain for me? Surely I must respond to the power of her voice, her touch.

When all were gone she came. Alone with her dead! Voiceless, tearless, in her great anguish. Clinging to me, prostrate beside me, broken-hearted, inconsolable, and I a living man, yet dead to her! It was too horrible. I fainted. Yes, I fainted, but did it calmly, knowing when and why I swooned; and when I revived remembered it all. With that memory my last hope of rescue fled, and striving to forget the trifling incidents of a living en-coffinment and burial, I solemnly reflected upon my prospects for eternity. The present seemed to me a momentous hour, pregnant with eternal con-

sequences. Wholly conscious was I that my soul was not prepared for its immortality. My past life, virtuous, just, reasonably charitable and quite equable, was to me, in that hour, loathsome. Why had I wasted on trifles the powers of an immortal nature! Why neglected the Word of eternal life! Why failed to test the power of Christ's salvation! Might I even now, acquaint myself with Him and—

Such salutary and appropriate reflections were rudely interrupted by a fashionable undertaker, and his body-guard of assistants. The coffin, in which I had begun to feel somewhat at home, was regarded as not good enough for the decay of mortal flesh, and I heard whispered gratulation that this new one cost five hundred dollars, and that as much more money would not pay for the flowers which were to adorn it. "Lovely corpse," briskly observed the undertaker, "money plenty; rare opportunity to make our best display. Funeral at the church, too. Crowds drawn by the railroad disaster and Harkee's popularity. Big funeral sermon expected; minister specially happy in his material there, too; such a faultless life! calm, serene as a summer's eve; I could almost preach upon it myself; so unlike my last case, when the minister was positively at his wit's end to get hold of anything to the credit of the departed. He did his best, though, and made him out almost a saint. But Harkee, here was 'lovely in his life, and in death he is not divided'—that's not exactly the wording of the text, perhaps; the preaching you know, is not my vocation, but my business is, as Harkee was lovely out of his coffin, to make him lovely within it; so here's to duty." And amid subdued laughter I was lifted out of my snug retreat, and re-arrayed for the tomb in more elaborate and costly apparel. All this, as before intimated, sadly sundered the thread of my solemn reflections, and by the time I was satisfactorily bestowed, and adjusted in the five hundred dollar casket, I was so fatigued and disgusted that, while endeavoring to recover my habitual equanimity, I fell asleep only to be awaked by fresh devices of the undertaker, preparatory to the private funeral, which I understood was to precede the public. It was the mention of my wife's name that awakened me.

"Mrs. Harkee is hard to manage about the funeral," said the undertaker. "She's not fond of display, would like to be much with her dead—preposterous idea that; deprives our profession of its only opportunity. Great ado there is to find one withered rose-bud, which I lost out of the first coffin. It seems he put it on her breast the morning he left home, so she wants that and makes nothing of five hundred dollars' worth of hot-house flowers. They couldn't get her off her knees to have her mourning fitted till we appealed to her respect for the dead. She don't care even for his funeral sermon, but told the minister—looking herself more like a corpse than Harkee here—says she to her pastor, 'Dear sir, this is an hour for honest words, and alas, neither you nor yet I have interested ourselves to know if his soul, in life, was at peace with God. Summoned in an instant, what dare we say of its future? I would give my soul to know that his is safe; for I love him better than I do myself.'"

"God save her intellect," solemnly put in the florist. "She must be going wild to answer the reverend gentleman in that way. So many tender, sweet things she might have told him to ornament the funeral sermon. The effect of that lily on the pillow is fine; the cheek, by contrast, has almost a life-like glow. Uncommon corpse!"

I tried to be calm in my coffin and prepare to die, but such a fuss was there, above, about, around, over and under, beside and beneath me, with mottoes, wreaths, crosses, harps, crowns, anchors, and no end of floral decorations, that I felt my poor soul's chances were so slender as to be scarcely worth considering.

"Sweet mottoes," breathed an amiable lady, Amy's friend, overlooking the work. "Safe in the arms of Jesus," "Sweet rest in Heaven," "The gates ajar," "Angels welcome thee," "A crown upon his forehead a harp within his hand." Beautiful floral idea, that actual crown and harp of flowers, with the rest of the motto spelled in flowers between! That must go over to the church."

Awful to relate, the last "beautiful floral idea" so struck my inherent sense of the ridiculous that I laughed—in spirit—and then, either for horror that I had laughed, or from an empty stomach, I once more fainted, and revived only as they jostled me on entering the church. The first sounds I took in were the

words spoken by the minister as I was borne up the aisle: "He that liveth and believeth in Me shall never die." My soul grasped them. In sweet rest? No, no. That was my mother's rest, my Amy's rest. I knew there is such a rest, and that I possessed it not. Yet the organ and the choir were chanting, "Requiescat in Pace." I stopped my ears, to use a metaphor, and said boldly to my soul: "Be calm, and deal truly with thyself, O immortal soul; though organs, choirs, hymns, mottoes, sermons and their authors lie, lie thou not to thyself, for soon thou wilt be with thy God, where truth alone shall stand." Thus charged, my soul made honest answer: "Thou art no believer, and 'He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.'" The singing of sweet hymns of love and peace in Heaven kept creeping to mock me, and over my head the pastor read of the pearly gates and golden streets, and I caught, "The Lamb is the light thereof," and "Whose names are in the book of life."

They meant kindly for me, I knew; but they all might have known that if my spirit heard I should know better than to think it appropriate. Then my solemn dealing with my soul was sadly put about by the sermon. It seems very ungrateful to come down on a man, especially on a good man, my own dear pastor, he my personal friend and college classmate, too, for anything so well meant, so solemn, tender, appropriate, and altogether up to the times as a model funeral sermon over a calm, peaceable, moral man in his coffin. But truth compels me to say it almost cost me my soul to lie there and listen to it. It put me into Heaven so neatly, in theory, that had not the circumstances made it indispensable for me to get there in reality, and without any but insurmountable delays, its sophistry might have cheated me. It was very distracting to hear what a good son, amiable brother, devoted husband, dear friend, worthy citizen, and benevolent helper, I had been, just as I was agonizing in spirit to learn, ere it was forever too late, the meaning of that belief in the Lord Jesus Christ which is unto eternal life.

Pathetically the sermon closed. The audience were melted to tears, and the organ sobbed in sympathy with the crowds who passed my coffin, soothing their anguish with its glories. Disengaging myself as much as possible from the pageant, I asked myself, candidly, "Am I, at heart, a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ?" and answered my soul, truly, in the negative, "Thou knowest not, O my soul, even faith's meaning." By this time the crowd had passed, and I felt hands busy with the flowers and fol de rols of my funeral toilet, and knew the cover of the casket was to be closed and locked. An awful spiritual anguish, unknown before, seized me, and I wrestled in body, soul and spirit, in the mortal anguish of a calm endeavour to save my body from the grave, that my soul might find the way of eternal life. But the casket closed! The key clicked in the lock, and I was borne away, fainting as I went. Yet I fainted calmly, saying to myself "I am fainting, and the grave will not hurt me. But what of that second death?"

The casket lid lifted. A breath of pure winter air seemed to penetrate my being, as the undertaker said, "His wife will have a last look before we lower him. Some one has found and handed her his last gift, that last rose-bud, and she will lay it on his heart. We must humor her." Then my wife's breath was on my lips, warm kisses which I felt, while at the same time I was thrilled with a sharp physical pain, unknown before. As she bowed over me, all overshadowed with her flowing veil, she put her little hand, with the rose-bud, upon my pulseless heart. I gasped. She shrieked, "He lives!" There is a warm spot at his heart!" "Crazy! Stark mad with grief," they muttered, and drew her away. My wife to a mad house! Myself to the grave, and to eternal death! The thought electrified my waking life. I sat up, stood up, in my coffin! I clasped my wife to my heart with my left arm, laid my right hand on my pastor's—for he stood beside me—and said, calmly, solemnly, "Dear pastor, classmate mine, what must I do to be saved?"

He answered as solemnly, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." "There is none other name under Heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."

"So I was reflecting while you preached my funeral sermon; but I understood you to put me in Heaven by another method."

"Oh, that was your funeral sermon, John," he replied, a twinkle of genial humor shining through his tears; "it couldn't hurt you, dead; but alive, don't trust it! don't, I beg! Trust the Lord Jesus Christ. Take Him at His word, as your boy does you."

"Trust Him! I see it!" cried I, joyfully, "why, 'tis plain as day!"

I stepped out of my coffin into my carriage—putting Amy in first—and rode home, a happy believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.