

Editorial: William R. Laidlaw

There died in this city two weeks ago, at the Home for Incurables, a man who should not be allowed to have suffered and died in vain. He was William R. Laidlaw.

Laidlaw was a clerk in Wall Street. His employers' dealings frequently brought him in touch with Russell Sage, about as near as can be a replica of the sharkish financier Daniel Drew. On all such occasions Sage took of Laidlaw no more notice than he would of a pneumatic tube through which bunches of mail are conveyed. One day about twenty years ago, Sage acted differently. His conduct was so surprisingly polite and affable that it almost took Laidlaw's breath away. The moment he entered Sage's office Sage stepped forward beamingly, took him by the hand and drew Laidlaw between himself and a stranger who was in animated conversation with Sage. Laidlaw yielded passively and amazed at such unwonted cordiality. But his amazement lasted only a few seconds. A fierce detonation took place. There was an explosion. When Laidlaw recovered consciousness he lay in a hospital full of splinters that had been exploded into his body.

What had happened? Shortly before Laidlaw had entered Russell Sage's office on that fateful day, a stranger (his name was subsequently ascertained as Norcross from Boston) had succeeded in getting access to Sage, whereupon he demanded million or so from the shark-plutocrat, threatening to blow him up with the dynamite in a satchel that he carried in his hand. Sage saw that he was dealing with a dangerous maniac. He parleyed with the fellow.

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At that moment Laidlaw entered the office, and Sage, thoroughly alarmed for his own life, seized Laidlaw's hand and drew him between the lunatic and himself. Sage was none too quick. That same instant, whether by accident or because he realized that his scheme had miscarried, Norcross dropped his satchel. A fearful explosion took place; one employe was killed; Norcross was blown to pieces; Sage was stunned, but otherwise remained unharmed; Laidlaw, however, survived only as a cripple for life. A good portion of the load that was meant for Russell Sage went into Laidlaw's body. Sage had saved himself by interposing Laidlaw between himself and Norcross.

One should think that an impulse of common humanity would have loosened Russell Sage's purse strings in behalf of the poor clerk, now physically wrecked for life, whom he screened himself with. Nothing of the sort. Russell Sage refused all aid. And then followed the third act in this social drama.

Some of the most noted lawyers took up Laidlaw's case. He brought suit for \$50,000 damages. The fate of that suit was a fit closing act to the tragedy which now assumed rank as a social tragedy:—

The first time the suit was dismissed on a technicality;

The second time Laidlaw got judgment for \$25,000, but the judgment was laid aside;

The third time there was a mistrial;

The fourth time Laidlaw was awarded \$43,000, but again, upon a technicality, the award was denied;

The death of Russell Sage in 1906 finally threw the case out of court altogether on the ground of its being a case in "tort," and as such could not survive the defendant.

The Law, being Class Law, together with the machinery for its enforcement, may trip, sometime or other; as a rule, both Law and legal machinery are well ballasted—as William R. Laidlaw's experience illustrates.

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