



Site of Devizes House of Correction

Charles Neale Fools the Prison Doctors

A CLEVER SCOUNDREL. It is a dreadful thing to pass sentence upon a man in such a state!" said the judge at the Wiltshire Assizes. His lordship seemed moved almost to distress at the pitiable object who, with an injured spine, was brought into court lying helplessly on a stretcher, and who could only feebly plead "guilty" to the charge alleged against him. "The infliction you are suffering under," said the judge, "surpasses any punishment I can give you!" Had Neale been in ordinary health he would undoubtedly have had penal servitude, for it was not his first act of felony; but who could find the heart to carry out the extreme rigour of the law in the case of a poor soul who would, to all appearance, never again be able to rise from the pallet on which he lay, writhing in all the agony of an injured spine. So much did his lordship feel this that, having first sentenced him to 18 months, his conscience seemed to have smitten him, and he reduced it to 12.

It appears that in October last Neale was apprehended for stealing a mare, the property of Mr. John Smith, of Luckington, and was lodged in Malmesbury lock-up previous to his transmission to Devizes. On the following morning, when the police visited his cell, they found him lying on the floor, unable to move. His statement was that he had got up to look out of the window when he fell backwards across the corner of the bed and injured his spine. Medical advice was obtained, and his sad condition at once appreciated. In fact, he appeared to be almost irretrievably injured, and to be suffering the greatest agony, and to remove a man a distance of twenty miles under such circumstances would have been the height of cruelty. He accordingly remained at Malmesbury for nine weeks, during which time everything which humanity could suggest to mitigate his sufferings was resorted to; a person was kept in constant attendance upon him; all kinds of nutritious things were ordered for him, such as roast fowl, grog, &c. - and his comfort was studied with the utmost solicitude. At the end of nine weeks it was thought that he might bear the journey to Devizes, and in January last a conveyance was obtained (belonging to Mr. Walter Powell, M.D.) long enough to hold a bed, and with great care and no little anxiety he was brought to the County Jail, and at once carried to the infirmary. The men were specially detailed to attend to his necessities and minister to his comfort for the medical officer, and another doctor he brought with him to see the case, "were (like the medical gentlemen at Malmesbury) both of opinion that the poor fellow's spine was seriously if not permanently, injured.

In this melancholy state he was brought before the judge, and a general murmur of pity, amounting almost to a shudder, ran through the Court as those present beheld the pallet with the injured man lying helplessly upon it. A breathless silence prevailed as the poor fellow was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment, and the pallet, with its occupant, was carried back to the prison. And now comes the sequel. To prove a former conviction, the deputy governor of Gloucester gaol had been summoned to

Devizes, and on going over the gaol a close inspection enabled him to recognise in Neale an old "invalid " with whom he had formerly had to deal. "Holloa!" said the deputy-governor, as he scanned the countenance of the cripple, "Holloa! what, at your old game?" "That fellow (said he) is an impostor. There is no more the matter with his spine than there is with mine." Impossible, it was thought. The deputy-governor must be deceived.

However Dr. Clapham, the medical officer, thought it worth while to communicate with the surgeon of Gloucester gaol, and the reply he received so entirely confirmed the deputy-governor's statement that he determined to test the point in such a way as should put it beyond doubt whether Neale was really the great sufferer he appeared to be, or an arrant knave. Taking with him Dr. Careless and Mr. Waylen, he went to the prison, and having put the man through a severe examination, the previously formed opinion of the doctors began to waver. Still the man protested that his sufferings and his injuries were real, and he seemed totally unable to move. To put the matter to a further test, a galvanic battery was introduced, and the "shocks" were turned on pretty strong. All, however failed to produce the expected result. The man was no more able to move during and after the "shocks" than he was before. So the doctors left. The morrow came, and as it came, so it found Neale lying in the same position as he had lain for the six months previous - if possible, in greater pain than ever. Regardless, however, of all demonstrations of suffering, the electric machine was again set to work, and so sharp was the effect that the leg which had appeared most affected by the spinal injury began to move, until at last, unable to stand the shocks any longer, the fellow jumped out of bed, and in a few minutes afterwards was walking across the courtyard to obtain his prison clothes, as lithe and agile on his pins as any man within the prison walls. A clever scoundrel! Electricity has produced many wonderful results, but none more wonderful than its effect upon Charles Neale. It is too late to give him the desert (of penal servitude) which would inevitably have awaited him but for his "pitiable condition."

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