

## THE PARTY

Josh Billings

*Editor: To the end of his active practice Josh was always willing to make house calls. The following is one of three vignettes published in The Pharos, a medical magazine, recalling memorable such calls. The other two, "Sudden Death" and "Southern Justice", we have published in previous Newsletters.*

It was a luxurious upper-crust evening. The ladies, in the drawing room, were gorgeously arrayed in Southern spring finery. The men, contrasting in black and white dinner jackets, satisfied with their success, discussed important worldly subjects, drank cocktails in the library.

Dinner was sumptuous, with several courses and wine.

The party moved to the game room with bar. Congeniality warmed. Noise level heightened. My wife and I went home early. By about 1:30 the last guest had probably departed.

My phone rang at 2:14 a.m. "Josh, come quickly!" I recognized the urgent voice.

"Mary, what's happened?"

"Just come quickly!"

"But it helps to give me some idea of what's wrong, so I can think about it on the way over."

"I think I've killed Harry!"

There was not much to think about except shock. Harry, who, with Mary, had been to the party, was known to be a heavy drinker, somewhat arrogant and abusive when drunk. His sixteen-year-old stepson lived with them. Harry was jealous. Their own child, a little girl, was six.

At 2:30 a.m., the large house was in a turmoil. Several maids were running around in bathrobes. In a side room, separated from the master bedroom by a bathroom, there were two beds. The far one had been slept in. Harry lay on the floor beside the near one, his dress shirt scarlet. Mary, in a blood-spattered, peach-colored chiffon dress, held his head in her lap, crying, moaning, swaying.

In a broken sobbing voice, she explained that they had arrived home from the party. Harry had gone into his sleeping stepson's room and begun to taunt him. She had intervened, dramatically jumping up on a nearby bed, snatching a Samurai sword (a gift to Harry's stepson from his own father) off the wall and stabbing with it, first the pillow and then the foot of the bed, to distract her husband. The stabs on the pillow were quite evident. As she swung the sword back and forth, Harry lunged at her. The sword plunged through his dress shirt, into his heart.

Here I was with a problem on my hands, not a medical one, but a people problem. What to do? I decided to call a lawyer. I knew Tom Harmer well. He was wise, thoughtful, and, more important, had had a lot of experience with this kind of situation. At 2:45 in the morning, he sounded alert and listening. When I told him the problem, he said, "I'll be there in twenty minutes. Call the police!" I called the police as instructed. It seemed to me that they were there before I hung up. More surprising was the fact that a reporter and a photographer were also there. I learned to stay behind the photographer. Tom Harmer arrived in a few minutes and took charge. Mary reenacted the incident while Harmer and the police watched. The undertaker arrived to take Harry's body for an autopsy by the coroner. I called Mary's father, who came at once.

At 4:00 a.m., we proceeded to the police station. Details of the situation were properly recorded. Bail was set. After a tumultuous evening, we went our separate ways.

A grand jury questioned all concerned, carefully deliberated, and returned, "No true bill: accidental death."