

Frictional Electricity

Max Adeler

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I HAPPENED to visit the accident ward of St. Paracelsus' Hospital because a friend of mine who is interested in the Flower Mission asked me to stop there during my afternoon walk and give a few flowers to the sufferers.

When I had arranged the last half-dozen of the roses in a vase upon the little stand by the bedside of one bruised and battered patient, he looked at me gratefully, and said:

"Oh, thank you, sir! And would you mind, sir, stopping for a bit of talk? I'm so lonely and miserable."

I sat upon the chair by the bed and with my hand smoothed the counterpane, while the the patient asked me:

"Do I really look like a burglar, sir, do you think?"

I hesitated to reply as I examined his face. It was really covered with bandages, but his nose seemed swollen and there were bruises about both eyes.

"I don't wonder you don't like to speak your mind when you see me here a broken wreck, smashed all up and not looking a bit like myself, sir. But if you would see me well and strong and all fixed up for going to church you'd say right off that I don't favor no burglar in looks."

I asked the unfortunate man his name.

"Mordecai Barnes, sir, and I'm a journeyman plumber, sir, with a good character and don't take no second place in that business with no man. How did I get here? What banged me all up into a shame and a disgrace like this? Well, I'll tell you, sir, if you have the patience to listen, for it does me good to talk who has been used so hard, and can get no attention from the nurses or nobody in this here asylum. Do you understand about frictional electricity, sir? No? I thought not; and well had it been for me, for this shattered hulk that you see a-lying here, if I had never heard of it neither! I'll tell you how it was, sir. My mate, George Watkins, and there ain't no better man nowheres if you go clear round the globe George Watkins is one of these men with inquiring minds, always a-hungering for knowledge, and so George off he goes week after week to the lectures up at the Huxley Institute. You know it; in that yallow building over by Nonpareil Square. And George often he told me about the wonderful things he learned there, and among others he was fond of explaining to me about frictional electricity.

"It seems, sir, for you may not know it any more'n I knowed it until George explained it to me, that there's three different kinds of electricity. There's the kind you make with a steam engine, and the kind you make with acid, and the kind you make with friction. Well, sir, would you believe or, let me say first, have you ever rubbed a black cat on the back in a dark room and seen the sparks fly? Of course, and, sir, I know it's almost beyond belief, but, positive, they told George Watkins, my mate, up at the Huxley Institute, that them sparks and the aurora borealis that you see sometimes a-lighting up the heavens is one and the same thing! Wonderful, isn't it, sir, that Science should discover that a black cat is some kind of kin to the aurora borealis? But George says that's what they said, for the aurora borealis is caused by the earth a-rolling around and rubbing the air just as the sparks is

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caused by stroking the cat's back.

"And George he says that this here frictional electricity is the only kind that'll cure pain. The steam-engine kind won't do it, and the acid kind won't do it, but the frictional kind'll do it every time if you only know how to apply it.

"Well, sir, now I pass to the sorerful part of my story. There is a girl named Bella Dougherty that does housework for a man named Muffitt, and a mighty nice girl she is; or, I used to think her nice. Maybe you know where Mr. Muffitt lives, on 149th Street, just above Parvin Street, the third house on the left with white shutters.

"Anyhow, I got to be fond of Bella and often used to set and talk with her in the evenings in Mr. Muffitt's kitchen, and maybe have two or three other girls come in sometimes, with a few men; though I never cared, sir, for much flocking together at such times, for Bella Dougherty she was good enough company for me, just her and I by ourselves.

"Howsomdever, there was another man that had a kind of fancy for Bella Dougherty, although in my opinion he isn't fit to wipe her feet on, and his name is William Jones.

"This yer William Jones used to come intruding around there in Mr. Muffitt's kitchen when he wasn't wanted and when he seen that me and Bella would rather be a-setting there by ourselves. And so, sir, one night, just to kill the time till he'd quit and go, I begun to tell them what George Watkins said to me about the Huxley Institute and frictional electricity being a sure cure for pain.

"And William Jones, a-winking at Bella Dougherty, as much as to say, sir, that he'd be having the laugh on me, said he had a pain that minute in his head from neuralgia and he'd bet me a quarter no frictional electricity would drive it out. I know now what was the matter with the head of William Jones. Not neuralgia, nor nothing of the sort, sir. It was vacuum. My mate, George Watkins, tells me that at the Institute they say that vacuum always produces pain, and that was the only thing the matter with this William Jones I'm a-telling you about.

"I never take no dare, not from no man of that kind, anyways, sir, so I bet him a quarter I'd cure him, and cure him with frictional electricity, too. So he set down on the chair a-laughing and a-winking at Bella Dougherty, who set over by the range holding the quarters; and I begun to rub William Jones's eyebrows with my two thumbs; just gently, but right along just like stroking a cat; keeping it up, a-rubbing and a-rubbing, until at last I asked him how he felt now; and, you can imagine my supprise, sir, when I seen that William Jones was fast asleep! I was skeered at first; but in a minute I seen that I had hypnertized him unbeknown to myself, and there set William Jones 's if he was froze stiff.

"I wa'n't so very sorry, sir, when I found out how things was a-going, although if I could have seen what was the consequences of this strange occurrence I'd a seized my hat and bid Bella Dougherty good-by and started straight for home.

"But, sir, of course I acted like a fool, for I'd read in the papers how a man who hypnertizes another man can make him believe anything and do anything, and so I thought I'd have some fun with William Jones and enjoy a lovely, quiet evening with Bella Dougherty.

"So I says to William Jones:

"Now, William, you-re a little school-scholar oncet again and you've missed your lesson, and so you just go over there in that corner by the china closet and stand with your face to the wall and say over and over your multiplication table till you know it right.

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"And so, to the surprise of Bella Dougherty, William Jones went right over in the corner like I told him, and there he stood, saying: Six sixes is thirty-six, six sevens is forty-two, and so on, whilst I set over with Bella Dougherty peacefully enjoying ourselves just exactly 's if William Jones wasn't anywheres about.

"And so, sir, it went on until Mrs. Muffitt she come down and said to Bella Dougherty it was time to shut the house up, and then I bid her good-night and told William to go home and go straight to bed, which he did, and a-saying the multiplication table all the way down the street. He would have said it all night, sir, I do believe, if I hadn't ordered him to stop and to begin saying his prayers when I passed him in at his front door.

"You may believe me, sir, that I had William Jones on my mind all night and was a-worrying a little about him too, for fear maybe he'd never come to. So around I goes the first thing in the morning to his boarding-house, and his landlady tells me he had been a-saying his prayers all mixed up like with the multiplication table ever since he come home the night before. She was a bit troubled about it, sir, as you may imagine, for William Jones was a good boarder and it'd 'a' been money out of her pocket if he had lost his mind.

"So, then, I seen William Jones and knowed at oncet that the hypnertizing still had hold of him. Very well; I had no idea how to get him out of it and it didn't hurt him nohow, so I just commanded William Jones to drop the multiplication table and his prayers and to fix all his intellect in the regular way on plumbing; and William Jones at oncet calmed down and seemed his old self again.

"Then a wicked thought flashed into my mind. You know how it is yourself, sir; you are tempted and you are weak and you fall, and then the first thing you know, to be sure your sin'll find you out and there you are! Here I am, a shattered hulk. It suddenly occurred to me, sir, that if I could control William Jones, why not turn his affections away from Bella Dougherty, who might take a fancy to him? who knows? women are so queer! and direct his thoughts toward my own Aunt Maggie, who is a middle-aged widder and not so bad-looking, and far too good for such a man as William Jones, although to speak the plain truth I had no objections to having him for an uncle by marriage.

"Therefore I did so, sir, and before the week was out I heard that William Jones was plumbing in the most supprising manner, plumbing here and plumbing there, and paying attentions vigorously, so to speak, to Aunt Maggie every evening.

"In the meantime, sir, believe me, I did not lose time in my suit with Bella Dougherty, who seemed real mad at William Jones when people began to talk about his courting Aunt Maggie, so that in less than two weeks, when Bella Dougherty heard that William Jones and Aunt Maggie had agreed to marry, I got Bella Dougherty about as good as to say, although she never quite said it square, that she would have me.

"I never knowed how it happened, sir, whether somebody waked William Jones up or he just come to by himself, but, sir, anyhow, William Jones about that time dropped hypnertism and was himself again. Imagine, sir, how things stood! There never was a man as mad as William Jones; mad with me, and mad with Aunt Maggie, to whom he sent a cruel message that he wa'n't marrying no grandmas, and that made Aunt Maggie mad; and then William Jones set down and wrote me a letter to the general effect that whenever he met me my course in this life would be short.

"Naturally, sir, as you may believe, I kept out of William Jones's way, for I am not fond of quarreling, and besides, William Jones is forty pounds heavier, sir, than I am.

"But one night while I was setting in the kitchen at Muffitt's, having some uplifting conversation with Bella Dougherty, there was a sudden knock on the side door, and up she jumps, pale and skeered, and says: I do believe that is William Jones. He said he might call, maybe, this evening! So, of course, as I never hunt trouble, I raised the window sash over by the kitchen table at the back and went out just as William Jones come in the side door.

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He kept the door open a—watching for me, and so as I couldn't get to the gate I climbed over the high fence into the next yard.

"I ought to have gone right home, sir, without stopping, but I hated to leave William Jones there with Bella Dougherty, and me just driven out; so, as it was raining hard and I had on my Sunday suit, what does I do but try the latch on the kitchen door of the house next to Mr. Muffitt's, and finding the door opened, in I walked and set down in a chair to await what was going to happen. That was a bad job for me, sir! It isn't safe to take one false step.

"For the next minute the inside door from the dining—room springs open and a man jumps out and grabs me and says: 'I've got thee at last, have I!' He was a Quaker, sir; a big man and with a grip like iron. I never knowed a man with a grip like that. Did you ever, sir, have your fingers in the crack of a door and somebody a—leaning hard on the door? That was the way this Quaker held me. Then he calls out 'Amelia! Amelia!' and in a minute a sweet old Quaker lady comes out with a candle, and he says to her: 'I've caught that burglar, Amelia; thee get the clothes line.'"

"So the lady she gets the clothes line and that man he ties my hands and my arms behind my back, good and tight, and then he made me set down and he ties me to the chair, and at last he gives the rope two or three turns around the leg of the kitchen table and says to me: 'Friend, thee can just set there while I go to get an officer!' Gave me no chance to explain. Took it all for granted; whereas if he would have listened to me I could have cleared up the whole mystery in two minutes.

"So then, sir, out he goes for a policeman, and the old lady sets down in a chair not far from me and said she was sorry I was so wicked and asked me about my mother, and if I ever went to First—Day school, and a whole lot of things. Then a thought seemed to strike her and she went into the next room and came back with a book in her hand, and she said she would read a good book to me while we waited for justice to take its course.

"She was lovely to look at, sir, with her tidy brown frock and the crape handkerchief folded acrost her bosom and her cap and the smile on her face; a sweet face, sir; an angel face; yes, sir, but sweet faces often has cruel dispositions behind them. For then she told me that the book was called Barclay's Apology for the People called Quakers, or something like that, and she begun to read it to me.

"Have you ever read that book, sir? It is dedicated, I think, to Charles the Second, and it begins with Fifteen Propositions, and she read every one of them Propositions from first to last. Then she turned to the section, sir, about Salutations and Recreations, and she read and read and read until, sir, actually it made my head swim.

"Do you know, sir, is Barclay still alive the man who wrote that book? Is there no way of getting even with him?"

"I couldn't get away. I might have walked out somehow with the chair fastened to me; but I couldn't go, could I, sir, with the table tied to my leg, and particularly if I had to climb the fence? So I had to set there and be regarded as a burglar.

"But at last I would be heard, and I told her I was no burglar but an innercent man; and then she looked in the index to find if Barclay had anything interesting to say about the wickedness of telling falsehoods. And then I said I was a member of the Baptist Society, and she said at once she would read Barclay on the errors of that sect; but I insisted on being heard, and I explained to her that I got into this trouble by trying to cure William Jones by frictional electricity, and she said: 'Thee has an ingenious and fruitful mind to invent such a story. Oh, that it had been turned to better devices than following a life of evil!'

"'And it seems hard, too,' I said, 'that a perfectly respectable Baptist plumer should be arrested as a burglar simply because he tried to relieve the pain of William Jones by a scientific method invented by the Huxley Institute.'

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"Where is thy friend William Jones?" she asked.

"Do you know, sir, at that very moment you could hear through the partition William Jones and Bella Dougherty laughing next door! It seemed like mockery to me, a-setting there in chains, so to speak.

"He is next door, ma'am," I said, a-courting the hired girl.

"I will prove if thee is telling the truth," she said, and she got up and moved toward the door.

"No, ma'am, no!" I said; 'please don't do that! William mustn't know that I am here;' and so she comes back and sets down again, and picks up Barclay, and looks sorerful at me, and says:

"It is wicked for thee to have such vain imaginations. Why does thee persist in pretending that there is a William Jones?" And then she started to look through Barclay to find if he had anything that would fit the William Jones part of the case.

"What could I do? I daresn't call in William Jones to prove my innercence; he was mad all over at me and a bigger man, too, and here I was tied; and I couldn't call Bella Dougherty without William Jones knowing it. It was hard, sir, for a man as innercent as a little babe to set there with that sweet and smooth old lady considering him a shameless story-teller and firing Barclay at him, now wasn't it, sir? Would you have called William Jones, sir, under them there circumstances, and his laughter and Bella Dougherty's still a-resounding through the partition?"

"Well, sir, that policeman was a long time a-coming with the old Quaker. I never knowed why; but Friend Amelia she set down again and turned over the leaves of Barclay and begun oncet more to read about Salutations and Recreations while, strange as it may seem to you, sir, I felt that I'd ruther see the policeman and be locked up in a dungeon than to hear more of it.

"But, howsomdever, after a while in comes the Quaker and the officer with him, and the very first minute the officer seen me he says:

"I reckernize him as an old offender."

"No you don't!" says I; 'I'm no old offender nor a young offender. I'm a perfectly honest Baptist plumber, and I kin prove it, too.'

"How kin you prove it?" says the officer.

"By William Jones," says I, 'who is a-setting in that kitchen right next door, a-wooing the hired girl.'

"I was bold about it, sir, because I knowed William Jones daresn't strike at me while the officer was there.

"We'll see about that, says the officer, and in he goes to Mr. Muffitt's yard next door and comes back with William Jones. I have no use for a man like William Jones. What do you think he does, sir? Why, he looks me over, from head to foot, in a blank sort of a way, and then, turning to the policeman, he says: 'I don't know the man, officer; never seen him before'; then that low-down plumber walks out and leaves me there and goes back, and in a minute I hear him and Bella Dougherty a-laughing worse than ever.

"I thought not," says the officer, slipping the handcuffs on me, 'and so now you come right along.' And Friend Amelia looked mournful at me and says to me she would come around regular and read Barclay to me in my cell after I was convicted.

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"And so, sir, to make a long story short, I was took up before the magistrate and held for burglary, and my mate, George Watkins, went my bail and so I was let go.

"I might stop here, sir, but I must tell you that the following Thursday I met William Jones up a kind of a blind alley where I was working, while he was working in a house on the opposite side. He had me in a corner where there was no chance to run, so I put on a bold face and went right up to him and says:

"William, there's been some differences betwixt us, but I'm not the man to bear grudges and I forgive you."

"What's that?" says he, savage.

"Why," says I, 'the whole thing is just one of them unpleasant misunderstandings'; and then I started to explain to him about the Huxley Institute theory of frictional electricity and the aurora borealis.

"I can't tell what he said, sir, in reply, with reference to the aurora borealis, because I'm a decent man and never use no low language; but suddenly he jumped on me, and the first thing I knowed I was being lifted in the ambulance and fetched to this yer hospital. Was it right, sir, do you think, for William Jones to strike me foul, like that, while I was trying to state my case to him? No, sir. But that's not the worst of it. Last Tuesday word came to me that Bella Dougherty had throwed me over and is going to marry William Jones on Decoration Day! Think of that, sir!" and Mordecai Barnes turned his head upon his pillow and moaned.

Turning again toward me, he was about to resume his statement, when suddenly he exclaimed:

"Why, there's Aunt Maggie."

A woman of fifty years, nicely clad, came to the bedside and said to him coldly:

"Is that you, Mordecai Barnes?"

"Yes, Aunt Maggie."

"I'm ashamed of you, Mordecai Barnes," said she; "ashamed of you. It served you right. You got just what was comin' to you. I wish William had banged you worse."

Mordecai Barnes groaned.

"And more than that," continued Aunt Maggie, glaring at him through her spectacles, "I've torn up my old will which named you my sole heir and made a new one and left all my property to this yer very hospital."

With these words Aunt Maggie walked away and left the room.

Mordecai Barnes could not speak for a few minutes. He looked as if death would be welcome. Then, pulling the bedclothes up under his chin and closing his eyes wearily, he said:

"Curse the day, say I, when George Watkins first went to the Huxley Institute and heard about frictional electricity."