

The Body-Snatchers

From The Mysteries of London

By G. M. W. Reynolds

There is not probably in all London—not even in Saint Giles's nor the Mint—so great an amount of squalid misery and fearful crime huddled together, as in the joint districts of Spitalfields and Bethnal Green. Between Shoreditch Church and Wentworthin Street the most intense pangs of poverty, the most profligate morals, and the most odious crimes, rage with the fury of a pestilence.

Entire streets that are nought but sinks of misery and vice—dark courts, foetid with puddles of black slimy water—alleys, blocked up with heaps of filth, and nauseating with unwholesome odours, constitute, with but little variety, the vast district of which we are speaking.

The Eastern Counties' Railway intersects Spitalfields and Bethnal Green. The traveller upon this line may catch, from the windows of the carriage in which he journeys, a hasty, but alas! too comprehensive glance of the wretchedness and squalor of that portion of London. He may actually obtain a view of the interior and domestic misery peculiar to the neighbourhood—he may penetrate, with his eyes, into the secrets of those abodes of sorrow, vice, and destitution. In summer time, the poor always have their windows open, and thus the hideous poverty of their rooms can be readily descried from the summit of the arches on which the railbad is constructed.

And in those rooms may be seen women half naked, some employed in washing the few rags which they possess, others ironing the linen of a more wealthy neighbour, a few preparing the sorry meal, and numbers scolding, swearing, and quarrelling. At many of the windows, men out of work, with matted hair, black beards, and dressed only in filthy shirts and ragged trousers, lounge all the day long, smoking. From not a few of the open casements hang tattered garments to dry in the sun. Around the doors children, unwashed, uncombed, shoeless, dirty, and uncared for—throng in numbers, a rising generation of thieves and vagabonds.

In the districts of Spitalfields and Bethnal Green the police are but little particular with regard to street-stalls. These portable shops are therefore great in number and in nuisance. Fish, fresh and fried, oysters, sweet-stuff, vegetables, fruit, cheap publications, sop-in-the-pan, shrimps and periwinkles, hair-combs, baked potatoes, liver and lights, curds and whey, shmeep's heads, haddocks and red-herrings, are the principal comestibles which find vendors and purchasers in the public street. The public-houses and the pawnbrokers also drive an excellent trade in that huge section of London.

In a former chapter we have described the region of Saffron Hill: all the streets and courts of that locality are safe and secure when compared with manny in Bethnal Green and Spitalfields. There are lanes and alleys between Shoreditch and Church Street, and in the immediate neighbourhood of time. Railway east of Brick Lane, through which a well-dressed person would not wander within a gold chain round his neck, at night, were he prudent.

Leadimmg from the neighbourhood of Church Street up into the Hackney Road, is a sinuous thoroughfare, composcd of Tyssen Street, Turk Street, Virginia Street, and the Bird-cage Walk; and in the vicinity of these narrow and perilous ways are the Wellington Road (bordered by a ditch of black find), and several vile streets, inhabited by the very lowest of the low, the most filthy of the squalid, and the most profligate of the immoral.

We defy any city upon the face of the earth to produce a district equal in vice, dirt, penury, and fear-inspiring demms, to these which we are now describing.

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The Resurrection Man, the Cracksman, and the Buffer hastened rapidly along the narrow lanes and filthy alleys leading towards Shoreditch Church. They threaded their way in silence, through the jet-black darkness of the night, and without once hesitating as to the particular turnings which they were to follow. Those men were as familiar with that neighbourhood as a person can be with the rooms and passages in his own house.

At length the body-snatchers reached the low wall surmounted with a high railing which encloses Shoreditch churchyard. They were now at the back part of that burial ground, in a narrow and deserted street, whose dark and lonely appearance tended to aid their designs upon an edifice situated in one of the most populous districts in all London.

For some minutes before their arrival an individual, enveloped in a long cloak, was walking up and down beneath the shadow of the wall.

This was the surgeon, whose thirst after science had called into action the energies of the body-snatchers that night.

The Cracksman advanced first, and ascertained that the surgeon had already arrived, and that the coast was otherwise clear.

He then whistled in a low and peculiar manner; and his two confederates came up.

“You have got all your tools?” said the surgeon in a hasty whisper.

“Every one that we require,” answered the Resurrection Man.

“For opening a vault inside the church, mind?” added the surgeon, interrogatively.

“You show us the vault, sir, and we’ll soon have out the body,” said the Resurrection Man.

“All right,” whispered the surgeon; “and my own carriage will be in this street at three precisely. We shall have plenty of time—there’s no one stirring till five, and it’s dark till seven.”

The surgeon and the body-snatchers then scaled the railing, and in a few moments stood in the churchyard.

The Resurrection Man addressed himself to his two confederates and the surgeon, and said, “Do you lie snug under the wall here while I go forward and see how we must manage the door.” With these words he crept stealthily along, amidst the tomb-stones, towards the church.

The surgeon and the Cracksman seated themselves upon a grave close to the wall; and the Buffer threw himself flat upon his stomach, with his ear towards the ground. He remained in this position for some minutes, and then uttered a species of low growl as if he were answering some signal which caught his ears alone.

“The skeleton-keys won’t open the side-door, the Resurrection Man says,” whispered the Buffer, raising his head towards the surgeon and the Cracksman.

He then laid his ear close to the ground once more, and resumed his listening posture.

In a few minutes he again replied to a signal; and this time his answer was conveyed by means of a short sharp whistle.

“It appears there is a bolt: and it will take a quarter of an hour to saw through the padlock that holds it,” observed the Buffer in a whisper.

Nearly twenty minutes elapsed after this announcement. The surgeon’s teeth chattered with the intense cold; and he could not altogether subdue certain feelings of horror at the idea of the business which had brought him thither. The almost mute correspondence which those two men

were enabled to carry on together—the methodical precision with which they performed their avocations—and the coolness they exhibited in undertaking a sacrilegious task, made a powerful impression upon his mind. He shuddered from head to foot:—his feelings of aversion were the same as he would have experienced had a loathsome reptile crawled over his naked flesh.

“It’s all right now!” suddenly exclaimed the Buffer, rising from the ground. “Come along.”

The surgeon and the Cracksman followed the Buffer to the southern side of the church where there was a flight of steps leading up to a side-door in a species of lobby, or lodge. This door was open; and the Resurrection Man was standing inside the lodge.

As soon as they had all entered the sacred edifice, the door was carefully closed once more.

We have before said that the night was cold: but the interior of the church was of a chill so intense, that an icy feeling appeared to penetrate to the very back-bone. The wind murmured down the aisle; and every footstep echoed, like a hollow sound in the distance, throughout the spacious pile.

“Now, sir,” said the Resurrection Man to the surgeon, “it is for you to tell us whereabouts we are to begin.”

The surgeon groped his way towards the communion-table, and at the northern side of the railings which surrounded it he stopped short.

“I must now be standing,” he said, “upon the very stone which you are to remove. You can, however, soon ascertain; for the funeral only took place yesterday morning, and the mortar must be quite soft.”

The Resurrection Man stooped down, felt with his hand for the joints of the pavement in that particular spot, and thrust his knife between them.

“Yes,” he said, after a few minutes’ silence: “this stone has only been put down a day or two. But do you wish, sir, that all traces of our work should disappear?”

“Certainly! I would not for the world that the family of the deceased should learn that this tomb has been violated. Suspicion would immediately fall upon me; for it would be remembered how earnestly I desired to open the body, and how resolutely my request was refused.”

“We must use a candle, then, presently,” said the Resurrection Man; “and that is the most dangerous part of the whole proceeding.”

“It cannot be helped,” returned the surgeon, in a decided tone. “The fact that the side-door has been opened by unfair means must transpire in a day or two; and search will then be made inside the church to ascertain whether those who have been guilty of the sacrilege were thieves or resurrection-men. You see then, how necessary it is that there should remain no proofs of the violation of a tomb.”

“Well and good, sir,” said the Resurrection Man. “You command—we obey. Now, then, my mates, to work.”

In a moment the Resurrection Man lighted a piece of candle, and placed it in the tin shade before alluded to. The glare which it shed was thereby thrown almost entirely downwards. He then carefully, and with surprising rapidity, examined the joints of the large flag-stone which was to be removed, and on which no inscription had yet been engraved. He observed the manner in which the mortar was laid down and noticed even the places where it spread a little over the adjoining stones or where it was slightly deficient. This inspection being completed, he extinguished the light, and set to work in company with the Cracksman and the Buffer.

The eyes of the surgeon gradually became accustomed to the obscurity; and he was enabled to observe to some extent the proceedings of the body-snatchers.

These men commenced by pouring vinegar over the mortar round the stone which they were to raise. They then took long clasp-knives, with very thin and flexible blades, from their pockets; and inserted them between the joints of the stones. They moved these knives rapidly backwards and forwards for a few seconds, so as effectually to loosen the mortar, and moistened the interstices several times with the vinegar.

This operation being finished, they introduced the thin and pointed end of a lever between the end of the stone which they were to raise and the one adjoining it. The Resurrection Man, who held the lever, only worked it very gently; but at every fresh effort on his part, the Cracksman and the Buffer introduced each a wedge of wood into the space which thus grew larger and larger. By these means, had the lever suddenly given way, the stone would not have fallen back into its setting. At length it was raised to a sufficient height to admit of its being supported by a thick log about three feet in length. If you can read this, this story was taken from H M where it was posted after many hours of hard work.

While these three men were thus proceeding as expeditiously as possible with their task, the surgeon, although a man of a naturally strong mind, could not control the strange feelings which crept upon him. It suddenly appeared to him as if he beheld those men for the first time. That continuation of regular and systematic movements—that silent perseverance, faintly shadowed forth amidst the obscurity of the night, at length assumed so singular a character, that the surgeon felt as if he beheld three demons disinterring a doomed one to carry him off to hell!

He was aroused from this painful reverie by the Resurrection Man, who said to him, “Come and help us remove the stone.”

The surgeon applied all his strength to this task; and the huge flag-stone was speedily moved upon two wooden rollers away from the mouth of the grave.

“You are certain that this is the place?” said the Resurrection Man.

“As certain as one can be who stood by the grave for a quarter of an hour in daylight, and who has to recognize it again in total darkness,” answered the surgeon. “Besides, the mortar was soft—”

“There might have been another burial close by,” interrupted the Resurrection Man; “but we will soon find out whether you are right or not, sir. Was the coffin a wooden one?”

“Yes! an elm coffin, covered within black cloth,” replied the surgeon. “I gave the instructions for the funeral myself, being the oldest friend of the family.”

The Resurrection Man took one of the long flexible rods which we have before noticed, and thrust it down into the vault. The point penetrated into the lid of a coffin. He drew it back, put the point to his tongue, and tasted it.

“Yes,” he said, smacking his lips, “the coffin in this vault is an empty one, and is covered with black cloth.”

“I thought I could not be wrong,” observed the surgeon.

The body-snatcher then proceeded to raise the coffin, by means of ropes passed underneath it. This was a comparatively easy portion of their task; and in a few moments it was placed upon the flag-stones of the church.

The Resurrection Man took a chisel and opened the lid within considerable care. He then lighted his candle a second time; and the glare fell upon the pale features of the corpse in its narrow shell.

“This is the right one,” said the surgeon, casting a hasty glance upon the face of the dead body, which was that of a young girl of about sixteen.

The Resurrection Man extinguished the light; and he and his companions proceeded to lift the corpse out of the coffin.

The polished marble limbs of the deceased were rudely grasped by the sacrilegious hands of the body-snatchers; and, having stripped the corpse stark naked, they tied its neck and heels together by means of a strong cord. They then thrust it into a large sack made for the purpose.

The body-snatchers then applied themselves to the restoration of the vault to its original appearance.

The lid of the coffin was carefully fastened down; and that now tenantless bed was lowered into the tomb. The stone was rolled over the mouth of the vault; and one of the small square boxes previously alluded to, furnished mortar wherewith to fill up the joints. The Resurrection Man lighted his candle a third time, and applied the cement in such a way that even the very workman who laid the stone down after the funeral would not have known that it had been disturbed. Then, as this mortar was a shade fresher and lighter than that originally used, the Resurrection Man scattered over it a thin brown powder, which was furnished by the second box brought away from his house on this occasion. Lastly, a light brush was swept over the scene of these operations, and the necessary precautions were complete.

The clock struck three as the surgeon and the body-snatchers issued from the church, carrying the sack containing the corpse between them.

They reached the wall at the back of the churchyard, and there deposited their burden, while the Cracksman hastened to see if the surgeon's carriage had arrived.

In a few minutes he returned to the railing, and said in a low tone, "All right!"

The body was lifted over the iron barrier and conveyed to the vehicle.

The surgeon counted ten sovereigns into the hands of each of the body-snatchers; and, having taken his seat inside the vehicle, close by his strange freight, was whirled rapidly away towards his own abode.