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The Sudden Death of Luke A. Lucas

By HAROLD E. SOMERVILLE

"MY LORD, Luke! You here?" Gasping the words, Ed Bosworth halted, thunderstruck, at the door.

"Come in, old fellow. You look upset. What's wrong?" Luke A. Lucas—he of the mighty brain and the intellectual dome—cleared a stack of law books from a chair and placed it for his caller. Bosworth, without taking his astonished eyes from the attorney, slowly seated himself.

"Let me feel of you," he said, extending a hand and grasping the arm of Lucas. "You *are* here, ain't you?"

"And why shouldn't I be? These are my office hours."

"But I heard you was dead! Came in to congratulate your partner—I mean, condole him. Excuse me."

"Eh—what's that you say?" Luke leaned forward, his brows knit. "Heard I was dead? Where'd you hear such nonsense as that?"

"On the street. Three or four folks spoke of it. Said it was too bad about poor Luke."

"I've been at home with a touch of rheumatiz for a day or two. But I don't even look sick—do I?"

"No, Luke, you don't."

"Who told you I was dead?"

"Well, old Bill Marsh, for one. Said it was your heart. Henry Bass thought it was acute indigestion. Mel Barker heard you had a shock. Otto Rummelfinger understood—"

Lucas, very much alive, sprang to his feet and reached for his hat.

"I'll go see Marsh about this," he declared. "You come along, Ed."

THEY hurried up the village street to the office of Luke's chief professional rival. Bill was at his desk.

"What do you mean, you old scoundrel," demanded Lucas, "by spreading rumors that I am dead?"

"Why—I—I heard you was!" The surprize betrayed by Marsh was unmistakably genuine.

"Where in the devil did you hear that stuff?"

Marsh reflected.

"I think Si Latham was the first who told me. Then Joel Burke—"

But Lucas was gone, Bosworth at his heels.

In Latham's grocery store Si was weighing out a sack of flour for a customer. At sight of the supposedly dead he lowered the scoop, and its contents whitened the floor.

"Luke Lucas!" he groaned. "Ed, be I seein' things? Or is that Luke standin' there beside you?"

"It's Luke," testified Bosworth. "I felt of him to make certain sure."

FROM Latham, the trail was followed to Smith's Sanitary Barber Shop; thence to Whitney's drug store; across the street to Atherton's Dry Goods Emporium; next to Mrs. Garrison's millinery parlors; up the hill to the cottage of Miss Parker, the spinster dressmaker; and finally to the office of the *Weekly Argus*.

Orman Holt, the editor "and prop.," took one look at Luke A. Lucas and bolted out of the rear door.

Thirty seconds later he returned.

"I've stopped the press, Luke," he announced.

"You was printing my death in the paper?"

"Just heard about it fifteen minutes before I closed the forms. Only had time to squeeze in a paragraph to say that 'As we go to press we learn with deep regret . . .' Hadn't run off more'n a dozen copies, and I've thrown 'em away. . . . You showed up in the nick o' time, Luke. What started that yarn?"

The editor, it appeared, had his information from a most reliable source, the truthful lips of the Reverend Joshua Stebbins. To the Reverend Joshua went Lucas.

"Well! Well!" exclaimed the clergyman. "This is indeed a most gratifying surprize!"

"I'm cheating you out of a funeral fee," Luke reminded him.

"My dear man!" beamed the sky pilot, raising a hand in protest. "Such a thought never entered my mind."

The pastor had learned of Luke's reported demise from Simon Cook, the village teamster. And the Reverend Mr. Stebbins gave full credence to the story, for Cook had it direct from Dr. Ferguson.

So to Ferguson's office. Here the appearance of the living ghost occasioned no astonishment.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" inquired the doctor, when Luke and Ed were seated. "And which one shall I do it for?"

"We're both well and strong," replied the lawyer. "Do we look it?"

"You do."

Ferguson lifted his eyebrows interrogatively.

"But I am a dead man, doctor, by your own statement," announced Lucas.

"Is this a joke?" the physician asked. "I may be dense, but I fail to get the point."

Luke A. Lucas, he of the mighty brain and the intellectual dome, spoke slowly and accusingly.

"You told Simon Cook that I was dead. The story has gone all over town. It even got into the *Argus*. I could sue you for slander."

"Man alive!" exclaimed the doctor, not realizing the peculiar fitness of his expletive. "I never said any such thing! Not to Simon Cook or anyone else!"

His denial was uttered with convincing emphasis. Lucas, more than ever bewildered, accepted it.

"I knew," said he, "that it wasn't like you to make up a story out of whole cloth. But we're such good friends that I figured maybe you were having a little fun at my expense. . . . I'm sorry, Doc, to have come to you with this, but Parson Stebbins said Cook got it direct from you. . . . Guess I owe you a box of cigars. . . . And now I'll be getting after Cook. We'll see what the stupid ass has to say for himself."

LUKE and Ed arose and moved toward the door. . . .

The doctor's gaze at that moment wandered to a smooth, white object reposing on his desk and remained fixed there for fully ten seconds. Then he burst out in uproarious laughter.

He lifted the thing and displayed it to his callers.

"Here!" he said; "this explains your story. It's one I ordered recently. It arrived yesterday. I had just unpacked it when Simon came in with a bruised finger. He picked it up and looked it over—never had seen one before, I imagine. He asked me what it was—he's addicted, you know, to the foolish question habit.

"Oh," I said, offhand, 'that's Luke Lucas's skull.'

"And the doggone fool must have thought I meant it."