

THE RESURRECTIONEST.



The name of Sir Astley Cooper recalls a traffic in the recent existence of which amongst us young men of our time might hesitate to believe. It is indeed a startling chapter in the history of civilization which is supplied by the methods formerly resorted to by anatomical teachers, for the purpose of obtaining subjects for dissection. From the year 1800 until the alteration of the law in 1832, the Resurrectionists, or 'Body-snatchers,' were almost the only sources of this supply: they were persons generally of the worst character, if we except the watchmen of that time, who were set to guard the burial-grounds, all of whom received a regular percentage on the sum obtained by the Resurrectionists.

The public were for many years aware of church-yards being robbed; it was known to be effected with wonderful rapidity and dexterity; but the modus was never fathomed by the public, and, curiously enough, no accidental circumstance occurred to furnish the explanation; even the members of the medical profession, with very few exceptions, were kept in ignorance of it, so careful were the Resurrectionists to remove all traces of their mode of working after the completion of their task. It was generally supposed that the body-snatcher, in exhuming a body, first proceeded, as a novice would have done, to remove all the earth with which the grave had been recently filled; and having at length arrived at the coffin, that he then, with proper implements, forced off the lid, and so removed the body. This would have occupied considerable time, and rendered the body-snatchers proportionately more liable to detection. To avoid this, they only cleared away the earth above the head of the coffin, taking care to leave that which covered the other end as far as possible undisturbed. As soon as about one-third of the coffin was thus exposed, they forced a very strong crowbar, made of a peculiar form for the purpose, between the end of the coffin and the lid, which latter, by using the lever as one of the first order, they generally pressed up, without much difficulty. It usually happened, at this stage of the proceedings, that the superincumbent weight of the earth on the other portion of the

coffin-lid caused it to be snapped across at a distance of about one-third of its length from the end. As soon as this had been effected, the body was drawn out, the death-gear removed from it, and replaced in the coffin, and finally the body was tied up and placed in its receptacle, to be conveyed to its destination. By this means, in the case of a shallow grave of loose earth, free from stones, the Resurrectionist would remove a body in a quarter of an hour. Silence was essential for the safety of the Resurrectionists; and in gravelly soils they had a peculiar mode of flinging out the earth, in order to prevent the rattling of the stones against the iron spade.

As soon as the body was raised, it was generally placed in a sack, and then carried to a hackney-coach or spring-cart, usually the latter. When bodies were sent from the country to the metropolis, they were generally packed in hat-crates, or in the casks in which hardwares are sent. Some-times the subject, instead of being deposited in a sack, was laid on a large square green baize cloth, the four corners of which were tied together, so as to inclose the body. It was not directly conveyed to any dissecting—room, but was generally deposited in some half-built house, or other convenient building, until the following day. The body-snatcher would then, dressed as a porter, swing the load over his shoulders, and often, even in broad daylight, carry it to its place of destination through the most crowded streets of the metropolis. At other times, the students would receive the bodies at their own houses, and convey them in a hackney-coach to the dissecting-rooms, the coachman being well paid for his job. Sometimes the driver was exorbitant in his demands, and was somewhat ingenious in enforcing them: a pupil who was conveying a body by coach to his hospital was astonished by finding himself in front of the Bow-street police-office, when the coachman, tapping at the front window, said to the affrighted youth, 'Sir, my fare to so-and-so is a guinea, unless you wish to be put down here.' The reply, without any hesitation, was, 'Quite right, my man; drive on.'

At the commencement of a new session at the hospitals, the leading Resurrectionists might be seen looking out for lecturers; and 'fifty pounds down, and nine guineas a body,' was often acceded to; the former being the opening fee from each school promised an exclusive supply. The competition for subjects, which the exhumators pretended to get up between the different schools, sometimes raised the prices so exorbitantly as to leave scarcely any remuneration for the lecturers. In some cases twenty pounds have been given for a single subject, in healthy seasons.

The competition occasionally led to revolting scenes of riot. Mr. Bransby Cooper, in his *Life of Sir Astley Cooper*, relates that two Resurrectionists, having gained access to a private burial-ground near Holywell Mount by bribing the gravedigger, sometimes brought away six bodies in one night. Two other exhumators, hearing of this prosperity, threat-cued to expose the gravedigger if he did not admit them to share his plunder; but he was beforehand with them, and pointed them out to a public-house full of labourers, as body-snatchers come to bribe him to let them steal from his ground, when the whole crowd rushed after the Resurrectionists, who narrowly escaped their vengeance. They ran to a police-office, and, in a loud voice, told the sitting magistrate if he sent officers to Holywell Mount burial-ground they would find every grave robbed of its dead; the rave-digger having sold them to the body-snatchers.' The indignant people rushed to the burial-ground, broke open the gates, dug-up the graves, and finding in them empty coffins, seized the gravedigger, threw him into one of the deepest excavations, began shovelling the earth over him, and would have buried him alive, but for the activity of the constables. The, mob then went to his house, broke every article of his furniture, seized his wife and children, and dragged them through a stagnant pool in the neighbourhood.

Such outrages as these, and the general indignation which arose from them, having interrupted the supply of bodies, other

stratagems were resorted to. The Resurrectionists, by associating with the lower class of undertakers, obtained possession of the bodies of the poor which were taken to their establishments several days before interment, and often a clergyman read the funeral service over a coffin filled with brick-bats, or other substitute for the stolen body.

The bodies of suicides were sometimes stolen from the charge of persons appointed to sit up with them; or they were obtained from poor-houses and infirmaries by the Resurrectionists pretending relationship with the deceased, and claiming the bodies for burial. By this means, one Patrick got a number of subjects, chiefly from St. Giles's workhouse, his wife being employed, under various disguises, to own the bodies. At other times, the body-snatchers would destroy the tombs, vaults, and expensive coffins of the wealthy, to obtain their prey; and their exactions, villany, and insolence grew intolerable. The sale of a drunken man in a sack, as a subject, to Mr. Brookes the anatomist, is a well-known incident.

Nevertheless, so useful were the services of the regular Resurrectionists, that when they got into trouble, the surgeons made great exertions in their favour, and advanced large sums of money to keep them out of gaol, or support them during imprisonment. Sir Astley Cooper expended hundreds of pounds for this purpose: a single liberation has been known to cost £160; and an anatomical teacher has paid £5 as a weekly allowance, continued for two years, to a Resurrectionist confined in prison.

A leading Resurrectionist once received £144 for twelve subjects in one evening, out of which he had to pay his underlings £5 each. These high prices not unfrequently led persons, while alive, to offer to sell their bodies for dissection after death; but very rarely did any surgeon accede to such a proposal, since the law did not recognise any right of property in a dead body. Among the papers left by Sir Astley Cooper was found the following: 'Sir, I have

been informed you are in the habit of purchasing bodys, and allowing the person a sum weekly. Knowing a poor woman that is desirous of doing so, I have taken the liberty of calling to know the truth. I remain, your humble servant. Sir Astley Cooper's answer (copied on the back of the application) was brief: 'The truth is, that you deserve to be hanged for making such an unfeeling offer.—A. C.'

The graves were not always disturbed to obtain possession of the entire body, for the teeth alone, at one time, offered tempting remuneration. Mr. Cooper relates an instance of a Resurrectionist feigning to look out a burial-place for his poor wife, and thus obtaining access to the vault of a meeting-house, the trap-door of which he unbolted, so that at night he let himself down into the vault, and secured the front teeth of the whole congregation, by which he cleared £60.

For nearly thirty years had this nefarious traffic flourished, when a Select Committee of the House of Commons was appointed to investigate the matter. In reply to the following question: 'Does the state of the law actually prevent the teachers of anatomy from obtaining the body of any person, which, in consequence of some peculiarity of structure, they may be particularly desirous of procuring?' Sir Astley Cooper stated: 'The law does not prevent our obtaining the body of an individual if we think proper; for there is no person, let his situation in life be what it may, whom, if I were disposed to dissect, I could not obtain.' In reply to another question, Sir Astley Cooper said, 'The law only enhances the price, and does not prevent the exhumation: nobody is secured by the law, it only adds to the price of the subject.'

The profession had for many years been anxious to devise some plan to prevent the exhumation of bodies; but it was thought too hazardous to attempt the enactment of laws on the subject, in consequence of the necessary publicity of the discussions upon

them. The horrible murders committed at Edinburgh, under the system of Barking, and exposed in the year 1828, at last rendered it peremptorily necessary for the Government to establish some means of legalizing dissection, under restrictions regulated by the ministers of the Crown. An inspector was appointed, to whom the certificate of the death of the individual, and the circumstances under which he died, were to be submitted before the body could be dissected, and then only in the schools in which anatomizing was licensed by the Government; and this new system has much raised the characters of those who are teaching anatomy, as well as the science itself, in the estimation of the public.

The Resurrectionists mostly came to bad ends. There were but few regulars; the others being composed of Spitalfields weavers, or thieves, who found the disguise of this occupation convenient for carrying on their own peculiar avocations. One was tried, and received sentence of death, for robbing the Edinburgh mail, but was pardoned upon the intercession of the Archdukes John and Lewis, who were much interested by finding the criminal at work in his cell, articulating the bones of a horse; he left the country, and was never after heard of. Another Resurrectionist, after a long and active career, withdrew from it in 1817, and occupied himself principally in obtaining and disposing of teeth. As a licensed suttler, in the Peninsula and France, he had drawn the teeth of those who had fallen in battle, and had plundered the slain: with the produce of these adventures, he built a large hotel at Margate, but his previous occupation being disclosed, his house was avoided, and disposed of at a very heavy loss: he was subsequently tried, and imprisoned for obtaining money under false pretences, and was ultimately found dead in a public-house near Tower-hill.

It is credibly reported of one body-snatcher, that, at his death, he left nearly £6000 to his family. One, being captured, was tried and found guilty of stealing the clothes in which the bodies were buried, and was transported for seven years. A man who was long

superintendent to the dissecting-room at St. Thomas's Hospital, was dismissed for receiving and paying for bodies sent to his employer, and reselling them at an advanced price, in Edinburgh; he then turned Resurrectionist, was detected and imprisoned, and died in a state of raving madness.