

# A TALE OF THE YELLOW FEVER

HARRY CARELESS<sup>1</sup>

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‘H—, did Dr. B— ever relate to you any of his experience as a physician?’

‘Never.’

‘Nor to me. Suppose we ask the old man, some of these long winter evenings, to give us some passages of his medical life?’

‘With all my heart. I’m sure he’ll not refuse, and few men have seen more than he.’

And so my fellow-student and I agreed to ask the Doctor for ‘a yarn;’ for though we had already spent a year or more in his office, and his kind, affable manners had quickly made us feel at home with him, we had never heard any of his professional history. The opportunity was not long wanting; it was eagerly embraced, and we were not deceived in our hopes from his kindness. I have sometimes thought the good old man’s vanity was a little flattered by the request; but however that was, he readily consented to gratify us.

‘Some thirty years have passed,’ began the Doctor, ‘since I resolved, like many other young men, to try my fortune in ‘the new countries’ toward the South. For several years I had been vainly striving to gain a practice in my native city; but while I had many *friends*, and, though I say it, a knowledge of my profession seldom surpassed in young men of my age, I had no patients. A spell seemed to be cast upon my efforts. Others were rising into notice, and even into fame, who I knew were in every respect my inferiors, while I could scarcely gain a livelihood. True, some of them made use of means to which I could not stoop,<sup>2</sup> even for

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<sup>1</sup> “Harry Careless” is a pseudonym, taken from a traditional American children’s tale *The Troubles of Harry Careless, or; Going Too Far*.

<sup>2</sup> Many conflicting ideologies existed within the medical practice during the period from 1750-1850. What the Doctor may be referring to here are the medical practices generally categorized under the term ‘Mesmerism’ after their founder and major proponent Franz Anton Mesmer (Kohlenbach). The theory, proposed by Mesmer as ‘Animal Magnetism’,

bread; but it seemed hard that I could not gain enough for even my scanty wants. At length, almost despairing forever of success, I resolved to seek it elsewhere. Adventurers of all sorts were turning their attention to the new territories on the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The country was still wild, and almost entirely uncultivated; but settlers were rapidly pouring in, and rumor spoke loudly of fortunes acquired there as if by magic. The prospect was a tempting one; success seemed almost within my grasp; to remain where I was would be to starve. In short, many weeks had not elapsed before I settled as a practising physician in the little town of M—, <sup>4</sup> almost on the shores of the Gulf itself. A curious place it was, then; its inhabitants, though numbering only a few hundreds, seemed as it were the *débris* of the various races who had in turn ruled the land. Indians, French, Spanish, Creoles, were alike represented; and the morals of the motley population accorded well with the character of its members. But it was little to me who or what they were; from the position of the town its future commercial importance was inevitable, and a permanent settlement there I looked on as a sure guarantee of success.

It was late in the fall when I reached M—. The winter passed pleasantly enough; and when spring arrived, I had the satisfaction of finding my prospects gradually brightening. But with the advancing season came a trial I had not anticipated. The epidemic of the South, the dreaded *yellow fever*,<sup>5</sup> began to make its appearance. I had heard of this terrible scourge before leaving my home; its severity I well knew; but I had flattered myself that even should it prevail during my first summer there, a little care would guard against all danger. But that summer it came with unheard-of violence. Whether it was engendered by the vegetable effluvia from the newly-cleared forests, or sprung from some occult cause past finding out by human ingenuity—whatever its source, it was in our midst. Never before had it been so severe; nor ever, through the many years that have elapsed, have its ravages been so terrible since. For a time I hesitated whether to remain or to leave the town. All who could were adopting the latter course; hurrying away, any where, so they but fancied themselves safe. To stay seemed like facing certain death; to go, would be to abandon my patients, and perhaps to lose the advantages I had already gained. I resolved to brave it out; influenced partly, at least, by a sense of duty to those who looked to me, under God, as their only safeguard from disease and death. And I did remain, through the whole of that trying period, with disease and sorrow and death around me—meeting me at every step; my sole employment to strive against their fearful

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argues that there exists within the cosmos and the human body a pervasive ‘fluid’ whose magnetic properties can be manipulated for healing purposes (Meheust).

<sup>3</sup> Same as ‘new countries.’ The combined criteria of ‘South’, ‘French’, ‘Spanish’, and ‘Gulf of Mexico’ best fit either the regions of modern-day Louisiana or Eastern Texas.

<sup>4</sup> New Orleans, in particular, probably inspired the town of M—. Historic quarters of New Orleans have a distinct wooden cottage style, the city of New Orleans has a long history of severe Yellow Fever outbreaks, and it had been colonized previously by the nations of France and Spain.

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive description of a Yellow Fever epidemic that occurred in New York complete with descriptions of symptoms, treatments, and possible contagions see “THE FEVER OF 1795...” published in *The Knickerbocker* February 1839. Many of the observations in this journal are similar or identical to those described in the story, including ‘anxiety’ and erratic deathbed behavior.

ravages. Oh! it is horrible to live thus, day by day, in the midst of pestilence! To go forth in the morning, sick at heart from the scenes of yesterday, with the thought that the morrow may perhaps find you too stricken down; to walk abroad at noonday through the lonely streets, and hear no sound of living being save the dull echo of your own foot-fall; meeting none, except here and there an anxious messenger from the sick-bed, or the dead-cart hastily rumbling over the stones with its loathsome burden; to look with jealous distrust even on the gifts of nature, lest they prove a curse; to throw aside the tempting fruit, for fear it may sow the seeds of dissolution; to shun the gentle breeze of evening, lest it come loaded with the unseen messengers of disease and death, the noxious *malaria*;<sup>6</sup> to tremble at each new sensation, dreading lest every transient pain prove the forerunner of the destroyer himself; and at last, worn out by such excitement, to fall into a despairing indifference, worse even than the fear of death, and in a morbid and sullen apathy to live on, careless of life; almost wondering when the fevered pulse and aching brow shall come to warn you too of your end. Yet such, for weeks, was the life I led. I have not exaggerated my fears, for it was not in ignorance that I resolved to encounter the peril; that I did escape has always seemed to me little short of a miracle. I had no lack of employment where disease marked almost every house for his fearful visitations. Yet it was like a mockery to visit the sick; for too often I could only confirm the bitter forebodings of those who watched by the couches of their friends. Day after day I went forth on my gloomy rounds, to return each night, weary and sick at heart, to my solitary chambers.

I was young then; young in years, and young in my profession; but before that awful season ended, I felt the weight of many a year upon me. It makes me sad, even now, to think of those days. I have seen much sickness and sorrow in my life; I have looked upon affliction in almost every form; the bitter grief of the new-made widow—the anguish of the bereaved mother, ‘refusing to be comforted’—the deep, silent agony of the manly mourner—all these I have witnessed, and I trust, with no callous heart; but never again sorrow like that of those days. A settled gloom was upon all within the town. A feeling, almost of fatality, spread itself abroad; too often the sure precursor of disease to the well, of speedy death to the sick; and when the destroying angel stretched forth his hand, no murmur followed; no weeping, nor lamentation; but that deep, dead grief, to call which *sorrow* were a mockery. The blow fell upon hearts already made lifeless by its anticipation; it only mangled them now.

‘One evening, while the pestilence was at its height, I was returning to my office from a visit to some patients. My way happened to lie through a narrow and unfrequented street; little more, indeed, than a passage between two large thoroughfares, and bordered only by the old low-roofed houses of the Spanish times. The sun had almost set, and I hurried homeward to escape the damp vapors of night. At the end of the street, where it opened into a larger avenue, stood a small old house, built of wood, in the Spanish style, and now fast going to decay. A single opening in the side looking outward served to admit the light, for the sash was long since gone. The door, strained with the gray rust of age, had half fallen from its broken

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<sup>6</sup> *Malaria* meaning “an unwholesome condition of the atmosphere” from the Italian ‘*mala aria*.’ (OED). The viral cause of Yellow Fever was unknown at this time, but it was generally accepted that the cause of the disease was some combination of an individual’s constitution and a quality of the air i.e. ‘vegetable effluvia.’

hinges; a board hung loose here and there from the side, and damp, greenish moss encrusted the mottled shingles above. I passed close to the door, and unsettled, excited as was my mind, I could not repress a mournful feeling as I looked upon even this common appearance of decay. As I stepped into the street, my ear caught what seemed a faint groan, apparently issuing from the wretched hovel. I stopped and listened; the sound again reached me; a low, prolonged groan, as though of a man almost exhausted by bodily suffering. I turned and tapped gently, but no answer was made. Confident that some one was within, I determined to enter; and pushing open the crazy door, passed the threshold.

‘A glance showed that I had not been mistaken. I had entered a small, dark room, whose bare floor and scanty furniture gave tokens of poverty, if not of distress. Not far from where I stood, upon a low bedstead, lay a man, evidently in the last stage of the fever. His large dark eyes, now rolling wildly around, now concealed by the livid, quivering eye-lids; the coal-black hair that lay in matted masses over his forehead, and the natural swarthy complexion, convinced me that he was of Spanish blood. His features had once been fine; the thin, but well-defined lip, the slightly aquiline nose, the high, full forehead, were still there—the wrecks of his manly beauty; but the seal of death was set upon them. The clear brown of his complexion had faded into a ghastly yellow; the *livery*<sup>7</sup> of his destroyer. His features were rapidly assuming the sharp fixed outline of death; and the unnatural brilliancy of his sunken eyes, when he was excited, contrasted with the dull, vacant stare that followed, like a flash of lightning at the dead of night with the doubly oppressive gloom it leaves behind. So rapid had been the progress of his disease, that he still retained the outward signs of great physical force; but the strong man was bowed down at last; a child might have mastered him now. He was not alone. At his side knelt a female figure, with her face turned from the door, apparently engaged in some office of kindness for the sufferer. The noise of my entrance caught her ear; she started suddenly to her feet, and turning toward me with a gesture of horror, exclaimed:

‘Not yet! oh, not yet! He is not—’ and then, as if perceiving her mistake, suddenly stopped, and burst into a passion of tears. An involuntary shudder came over me; for I well knew the thought which had flashed upon her as she heard the foot-steps of an intruder. She had thought the dead-cart was at the door.

‘I have omitted one feature in that season of wo, which may serve as an index<sup>8</sup> to all its horrors. So frequent had the deaths become, that except in the case of the few in better circumstances who remained, even the common decencies of burial were abandoned. It became impossible to observe the solemnities of a funeral; friends were absorbed in their own grief; even money had lost its all-potent persuasiveness. Some way of removing the dead must be found; and at length the last expedient of a plague-stricken city was adopted. Each day through the deserted streets there went from house to house the DEAD-CART.<sup>9</sup> An old slave

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<sup>7</sup> *Livery* meaning “Something assumed or bestowed as a distinguishing feature” but also more generally “the distinctive dress or uniform provided for and worn by an official, retainer, or employee” (OED).

<sup>8</sup> *Index* meaning “a sign, token, or indication of something.” (OED).

<sup>9</sup> A cart whose sole purpose is the *en masse* transportation of corpses. A common image of plague literature, the usage of this grossly descriptivist term ‘dead-cart’ seems to originate in Defoe’s immensely influential *Journal of A Plague Year* (OED).

was induced to undertake the task. Wherever he bent his footsteps echoed the appalling summons, 'BRING OUT YOUR DEAD!' One by one his burden was made up; one by one, from the very arms of childless mothers, of heart-broken widows and desolate orphans, they were deposited, without coffin, without shroud, in his charge, to be conveyed where in one common receptacle they might return to dust.

'I was by this time too familiar with such scenes, not to attribute to its true source the emotion of the woman before me. A glance at the sick man was enough to convince me that there was little hope for him; my only thought was to afford what temporary relief I could, and if possible to remove her. I advanced to the side of the sufferer, and in a few words explained to her my hopes of giving him aid. For a moment I addressed her unheeded; but when I spoke of *him*, her face was no longer hidden from me. Brushing back abruptly the dark tresses that fell on either side upon her neck and shoulders, she bent upon me from her tearful eyes one long, beseeching look, and in a voice broken by sobs, implored me to save her Pedro; if—if it were not, (the word seemed almost to choke her utterance,) too late! 'I will try' I said; but when I saw the agony that rent her young heart at the very thought of his death, my conscience smote me for seeming to encourage a hope that must so soon be deceived. She had spoken in Spanish; and her appearance indicated that she was of Spanish descent. She was not beautiful; yet I have seldom seen a face which so impressed itself upon me. Her complexion, the olive tint peculiar to the races of the south, had lost the flush of health for the pale hue of sorrow; her dark eyes no longer sparkled with the brilliancy of youth, and their deeply fringed lids dropped tears

'As fast as the Arabian trees

Their medicinal gum.'<sup>10</sup>

'Of her features I have little remembrance; I can only recall the expression of her countenance, as with choking sobs she appealed to me for aid. But once since then, have I met with such a countenance; it was in a painting by some of the old masters; Mary at the foot of the Cross.

'I turned to the sick man. He lay in a sort of stupor; the result, however, rather of physical exhaustion than of the disease itself. The parchment-like skin was drawn tightly over his temples; and the feverish pulsations beneath seemed like the dull beating of a muffled drum ushering him onward to the grave.\*[Author's note]<sup>12</sup> His hand, as I took it up, fell heavily into mine; a faint motion of the closed eye-lids, and a half-audible 'Gra-ci-as' from his pallid lips, as I bathed his forehead with a lotion from a pocket-case, were the only signs of

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<sup>10</sup> An allusion to the dying monologue of Othello, from Shakespeare's *Othello* Act 5 Scene 2: "[speak] of one whose eyes, / Albeit unused to the melting mood, drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees / Their medicinal gum."

\* The Doctor was a great lover of American poetry. — H. C.

<sup>12</sup> The doctor quotes the fourth stanza of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "A Psalm of Life." "Art is long, and Time is fleeting, / And our hearts, though stout and brave, / Still, like muffled drums, are beating / Funeral marches to the grave." The poem was originally published in the October 1838 issue of *The Knickerbocker*. It would seem that the 'H.C.' that first brings our attention to this allusion is also our narrator and author, Harry Careless.

consciousness he gave. Suddenly, his eyes opened, and an expression of pain passed over his countenance; he seemed about to speak; but as I bent my head to catch his words, his whole frame shook, as if in a spasm, and the harsh, dry *hicough* burst from him. The last spark of hope was extinguished; for no human aid could now avail him in his struggle with the last enemy. She too understood its fatal meaning; an ashy paleness overspread her features, and overwhelmed by the approach of a blow the very thought of which was agony, she could no longer restrain her passionate grief. As she bent over him, clasping his hand to her breast, tears and sobs were mingled with her heart-rending exclamations!

‘He will not; oh! he cannot leave me! Pedro, you will not die; tell me, you will not forsake me!’

‘The sufferer made no reply; but the convulsive workings of his face, and the sudden clenching of his hand in mine till the blood almost started, bore witness to his emotion. I strove to console her, but in vain; my efforts were frantically repulsed.

‘I will not be comforted,’ she said; ‘how can I live if he die; who is left to me but him? He cannot—he *shall* not die!’

‘But the king of terrors was not thus to be deprived of his victim. Each moment he grew weaker; the intervals between the terrible spasms; for such they certainly were; were gradually diminished, and their violence increased. Once or twice he essayed to speak; the half-formed syllables died upon his lips, but I could catch the word ‘Maria.’ Her name was uttered with his dying breath. At length the hicough ceased. A calmer expression settled upon his features; his eyes closed gently, as if he were disposed to sleep. Wondering at a change so sudden, and apparently so favorable, she looked up at me as if for an explanation, and again at him. A moment after, and with one choking gasp for breath, she swooned upon the floor. He had ceased to breathe.

I raised her at once, and applied what restoratives I had with me. Long and anxiously I watched for some sign of returning life; and yet I almost hoped it might not be; for what now was life to her? Slowly and painfully she revived; but her glance was without meaning as at first she looked about her. As I followed it around the room, our eyes at the same moment fell upon a new object. The slave of whom I had spoken; he who buried the dead, had entered unperceived; how or why I know not, and was standing by the bed. Even as we looked upon him, he stooped over the body, and as if satisfied that life was extinct, laid his hand upon the still muscular arm. A shock, as if from a powerful battery,<sup>13</sup> thrilled through the seeming corpse; the eyes unclosed, with a fixed and glassy stare; slowly rising from the bed, it assumed a sitting posture, the arms opened wide, and an instant after the horror-struck negro was clasped between them in an embrace like that of death itself.<sup>14</sup> Then their grasp relaxed,

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<sup>13</sup> The Doctor refers to a battery of the electric sort, rather than a gun. In 1781, Luigi Galvani publishes *De Viribus Electricitatis in Motu Musculari Commentarius* in which frog muscles are shown to respond to the stimulation of electrical currents, and excites an explosion of physiological and neurological discoveries which deepen and complicate the medical conception of ‘nerves’ (Verkhatsky 234).

<sup>14</sup> There are many parallels between the symptoms described in “THE FEVER OF 1795...” and those observed by the Doctor in the story. For example: in the case of sudden feats of

forever; and with a cry of horror the terrified negro burst from the room. I stood almost stupefied, till the noise of a heavy fall recalled me to myself. Maria lay near me on the floor; a scarlet foam oozed slowly from her mouth. I was alone with the dead.

I returned home; and for many weeks after that evening friends watched by my bedside night and day. The constant excitement to which my duties had exposed me, and which the scenes of that evening especially had produced, re-acted on my nervous system.<sup>15</sup> The consequence was a dangerous illness; and when I recovered, the frosts had set in, and the pestilence was gone. But the wealth of the Indies would not have tempted me to pass another ‘sickly season’<sup>16</sup> in M—; and before long I bade adieu to the south.

‘But, Doctor,’ I asked, ‘who were Pedro and Maria?’

I never knew more than I have told you. In a remote corner of the cemetery at M—, a little mound marks the place where they lie. There is no monument; only a small marble slab rests upon the turf; and upon it these few words are cut:

‘IN THEIR DEATHS THEY WERE NOT DIVIDED.’<sup>17</sup>



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strength: “There was great variety in muscular power, in different persons. A man who died with the very worst symptoms of the fever, the evening before his death, rose from his bed, ran down two flights of stairs, returned, and was only prevented from going down a second time, by his nurses having locked him in his chamber.” And in the case of hiccoughs:

“Hiccough was a troublesome symptom, and often accompanied vomiting.”

<sup>15</sup> Underlying this shocking illustration of death by fever are the experiments of the 1830s and 40s by British physiologist Marshall Hall. The study of the reflex arc and the discovery of physiological and neurological processes outside of human consciousness complicate the dialogue around the dichotomy of ‘body’ and ‘mind’ present in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Macgill 48).

<sup>16</sup> In this case the ‘sickly season’ is the period of summer and early autumn characterized by high temperatures and humidity. This part of the year is particularly oppressive in the areas around the Gulf of Mexico.

<sup>17</sup> From the King James Bible: “Saul and Jonathan *were* lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions” (2 Samuel 1:23).

## EDITOR'S NOTE

What makes a plague? In its most general sense, 'plague' is not confined to a particular disease, or even to a particular kingdom of life. A plague is epidemic—it is defined primarily by its infectiousness. The epidemic nature of plague serves as the perfect literary device for analyzing the relationships between people. After all, how could a plague spread without face-to-face conversation, handshakes, or public spaces? Plague is very much a social disease, thriving precisely where urbanity thrives: in the densest neighborhoods, the places of closest human contact. In "A TALE..." the yellow fever manifests itself as a deafening, inescapable silence. Its silence pervades the plague-stricken city, punctuated only by 'Bring out your dead!' Pedro and Maria struggle to speak to each other, 'choked' by the plague.

By rendering the inhabitants of M— mute and unable to express themselves even to their loved ones, yellow fever seems to break down the ritual customs of society, forcing its inhabitants to abandon burial rites and institute the practice of the dead-cart. This breakdown is 'indexed' by the dead-cart, which levels young and old, rich and poor to strictly material objects: 'your dead.' According to René Girard "plague is universally accepted as a process of undifferentiation, a destruction of specificities." The undifferentiation of people makes Pedro, Maria, and The Slave difficult to read as characters. The Slave, despite his gruesome office, remains stubbornly Other. Pedro and Maria, on the other hand, in death are 'not divided' yet have also secured an individualized grave rather than being burned or buried *en masse*. Somehow, only The Slave and The Doctor survive the 'Sickly Season', and also retain their ability to speak albeit in gruesome imperative or stock phrases of comfort, respectively. It is only through the bureaucratic, Foucauldian occupation of sanitation that The Doctor and The Slave retain some semblance of civilization during the crisis.

The plague's destruction of specificity can be seen at work on an individual level during the death of Pedro. His final moments are oddly prescient of modern zombie literature. His glazed eyes, yellow complexion, and surprising strength work at odds with his lifeless condition. Pedro's body operates beyond his consciousness, reflexively. In his final moments, even the boundaries between life and death, consciousness and reflex are blurred. The plague, it seems, operates on a more than viral level. It can be said that Maria is also killed by plague, and even the Doctor sickens. The "nerves", "anxiety", and "convulsive horror" challenge a strictly bodily reading of the plague. The health of the mind, as well as the health of the body, are endangered, or perhaps joined, in times of yellow fever.

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