

The Case of the Dow Twins

By Edward Page Mitchell

“My notions about soul’s influence on soul,” said Dr. Richards of Saturday Cove to me one day last September, “are a little peculiar. I don’t make a practice of giving ’em away to the folks around here. The cove people hold that when a doctor gets beyond jalap and rhubarb he’s trespassing on the parson’s property. Now it’s a long road from jalap to soul, but I don’t see why one man mightn’t travel as well as another. Will you oblige me with a clam?”

I obliged him with a clam. We were sitting together on the rocks, fishing for tomcod. Saturday Cove is a small watering place a few miles below Belfast, on the west shore of Penobscot bay. It apparently derives its name from a belief, generally entertained by the covers, that this spot was the final and crowning achievement of the Creator before resting on the seventh day. The cove village consists of a hotel, two churches, several stores, and a graveyard containing former generations of Saturdarians. It is a favorite gibe among outsiders, who envy the placid quiet of the place, that if the population of the graveyard should be dug up and distributed through the village, and the present inhabitants laid away beneath the sod, there would be no perceptible diminution in the liveliness of the settlement. The cove proper abounds with tomcod, which may be caught with clams.

“Yes,” continued Dr. Richards, as he forced the barb of his jig hook into the tender organism of the clam, “my theory is that a strong soul may crowd a weak soul out of the body which belongs to the weak soul and operate through that body, even though miles away and involuntarily. I believe, moreover, that a man may have two souls, one his own by right and the other an intruder. In fact I know that this is so and it being so what becomes of your moral responsibility? What, I ask, becomes of your moral responsibility?”

I replied that I could not imagine.

“Your doctrine of moral responsibility,” said the doctor sternly, as if it were my doctrine and I were responsible for moral responsibility, “isn’t worth this tomcod.” And he took a small fish off his hook and contemptuously tossed it back into the cove. “Did you ever hear of the case of the Dow twins?”

I had never heard of the case of the Dow twins.

“Well,” resumed the doctor, “they were born into the family of Hiram Dow, thirty years or more ago, in the red farmhouse just over the hill back of us. My predecessor, old Dr. Gookin, superintended their birth, and has often told me the circumstances. The Dow twins came into the world bound back to back by a fleshy ligature which extended half the length of the spinal processes. They would probably have traveled through life in an intimate juxtaposition had the matter depended on your great city surgeons—your surgeons who were afraid to disconnect Chang and Eng, and who discussed the operation till the poor fellows died without parting company. Old Dr. Gookin, however, who hadn’t attempted anything for years in the surgical line, more than to pull a tooth or to cut out an occasional wen, calmly went to work and sharpened up his rusty old operating knife and slashed and gashed the twins apart before they had been three hours breathing. This promptitude of Gookin’s saved the Dow twins a good deal of inconvenience.”

“I should think so.”

“And yet,” added the doctor, reflectively, “perhaps it might have been better for ’em both if they hadn’t been separated. Better for Jehiel, especially, since he wouldn’t have been put in a false position. Then, on the other hand, my theory would have lacked the confirmation of an illustrative example. Do you want the story?”

“By all means.”

“Well, Jacob and Jehiel grew up healthy, strapping boys, like as two peas physically, but not mentally and morally. Jehiel was all Dow—slow, slow-witted, melancholy inclined, and disposed to respect the Ten Commandments. Jake, he had his mother’s git-up-and-git—she was a Fox of Fox Island—and was into mischief from the time he was tall enough to poke burdock burrs down his grandmother’s back. Dr. Gookin watched the development of the twins with great interest. He used to say that there was an invisible nerve telegraph between lake and Jehiel. Jehiel seemed to sense whenever Jacob was up to any of his pranks. One night, for instance, when Jake was off robbing a hen roost, Jehiel sat up in bed in his sleep and crowed like a frightened cock until the whole family was aroused.

“I came here and opened my office about ten years ago. At that time Jehiel had grown into a steady, tolerably industrious young man, prominent in the Congregational Church, and so sober and decorous that the village people had trusted him with the driving of the town hearse. When I first knew him he was courting a young woman by the name of Giles, who lived about seven miles out in the country. Jehiel was a tin knocker by trade, and a more pious, respectable, reliable tin knocker you never saw.

“Jake had turned out very differently. By the time he was twenty-one he had made Saturday Cove too hot to hold him, and everybody, including his twin Jehiel, was glad when he enlisted in a Maine regiment. I never saw Jake in my life, for I came here after he had departed, but I had a pretty good notion of what a reckless, loud-mouthed, harum-scarum reprobate he must have been. After the war he drifted into the western country, and we heard of him occasionally, first as a steamboat runner at St. Louis, then in jail at Jefferson for swindling a blind Dutchman, then as a gambler and rough in Cheyenne, and finally as a debt beat in Frisco. You could tell pretty well when Jake was in deviltry by watching the actions of Jehiel. At such times, Jehiel was restless. Knocked tin with an uneasy impatience that wasn’t natural with him, was as solemn and glum as an undertaker.

He was impatient and short to the people of Saturday Cove, and evidently had to struggle hard to be good. It seemed as if Dr. Gookin’s knife had severed the physical bond but not the mental one.

“The strangest thing of all was in regard to Jehiel’s attentions to the young woman named Giles. She was a sober, demure, church-going person, whom Jacob had never been able to interest, but who, as everybody said, would make an excellent helpmate for Jehiel. He seemed to care a good deal for her in his steady, slow way and made a point twice a week of driving over to bring her to prayer-meeting at the cove. But when one of his odd spells was on him he forsook her altogether, and weeks would go by, to her great distress, without his appearing at the Giles gate. As Jake went from bad to worse these periods of indifference became more frequent and prolonged, and occasioned the young woman named Giles much misery and a good many tears.

“One fine afternoon in the summer of 1871, Jacob Dow, as we afterward learned, was shot through the heart by a Mexican in a drunken row at San Diego. He sprang high into the air and fell upon his face, and when they laid him away a good Catholic priest said mass for the repose of his soul.

“That same afternoon, as it happened, old Dr. Gookin was to have been buried in the graveyard yonder. He had died a day or two before, at an extreme age, but in the full possession of his faculties, and one of the last remarks he made was to express regret that he would be unable to follow the career of the Dow twins any further.

“It became Jehiel’s melancholy duty to harness up his hearse on account of old Dr. Gookin’s funeral, and as he dusted the plumes and polished the ebony panels of the vehicle, his thoughts naturally recurred to the great service which that excellent physician had rendered him in early youth. Then he thought of his twin brother Jacob, and wondered where he was and how he prospered. Then his eyes wandered over the hearse, and he felt a dull pride in its creditable appearance. It looked so bright and shiny in the sun that he resolved, as it still wanted a couple of hours of the time appointed for the funeral, to drive it over to the Giles farm and fetch his sweetheart to the village on the box with him. The young woman named Giles had frequently ridden with Jehiel on the hearse, her demure features and sober apparel detracting nothing from the respectable solemnity of the equipage.

“Jehiel drew up in state to the door of his betrothed, and she, not at all reluctant to enjoy the mild excitement of a funeral, mounted to the box and settled herself comfortably beside him. Then they started for Saturday Cove, and jogged along on the hearse, discoursing affectionately as they went.

“Miss Giles affirms that it was at the third apple tree next the stone wall of Hosea Getchell’s orchard, just opposite the bars leading to Mr. Lord’s private road, that a sudden and most extraordinary change came over Jehiel. He jumped, she says, high into the air and landed sprawling in the sandy road alongside the hearse, yelling so hideously that it was with difficulty that she held the frightened horses. Picking himself up and uttering a round oath (something that had never before passed the virtuous lips of Jehiel), he turned his attention to the horses, kicking and beating them until they stood quiet. He next proceeded to cut and trim a willow switch at the roadside, and putting his decent silk hat down over one eye, and darting from the other a surly glance at the astonished Miss Giles, he climbed to his seat on the hearse.

“ ‘Jehiel Dow!’ said she, ‘what does this mean?’

“ ‘It means,’ he replied, giving the horses a vicious cut with his switch, ‘that I have been gain’ slow these thirty year, and now I’m gain’ to put a little ginger in my gait. Gelang!’

“The hearse horses jumped under the unaccustomed lash and broke into a gallop. Jehiel applied the switch again and again, and the dismal vehicle was soon bumping over the road at a tremendous pace, Jehiel shouting all the time like a circus rider, and Miss Giles clinging to his side in an agony of terror. The people in the farmhouses along the way rushed to doors and windows and gazed in amazement at the unprecedented spectacle. Jehiel had a word for each—a shout of derision for one, a blast of blasphemy for another, and an invitation to ride for a third—but he reined in for nobody, and in a twinkling the five miles between Hosea Getchell’s farm at Duck Trap at the village at Saturday Cove had been accomplished. I think I am safe in saying that never before did hearse rattle over five miles of hard road so rapidly.

“ ‘Oh, Jehiel, Jehiel!’ said Miss Giles, as the hearse entered the village, ‘are you took crazy of a sudden?’

“ ‘No,’ said Jehiel curtly, ‘but my eyes are open now. Gelang, you beasts! You get out here; I’m going to Belfast.’

“ ‘But, Jehiel, dear,’ she protested, with many sobs, ‘remember Dr. Gookin.’

“ ‘Dang Gookin!’ said Jehiel.

“ ‘And for my sake,’ she continued. ‘Dear Jehiel, for my sake.’

“ ‘Dang you, too!’ said Jehiel.

“Drawing up his team in magnificent style before the village hotel, he compelled the weeping Miss Giles to alight, and then, with an admirable imitation of the war whoop of a Sioux brave, started his melancholy vehicle for Belfast, and was gone in a flash, leaving the entire population of Saturday Cove in a state of bewilderment that approached coma.

“The remains of the worthy Dr. Gookin were borne to the graveyard that afternoon upon the shoulders of half a dozen of the stoutest farmers in the neighborhood. Jehiel came home long after midnight, uproariously intoxicated. The revolution in his character had been as complete as it was sudden. From the moment of Jacob’s death, he was a dissipated, dishonest scoundrel, the scandal of Saturday Cove, and the terror of quiet respectable folks for miles around. After that day he never could be persuaded to speak to or even to recognize the young woman named Giles. She, to her credit, remained faithful to the memory of the lost Jehiel. His downward course was rapid. He gambled, drank, quarreled, and stole; and he is now in state prison at Thomaston, serving out a sentence for an attempt to rob the Northport Bank. Miss Giles goes down every year in the hopes that he will see her, but he always refuses. He is in for ten years.”

“And he, does he feel no remorse for what he did?” I asked. “See here,” said Dr. Richards, turning suddenly and looking me square in the face. “Do you think of what you are saying? Now I hold that he is as innocent as you or I. I believe that the souls of the twins were bound by a bond which Dr. Gookin’s knife could not dissect. When Jacob died, his soul, with all its depravity, returned to its twin soul in Jehiel’s body. Being stronger than the Jehiel soul it mastered and overwhelmed it. Poor Jehiel is not responsible; he is suffering the penalty of a crime that was clearly Jake’s.”

My friend spoke with a good deal of earnestness and some heat, and concluding that Jehiel’s personality was submerged. I did not press the discussion. That evening, in conversation with the village clergyman, I remarked:

“Strange case that of the Dow twins.”

“Ah,” said the parson, “you have heard the story. Which way did the doctor end it?”

“Why, with Jehiel in jail, of course. What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” replied the parson with a faint smile. “Sometimes when he feels well disposed toward humanity, the doctor lets Jehiel’s soul take possession of Jacob and reform him into a pious, respectable Christian. In his pessimistic moods, the story is just as you heard it. So this is one of his Jacob days. He should take a little vacation.”