

SURGEON TO THE DEAD

by

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ACT [1]

SCENE [1]

13th December 1846. The Herb Garrett (the Garrett is the attic in the rafters of St Thomas' Church which is filled with hanging dried herbs, medical implements and body parts in jars. The operating theatre's entrance is off the Garrett). Violinist to play 'Surgeon to the Dead' theme.

Flossie pootles in, starts putting up Christmas decorations. She's not supposed to be doing it, but Christmas is her favourite time of year and she can't resist. She sings carols along with the violin, gets carried away and astonishes the violinist with her bellowing. Takes a tiny mince pie out of her apron pocket and surreptitiously stuffs one into her mouth. She's having a great time.

She's halfway through another pie when a female patient runs screaming into the Garrett from the antechamber. Unsure what to do, Flossie tries to hold up her decorations to stop the patient from running into them.

Dr Haighton appears in hot pursuit after the patient. Flossie with mouth half full of pie, does a muffled squeal. Shoves in the rest of the pie. Dr Haighton shouts at the patient.

DR HAIGHTON: Come back! Come here at once I insist. Just stop it will you. You're to come back in right away.

Chases the patient around the Garrett. The patient continues to squeal and scream.

DR HAIGHTON: I'm warning you! I'll take my belt to you! Right. That's it. You've asked for it!

Dr Haighton starts to undo his belt and partially removes it, his trousers start to slip down.

Dr Edwards appears from the antechamber, clutching a large amputation saw as if he's been caught midway through a duel. He's furious at the shenanigans, and shocked to see the Garrett is full of medical students (ie. audience members). Flossie squeaks in shock, tries to hide behind a prop in the Garrett. Dr Haighton, on seeing Dr Edwards becomes more formal, tries to wedge his belt back into place.

DR HAIGHTON: Madam, if you'd be so kind as to escort me back to the operating

theatre...

DR EDWARDS: Dr Haighton, why are both the patient and medical students *outside* the operating theatre, rather than in?

DR HAIGHTON: You see...

DR EDWARDS: God this is intolerable. You are intolerable. And Flossie take down these confounded decorations!

Dr Edwards rips down some decorations and a terrified Flossie comes out from her hiding place. She doesn't know whether to shoo the patient into the theatre or take down her beloved decorations.

DR EDWARDS: *(to the patient)* Either come back into the theatre by your own free will or I will throw you over my shoulder and carry you there.

Patient wimpers.

DR EDWARDS: Madam, you can rest assured that you are in the safest possible hands. An amputation such as yours will take seconds. Thousands of patients have put their trust in me and many of them have survived. The pain will be excruciating, yes, but very brief, I assure you.

DR HAIGHTON: Don't worry Sir I shall ensure she's back on the table in no time!

DR EDWARDS: Good, good.

Dr Edwards goes to strut back into the operating theatre but something is bothering him and he reverses.

DR EDWARDS: What is that smell?

He goes over to a medical student (audience member).

DR EDWARDS: Show me your arm. Show it!

He inspects it.

DR EDWARDS: You are aware that you attempted to enter the operating theatre with a diseased arm? Why was this not seen to before? It has (*he leans in to smell it*) a foul smelling odour, surely one of your colleagues here pointed this out?

He grabs the arm and amputates it briskly with his saw. Flossie screams.

DR EDWARDS: I'm sure the pain of the amputation is intolerable but if I'd asked you first I doubt you would have submitted. Luckily I was here to make that decision for you. Flossie, bandage please.

Haighton! Medical students in the theatre now!

Dr Edwards struts back into the antechamber with the arm slung across his shoulder. He tosses it to one side as he leaves the Garrett.

DR EDWARDS: Clear that up will you!

Flossie goes up to the medical student with a bandage but has no idea how to bandage the arm. She ends up just throwing the bandage at the medical student as she gets back to the matter in hand - getting the patient into the operating theatre.

DR HAIGHTON: Well come on then! Medical students must be *inside* the operating theatre, make haste damn it.

Dr Edwards comes back in, pushing through audience members if necessary. He grabs the patient and slings her over his shoulder, makes his way back into the antechamber pushing past audience members.

DR EDWARDS: Move damn it!

Dr Haighton and Flossie starts to shoo the audience members into the operating theatre.

DR HAIGHTON: Come on will you! Time is of the essence!

Audience to be shepherded into the operating theatre as the violin plays.

ACT [1]

SCENE [2]

13th December 1846. Operating Theatre.

Dr Edwards thumps the patient onto the operating table then Dr Haighton tries to hold her down. Dr Edwards reviews the angle of his top hat in the mirror at the back of the stage. Flossie is hiding at the back of the theatre on the top step, behind the audience. If possible she is still trying to bandage up the arm of the medical student, or be miming a gesture to keep the rest of the arm elevated.

Dr Haighton signals at Flossie to come down and help him and she creeps, embarrassed, between the medical students. Together they try to hold down the patient. The patient lashes out, Dr Haighton ducks so that Flossie takes the blow. Flossie squeals.

Dr Haighton berates the patient in a loud hush, just enough to not be heard by Dr Edwards.

DR HAIGHTON: Silence! After your shenanigans this morning you barely deserve to be operated on at all.

PATIENT: I shan't be able to take the suffering!

DR HAIGHTON: Then I shall get you the Physician's Stick!

Dr Haighton goes to the cupboard at the side to search for the Physician's stick (a length of wood similar to a walking stick). Flossie tries to hold the patient down but is afraid of being hit again. Dr Haighton talks with his back to the patient as he continues to rummage for the stick.

DR HAIGHTON: And should you think of departing again I warn you we had a patient leap off the table on the other day, darted down the corridor and locked themselves in the lavatory. Dr Edwards broke down the door with his knee, causing extensive damage, and dragged out the trembling wretch. Right, bite down when you feel the -

Dr Haighton has found the stick and turns brusquely just as the patient sits up. The patient collides with the stick and knock themselves out. The patient falls back, out cold.

DR HAIGHTON: - Pain. Oh. Oh dear.

Dr Haighton and Flossie look at one another. Dr Haighton tries to rouse the patient, nothing. Dr Edwards comes over to start the operation.

DR EDWARDS: They're very quiet, have you bored them to death? Oh, they are very quiet aren't they.

DR HAIGHTON: Yes, they said, it had been an exhausting experience, and they required a sleep.

DR EDWARDS: They went to sleep?

DR HAIGHTON: Yes, they said they fancied a refreshing sleep.

DR EDWARDS: On the operating table.

DR HAIGHTON: Yes Sir.

Dr Edwards walks round to Dr Haighton, glares at him right in the face. He obviously knows what he's done. Flossie squeaks. Dr Edwards points his arm back towards Flossie without taking his eyes off Dr Haighton.

DR EDWARDS: Out!

Flossie panics, hides at the side.

She hides during the operation but occasionally comes out and squeaks as she listens intently to their conversation. During particularly shocking moments she takes another mince pie from her apron pocket and mindlessly eats it.

DR EDWARDS: And when I make the first incision you can assure me they won't wake up?

DR HAIGHTON: I am sure they will remain silent and fully rested, Sir.

DR EDWARDS: Then gentlemen, we shall have the honour today of operating on an unconscious patient. Female, forties, slammed her little finger in the pantry door (*sighs*) which has been left to infection and

now the finger must be amputated. I'm sure men you'll find this as thrilling as I will. Dr Haighton will you hold her still please, ensure she does not roll off. Scalpel.

Dr Haighton passes him a sharp scalpel. Dr Edwards prepares to make the first incision.

DR EDWARDS: Time me gentlemen, time me!

Dr Haighton gets out a pocket watch and sets it to time him. As Dr Edwards makes the first incision the patient of course wakes up. Dr Edwards withdraws his sharp scalpel and taps it in frustration against his leg.

DR EDWARDS: Perhaps next time, you could just punch the patient out cold?

Dr Haighton shoves the Physician's Stick in the patient's mouth which they bite down onto to help with the pain.

DR EDWARDS: Gentlemen do heed the time as I shall aim to do this in twenty seconds or less.

Dr Edwards continues the finger amputation. Order of operation: scalpel to cut the skin, Catlin to separate the tissues, amputation saw to whip the finger off, tie off blood vessels, skin is stitched up - while Dr Haighton continues to talk as if nothing particular is happening. All the while the patient fights under his hand.

DR HAIGHTON: Regarding a patient being knocked out cold before amputation -

DR EDWARDS: Catlin.

DR HAIGHTON: My father and I have an interesting prospect for you.

DR EDWARDS: Not that knife, the other one.

DR HAIGHTON: It will change medical history forever.

DR EDWARDS: You always claim to be on the brink of making medical history. This Catlin is blunt.

DR HAIGHTON: My father has assured me this will change the course of history

for all mankind.

DR EDWARDS: *All of mankind now?*

DR HAIGHTON: Yes Sir.

DR EDWARDS: Amputation saw.

DR HAIGHTON: If you are not curious, there are of course many others I can ask...

DR EDWARDS: Tell me! *(Beat)* Fine. I wish you good luck with your endeavours. Gentlemen, as you can see the finger was successfully amputated, *(waggles it in the air like a little carrot)* it will be available later for review in one of my dissection classes.

PATIENT: *What?*

Dr Edwards tosses the finger on a side table and goes to leave the operating theatre. The patient sits up in horror and Dr Haighton is in a panic as he sees his one chance of victory waltzing out the door. He yells after him.

DR HAIGHTON: A man was made insensible! For an entire operation! In Boston!
In America!

Dr Edwards struts back in.

DR EDWARDS: The patient was out cold?

DR HAIGHTON: For the whole operation!

DR EDWARDS: They did not awake?

DR HAIGHTON: Only once the operation was complete. They felt no pain at all.

DR EDWARDS: Did they survive?

DR HAIGHTON: Of course!

DR EDWARDS: Does your father have details of this? What chemicals were used?

- DR HAIGHTON: A letter is coming from his very good friend, very high up you know, in Boston. Very important chap. He was at the operation. It's coming by sea to Liverpool. On a brand new steamship. The letter will be sent onto me. Wilberforce Haighton.
- DR EDWARDS: Then what do you plan to do with it?
- DR HAIGHTON: Oversee the operation myself, with a surgeon who can do the actual - grunt - work. Then I'll report the operation in the Lancet and achieve fame, riches and have streets and babies named after me. An entire generation of little Wilberforce Haightons. There will be a Dr Haighton Day and I shall almost certainly be made a Knight. *(Dr Haighton to swing the Physician's Stick around as if it were a sword and to then stand as if ready to fight a duel)*
- DR EDWARDS: *(Mulls)* An operation such as this requires an experienced surgeon. It shouldn't be left in the hands of a cretin. Give the letter to me.
- DR HAIGHTON: Sir I do not think that is going to happen. It is of course my operation, I merely need an assistant.
- DR EDWARDS: This changes medicine. Forever. If we can operate on patients who are insensible then I could commit to far superior operations, ones in internal cavities. I could operate on the brain! Tell me, as a qualified doctor how many operations have you completed alone?
- DR HAIGHTON: Not that many but my role is more a facilitator -
- DR EDWARDS: How many is 'not that many'?
- DR HAIGHTON: Well a few, but of very high standard -
- DR EDWARDS: How many is 'a few' - exactly?
- DR HAIGHTON: None, Sir. But it can't be that difficult when they're out cold.

DR EDWARDS: None. If the world are to witness this surgery it is essential any assistant has proved themselves worthy.

DR HAIGHTON: Assistant!

DR EDWARDS: I can't operate with another doctor - whether they actually cut or just extensively pontificate - if they haven't shown their abilities. Do your first operation alone, prove yourself.

Dr Edwards struts out of the theatre. Dr Haighton rushes after him, shoves the bandage at Flossie as he leaves who thinks she is perfectly hidden round the corner.

DR HAIGHTON: Sir! Sir! This is entirely unnecessary, I am sure if you were to speak to my father...

Flossie creeps towards the patient, makes a hash of wrapping up the hand she's a cleaner not a medical practitioner. She talks to the patient who has no interest in what she's saying and just gently moans.

FLOSSIE: Did you hear that? They're going to make a man dead. Cut him up. Then make them alive again. You know what that is don't you? It's magic. Black magic. It's the devil. It's Satan. It's the work of Satan. I tell you it's unnatural that's what it is.

ACT [1] SCENE [3]

14th December 1846. Operating Theatre.

Dr Haighton is alone with a whimpering patient on the operating table. He struts about, keeps checking the instruments, clearly stalling for time.

DR HAIGHTON: Good morning class! Sharp scalpel, Catlin knife, amputation knife, amputation saw -

He retches when he reaches the saw.

DR HAIGHTON: All present and correct. Gentlemen, it is of upmost importance that you check your equipment throughly before performing.

Fiddles again with the equipment.

DR HAIGHTON: Today will be a masterclass. You are extremely fortunate to be in my presence. I have worked with Dr Edwards for many years. Together we have completed some of the fastest operations known to man.

He looks at the patient and retches.

PATIENT: Sir, the wait for the pain is more tortuous than the pain itself.

DR HAIGHTON: Shut up. Gentlemen, you are supremely fortunate that today I have decided that instead of merely watching a procedure I will allow one of you the great - extraordinary - opportunity to get the practical experience of performing the operation. You shall amputate under my expert guidance. *(Takes the sharp scalpel)* Who would like to volunteer?

Dr Haighton walks around the medical students, tries to pass a knife to people in the audience, desperately hopes someone will take it. [Note: back up lines should be rehearsed in case an audience member actually takes it, for example "No not you, no women"].

DR HAIGHTON: No? Are you sure? It's the opportunity of a lifetime. Never to be repeated.

Dr Edwards enters, stands at the back of the theatre saying nothing but watches Dr Haighton like a hawk.

DR HAIGHTON: Of course, I understand that you wish to see a master at work. Very well.

Dr Haighton stands as far away from the patient as he can.

DR HAIGHTON: So, which knife do we take first? *(No response)*. That's right, the sharp scalpel. And what do we use that for?

PATIENT: Sir just make the incision! For I can bear it no longer!

DR HAIGHTON: Will you shut up! We use it to cut the skin. Time me gentlemen, time me!

Dr Haighton takes the knife, is visibly shaking. He goes to make an incision, but can't do it. Shoves a hanky over his nose, looks the opposite way and just jabs at the leg, roughly cuts the skin.

DR HAIGHTON: We take the Catlin knife.

Dr Haighton rummages through the knives until he's found the right one, then with hanky firmly over his nose he goes back in.

DR HAIGHTON: And we slice through the skin creating a flap.

Dr Haighton stands at the bottom of the leg, trying to cut a flap of skin without vomiting. Cuts the flap of skin over the knee, rather than beneath it which is what he should do.

DR HAIGHTON: And then - you are timing this aren't you gentlemen as this is history in the making - we take the flap of skin and we fold it back and take the amputation saw - SAW!

Realises he does not have an assistant as Dr Edwards is not going to move.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh.

Goes to get the saw, nearly vomits when he picks it up.

DR HAIGHTON: And we saw at the leg. I should at least give one of you the honour of completing the last part of the amputation?

He tries to pass the saw to a member of the audience, meanwhile the patient is screaming. Dr Haighton stands at the top of the leg and saws away at it.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh. Oh dear me. This is a tough bugger!

He saws away at it gingerly but nothing is happening. The patient is screaming in agony.

DR HAIGHTON: Oh shut up! This doesn't seem to be, right bear with -

He grabs the leg, the hanky drops from his nose and Dr Haighton pulls his collar up to cover his nose. He saws with all his might while looking away from the leg.

DR HAIGHTON: Ah gawd!

The leg is half hanging off. Dr Haighton stands there holding it while simultaneously keeping his nose in his collar.

DR HAIGHTON: Gentlemen you are fortunate enough to see this amputation as it shows...demonstrates...sometimes bones are not all created equal and some are tougher than others; I'll need to use a different saw for the rest of it.

Realising he has no one to pass him another saw he tries to balance the half cut off leg on his knee while he leans back. After much huffing and puffing he grabs a smaller saw.

DR HAIGHTON: Good, good. Right, you simply cut through the rest of the bone -

PATIENT: Just kill me! I can take it no more! Better to be dead than in agony!

DR HAIGHTON: You simply cut the rest of the leg -

There is much sawing, retching and looking in completely the wrong way. Finally the leg comes off with an almighty yell from the patient.

DR HAIGHTON: And there we have it!

Goes to hold the leg up but nearly vomits and hands it to the patient who is still lying down and has no idea what to do with it.

DR HAIGHTON: Now we simply have to pull the flap of skin over the bone -

He looks away as he tries to find the flap of skin without looking at it, gets it, pulls it, pulls it again. It's not reaching.

DR HAIGHTON: What the hell! The skin flap, it simply pulls over the bone and you stitch it - wait, this isn't right, good god what's wrong with your

leg?

As Dr Haighton stands there holding the flap of skin trying to pull it desperately over the leg.

DR EDWARDS: You've cut her leg off upside down.

A moment as Dr Haighton sees Dr Edwards. Dr Haighton is still holding up a flap of skin.

DR EDWARDS: You've cut the skin one way, then the bone the other, so you've not got enough skin to pull over the bone.

DR HAIGHTON: Sir I think you'll find there is a problem with the skin -

DR EDWARDS: Yes, you've not left a big enough flap.

DR HAIGHTON: No the skin Sir - it's faulty.

DR EDWARDS: Faulty?

DR HAIGHTON: Not stretchy enough.

PATIENT: Please can someone kill me, please I beg you, the pain is worse than being dead!

DR EDWARDS: I'm sorry Madam he's cut your leg off upside down.

PATIENT: Kill me!

DR EDWARDS: Do you know what to do to fix it?

DR HAIGHTON: I don't need to fix it, there's nothing wrong with it.

He tries desperately to pull the skin flap over the bone. It's really not happening.

DR EDWARDS: You'll have to amputate more bone to fit the skin over it.

PATIENT: Give me the knife and I'll do it myself!

DR HAIGHTON: I shall do nothing of the sort!

DR EDWARDS: Do you want me to show you?

DR HAIGHTON: No! I am performing this operation alone. In fact, the medical students asked, begged me, if today they could stitch up the flap of skin under my supervision.

Dr Edwards watches as Dr Haighton desperately tries to get the audience members to help him out. No one does.

DR EDWARDS: You would not have performed an operation alone if you have to ask the audience to complete it for you.

DR HAIGHTON: I have amputated a leg!

DR EDWARDS: You cannot let the patient go home with half their bone still sticking out. And why is the patient clutching the other half of their leg - do you expect them to carry it home?

PATIENT: Please, give me the needle, I'll stitch it myself!

DR EDWARDS: It's a fail isn't it Haighton. I can't operate with a man who blatantly can't operate himself.

DR HAIGHTON: This is outrageous. A patient who is insensible - one who does not move and cannot complain - is far easier to operate on.

DR EDWARDS: A patient who does not move is harder, at least a patient can scream to tell you when you are going wrong.

DR HAIGHTON: I've already received the letter. I've got clear instructions on how to make a man insensible. I just need a surgeon to work under me and I am ready.

DR EDWARDS: Fine. Then stitch up the leg, show me your ability.

Dr Haighton stares at the leg, really has no idea how to fix the mess he's made.

DR HAIGHTON: Operation is completed, a dresser can finish it off. I bid you good

luck and good day.

Dr Haighton storms out.

DR EDWARDS: Talent doesn't require luck. I trust you'll find a poor deluded soul to help you operate!

Dr Haighton stomps back in, glares at Dr Edwards, grabs his doctor's bag.

DR HAIGHTON: If you're that talented then meet me here tomorrow, bring your equipment and we'll see who really knows what they're doing!

DR EDWARDS: Fine!

DR HAIGHTON: Fine!

Dr Haighton strops out like a petulant child.

Dr Edwards swiftly cuts a section of bone off, and then is able to stitch up the leg. As soon as he finishes Dr Edwards has no interest left in the patient.

DR EDWARDS: Come on! Move!

The patient is unsure - he can't be asking her to walk out of the theatre? Dr Edwards picks her up and carries her over his shoulder.