Charlie the Swab

Charlie was a Holy Terror. He did more for the cause of capital punishment in New England than three and a half murderers and Jim Curley. Every time something untoward happened to the New Hampshire town of Clarmont which reluctantly gave birth to his genius, the chief of police spread out a drag-net for Charlie just on general principles.

Before he was two months old Charlie had perfected his “Safety-Pin-Sticking-In” howl, which would bring a-running in anguish even the person who had seen him snugly installed in zippered diapers only a few minutes before. When his elder brother got his hide tanned for feeding the cat and the family Great Dane candied laxative and then locking them in the house together, Charlie — aged four — was quietly washing the last traces of the chocolate from his fingers. At five he put hydrochloric acid in his teacher’s ink well and she lost three pen points and a fingernail. At eight he raided the swimming hole where his older brother and five friends were swimming without benefit of trunks, carried off their clothes, and left them only six lace brassieres.

At ten he contrived from a piece of canvas, two clothespins, some rubber bands and music wire a “pants rip imitator” and for a long time visitors to his school never sat all the way down in one movement. By twelve Charlie had developed an actual pants unpatcher which, when applied to chairs, clung affectionately to the trousers of the occupant. The story is still circulating of how a valiant class of thirty youngsters, unnerved by a visit of the school board, paid no attention to the tugging of their nether garments and marched dazedly out of the room, each waving from behind a ragged flag of truce.

It was Charlie who, at his high school graduation, packed a mouse between dry ice plugs in each of the diplomas and when the class stood on the stage before the gathered multitude that sweltering day in June, the ice melted and the mice were revived and released. And it was Charlie who labored for two hours to put two grass snakes in the middle of the huge graduation cake at the class dance, and a cockroach at the bottom of each paper container of ice cream. So well did he accomplish this that the impurities were not discovered until the refreshments had been nearly consumed and then the discovery was simultaneous. Stomach pumps were over-worked among the stronger stomach-ached females, while others required no artificial means of regurgitation. And even the little boys showed an unusual fondness for castor oil that night.

At prep school Charlie single-handed led a cow up the stairs to the entrance of the headmaster’s combined study and library and left her with two dozen castor-oil-soaked apples. The headmaster returned a few minutes after cause and effect began to operate, but all his efforts did not alleviate the natural course of events. Unfortunately, Charlie was a new pupil and accused just on general principles and because he had not taken the trouble to find out that the fellow across the hall under whose bed he had planted three apples and a half gallon of castor oil was the son of the headmaster. So Charlie came to Tech. That was his first mistake.

Beginning his operations in Boston, he first dumped methylene blue into the pond in the Public Gardens. Next morning the swans swam around blue inside and out. It was so surprising that two of the voluntarily unemployed, in their attempts to get closer to the phenomenon, fell in headlong and when next seen were permanently blue from toe-nail to esophagus, making it possible for them to earn a comfortable living, one with Barnum and Bailey and the other as a professional “blue-feeler.”

For a while after this Charlie laid low, relaxing only now and then for such minor pastimes as swapping all the coat checks at the Met, the RKO and the Opera House in one evening and seducing two of the hat check girls in the bargain. The third was a male, and he lost two weeks pay and tips to Charlie in a crap game. Charlie had the police dragging the river for weeks when he perfected his famous disappearing body. This was a suit of old clothes stuffed with salt which he hooked to the outside of the bridge rail by a thin thread which in turn ran the half span of the bridge. As some one approached the dummy at night, Charlie would haul in on the thread, release the hook, and before the oncomer could shout, the body dropped into the water. One variation even had a soluble air sack inside it to send up bubbles. But the police never found more

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