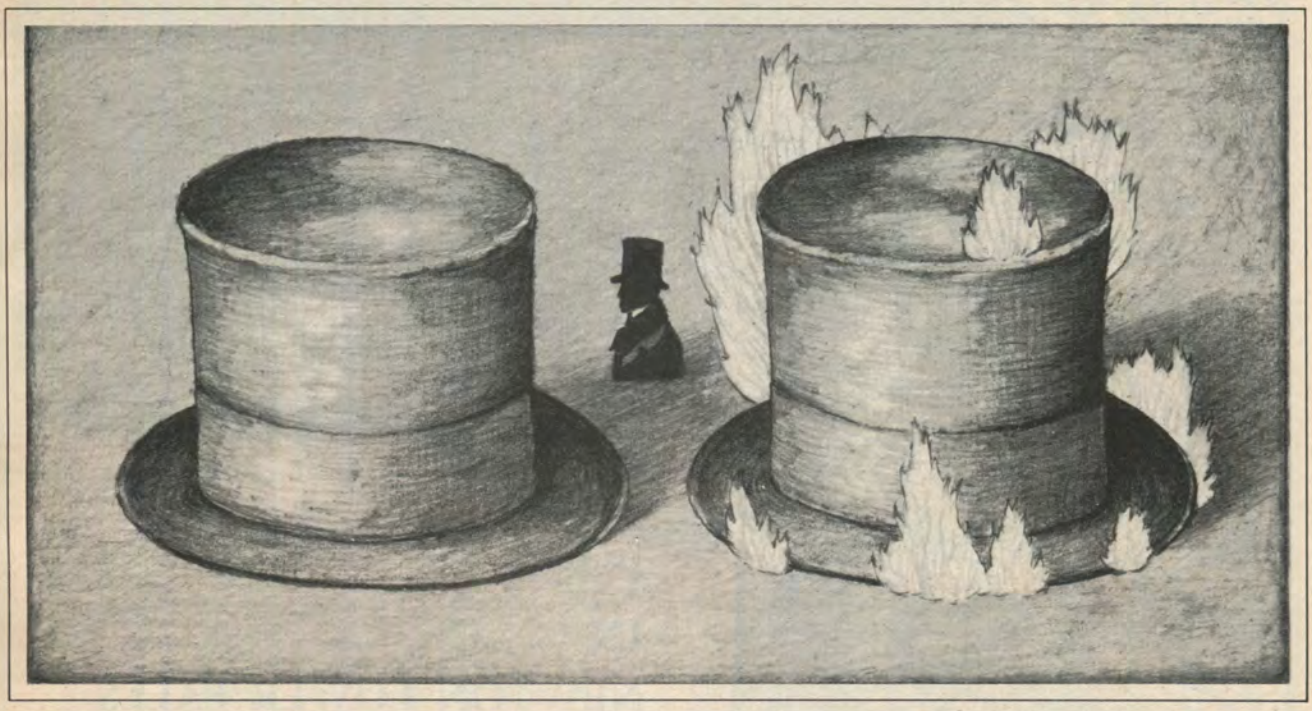
THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

The Goriest Crime of the Century



On the Friday before Thanksgiving, 1849, Dr. George Parkman, one of the five richest men in Boston, went on an errand in the West End and never returned.

At noon, the thin, bony fifty-nine-year-old had set out from his stately four-story house off Beacon Street on the Hill, wearing his usual black greatcoat, purple waistcoat, and black stovepipe hat. He could often be seen at that time of day walking briskly about his various properties, bending forward from the waist, his chin jutting out like the prow of a clipper ship. The care of his considerable real estate holdings, which he had inherited from his father, was pretty much the extent of his professional activity. For though he was a licensed physician, having taken his M.D. at Scotland's University of Aberdeen (he got his B.A. from Harvard, of course), Dr. Parkman had never set up a practice. He had written a few papers on psychiatry (one entitled "On the Management of Lunatics") and even applied for the job of superintendent at McLean, but when he was turned down for that, he gave up job-hunting altogether.

One can only wonder if Dr. Parkman applied to his tenants the same principles of management that he proposed for lunatics. On the Friday in question, Parkman had stopped at Quincy Market to buy a head of lettuce for his invalid daughter, Harriet, who was institutionalized in a local hospital. There he had spotted one of his tenants, an Irishwoman who was behind in her rent. Parkman was always a stickler in money matters. He reminded her of the debt, snatched from her hand the money she was about to spend on groceries, and continued on his way. He stopped at Mr. Holland's grocery store, near the Harvard Medical College, on the banks of the Charles River, and placed an order with Mr. Holland, saying he would be back in a few minutes to pick it up. He never came back.

By midafternoon, Mrs. Parkman was frantic. It wasn't like her husband to miss two o'clock dinner; in thirty-three years of marriage he had only done so twice, and both times he had sent word well in advance. When he had still not returned the next morning, Mrs. Parkman went to her brother-in-law, Robert Gould Shaw, one of the four men in Boston richer than her husband, and together they went to the police. On the way Mrs. Parkman explained that her manservant, Patrick, recalled having admitted a visitor early Friday. Patrick hadn't recognized the man, but he *had* heard him say that he wanted to arrange a meeting with Dr. Parkman later that afternoon. Perhaps that had something to do with his absence.

Police Marshal Francis Tukey took the matter seriously. By nightfall, the police had posted around the city 28,000 copies of a "Special Notice" alerting the public to Dr. Parkman's disappearance, and they had notified all police stations within a sixty-mile radius. They had also dragged the Charles River.

On Sunday afternoon, Dr. John Webster, a professor of chemistry at the Harvard Medical College, called on the Reverend Francis Parkman, Dr. Parkman's brother and Webster's pastor for twenty years, to say that he was the man who had visited the Parkmans early Friday morning. Webster, a short, round-faced, and bespectacled individual, explained that he had wanted to talk to Dr. Parkman about the money he, Webster, owed him. He and Parkman had been friends for forty years, ever since Harvard College days; Parkman had given a lot of money to the medical college and helped Webster secure his professorship. But Webster's salary of $1,200 a year, which

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Illustration by Tom Hibschman

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he supplemented with about $500 by selling tickets to his medical lectures, was not enough to support his large family. He was in serious debt, having long ago squandered a $50,000 inheritance from his father, a well-to-do apothecary. In recent years, Parkman had advanced him over $2,000. Webster said that he had asked Parkman to come to the medical college that Friday afternoon so that he could pay him some of the money he owed. Dr. Parkman arrived at about one-thirty, whereupon Webster paid him $483.60. Webster said Parkman then canceled two of the notes he held, handed them over to Webster, and hurried out, taking the stairs two steps at a time. Having made this declaration, Webster excused himself and departed.

Just as a formality, the police paid the medical college a visit the following afternoon. Guided by Webster, the officers looked around the upper and lower laboratories and the adjoining dissection room. They didn't ask to search the vault beneath the dissection room: that was too obvious a place to hide a corpse.

Meanwhile, a second "Special Notice" was posted around the city, this one offering $3,000 for information leading to Parkman's discovery, "if alive." Boston was duly ransacked. Citizens combed every inch of Parkman's buildings, cellar to attic, looking for him. There was still not a trace of him.

Ephraim Littlefield, the janitor at the medical college, was troubled. He lived at the college with his wife in rooms just down the hall from Webster's laboratory. Along with his janitorial duties, Littlefield was responsible for procuring cadavers for the medical students' experiments. Littlefield was worried that people might suspect that *he* had something to do with Dr. Parkman's disappearance. Several people had seen Dr. Parkman go into the medical college, but only Dr. Webster had seen him leave. And Dr. Webster had been acting pretty suspicious since. Why had he asked Littlefield all those questions about the vaults in the basement? And why had he told Littlefield in such detail what had gone on between him and Dr. Parkman that Friday afternoon? Dr. Webster had even mentioned the odd cents that he had paid Dr. Parkman.

The police returned for a more careful search the next afternoon. Webster was perfectly congenial, as always. He chatted with the men about what a hubbub Parkman's disappearance was causing. He watched nonchalantly as the officers opened the various containers in his laboratory and examined the furnace and the fuel closet. When they took a step toward the corner of the room, Webster said that was just his private privy. Wouldn't the officers like to look in the dissection room

instead? They nodded and changed direction. This time, they decided to go down into the dissection room vault. Littlefield led the way. The officers had to walk hunched over, and the lamp kept blowing out. When they found nothing out of order there, the men declared themselves entirely satisfied, thanked Dr. Webster for his time, and left.

But Ephraim Littlefield wasn't satisfied. And he didn't feel any better when, after the officers had gone, Webster handed him the money for a Thanksgiving turkey, with his compliments. In the seven years that Littlefield had worked in the lab, Webster had never given him anything.

By Wednesday, the reward was down to $1,000, "for information leading to the recovery of the body." Early that morning, Littlefield heard Webster moving about in the laboratory down the hall. Awfully early for him to be about, Littlefield thought, particularly when the college wasn't in session. Littlefield stretched himself out on the hallway floor and peered under the door to see what Webster was doing. He could only see a few inches above floor level, but he could see the professor moving back and forth between the coal bin and the furnace. Back and forth. Eight times as Littlefield watched—before his wife called him away to go shopping.

Twenty minutes later he punched through the last layer of bricks. The stench from the damp earth was terrible.

That afternoon, as Littlefield was walking down the corridor by Webster's laboratory, he felt a sudden warmth on his cheek. The wall—right by Webster's furnace—was scorching. Littlefield thought the lab was on fire. All the doors were locked, so he ran outside and climbed in a window. To his surprise, there was only a small flame in the furnace. But the coal bin was nearly empty. He had filled it with a two weeks' supply only last Friday. That furnace must have been roaring!

Littlefield hurried back to his wife. Something was up, he told her, and he was going to find out what. Mrs. Littlefield begged him to remember that Webster could get him fired—then where would he be? But Littlefield wouldn't listen. He was going to check the one place the police hadn't looked yet: the vault under Webster's privy. If he didn't find anything there, then he could rest easy.

He got his chance the next afternoon, Thanksgiving Day. The vault was sealed off by five layers of brick, the privy hole in Webster's locked closet being the only opening into it. Littlefield borrowed a hatchet and a chisel, crawled through the pilings that held the building up off the

mud flats to the wall of the vault, and set to work. Two hours later, when he was halfway through, his wife called down to him that it was time to get dressed for the Thanksgiving Day dancing party. He stopped work immediately. More than anything else, Ephraim Littlefield loved to dance.

The next afternoon he returned to his task. This time he brought a crowbar. He had told his wife that if anyone came near the lab she should bang four times on the kitchen floor. Littlefield would be sure to hear. He had just broken through the fourth layer of bricks when—thump, thump, thump, thump—he heard his wife's warning. He scurried upstairs. A policeman had come back to look into one more thing. Littlefield explained that the laboratory was locked and only Webster had the key. Would the officer come back some other time? Then Littlefield went back to work. Twenty minutes later he punched through the last layer of bricks. The stench from the damp earth was terrible. He thrust his lantern in, but a draft of air blew it out. He tried again, this time shielding it from the wind with his body. The light held and Littlefield

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peered in. Heaps of black earth were everywhere in the dim and marshy vault. Something gleamed to his right. It was pale gray, and it was horrible. It was a man's pelvis; the genitals were still intact. Down lower, there was a thigh. And a little to one side, the lower part of a leg.

Two hours later, the police pounded on the door of Dr. Webster's house on Garden Street in Cambridge. They told him he was needed at the medical college, and hurried him into a carriage. The officers didn't take him to the medical college; they took him to the Leverett Street jail. There he was arrested and charged with the murder of Dr. George Parkman.

The next morning, Police Marshal Tukey, the coroner, and several attending officers made a trip to Webster's laboratory for a thorough examination. Small bits of bone were found in the ashes of the furnace, a piece of a finger here, a slice of a shin there, over fifty fragments in all. Among them, there was a set of false teeth. Thrusting a hand into a large tea chest by the laboratory wall, one officer felt something cold and clammy. He turned the tea chest over, and a human torso tumbled out. It was half burned. The head and arms had been hacked off. And it was covered with hair. The coro-

ner said he had never seen so much hair on anyone. The torso had been ripped down the middle and hollowed out. Inside, there was a thigh.

After assembling the remains, one expert concluded that they belonged to a man between fifty and sixty years of age, about five feet ten, with strong muscles and a very hairy chest. All of which perfectly described Dr. George Parkman.

A grand jury quickly returned an indictment, charging—rather indefinitely—that Parkman was killed "by blow or blows, wound or wounds . . . with some instrument or weapons to the Jurors unknown and by means not yet known to the Jurors; and that said blow or blows, wound or wounds, were inflicted upon him and said means were used by the hands of said Doctor John W. Webster." The grand jury's confusion is understandable. With so little of the man's body left, it was almost impossible to judge just what caused his death.

Boston hadn't known such excitement since the days of Anne Hutchinson and the witchcraft trials. An eminent Bostonian chopped to bits by a Harvard professor! Newspaper correspondents besieged the city and sent the story out as far as Berlin. Citizens descended by the thousand on Harvard Medical College to have a look at the scene of the crime. No one had any doubt that Webster was guilty. The governor of Massachusetts himself announced that he was sure of it. One widely circulated pamphlet purportedly reviewing the evidence of the case carried a picture of Webster portrayed as a vampire. Newspapers editorialized against him. One expert opined that Webster's only possible defense was to maintain that Parkman came into his laboratory and shook himself all to pieces.

The trial was convened on March 19, 1850. Before it was over twelve days later, 60,000 people—nearly half the population of Boston—had seen part of it. With some difficulty, Webster had engaged two lawyers to defend him, Edward Sohier and Pliny Merrick. Sohier, a handsome forty-year-old, had little experience with criminal law; the natty Merrick, a lower court judge, had been a district attorney. Sohier undertook the major part of the defense.

The restive audience fell silent when the prisoner, John Webster, was brought to the dock. He seemed composed and dignified—professorial. He waved to a few friends in the gallery as he came in. Asked by the judge how he would plead, he said in a firm, clear voice, "Not guilty."

Despite the widespread publicity of the case, the court was able to select and impanel that afternoon a jury of twelve men who swore they had formed no opinion about Webster's guilt. Attorney General John Clifford, who would later parlay his fame from the Webster case into a gover-

norship, outlined the prosecution's two main claims: that Dr. George Parkman had been murdered; and that Dr. John Webster was his murderer. Seven witnesses—Marshal Tukey, the grocer, Mr. Holland, the Parkmans' manservant, Patrick, among them—recounted the events relating to Dr. Parkman's disappearance and the later discovery of the remains at the medical college. Robert Gould Shaw recalled, on the stand, how angry his friend Parkman had been when he learned that Webster had asked Shaw for a loan using Webster's valuable mineral collection as collateral. The mineral collection was already mortgaged to Parkman. In fact, all Webster's possessions had been mortgaged to Parkman. A doctor was called to the stand to explain the various ways of getting a human body to burn; he added, "I have never seen Dr. Parkman naked, yet I have a great interest in the living human body, the male and particularly the female form." Even

Medical college dean Oliver Wendell Holmes testified that the man who carved the body seemed to know what he was doing. "There was no botching about the business."

Dr. Webster chortled over that. A Dr. Wyman produced a detailed catalogue of the bones uncovered at the medical college. He showed some of them to the jury, who recoiled in horror. But the skeletal evidence was too fragmentary to allow positive identification. The prosecution discreetly declined to call Mrs. Parkman to the stand to identify certain unusual markings on the dead man's penis. Instead, Attorney General Clifford called Dr. Nathan Keep, Parkman's dentist, who had ground for him a set of false teeth. He asserted unequivocally that the teeth found in the furnace were the ones he had made for Parkman. Keep produced the mold from which he said he made Parkman's teeth. The teeth found in the furnace fit it perfectly. Then, perhaps struck by the ghastliness of his patient's death, Keep burst into tears. Many people in the audience did too. According to the Boston *Transcript,* the corners of Dr. Webster's mouth twitched nervously.

Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, who was dean of Harvard Medical College at the time, was called to the stand. He testified that the man who carved up the body found at the college seemed to know what he was doing. Said Holmes, "There was no botching about the business."

Now, four days into the trial, Ephraim Littlefield took the stand. Well spruced up for the occasion in a blue frock coat and silk scarf, Littlefield gave a very

sober account of the strange goings-on at the medical college in the days following Parkman's disappearance. He told how the doors to Webster's laboratory had been locked much more than usual, often bolted on the inside; how the furnace had been so hot; how Webster had given him a turkey; and finally, how he had discovered the remains under Webster's privy. All in all, it was exceedingly damaging testimony. Webster's lawyers tried to shake Littlefield, to suggest that he was not telling the whole truth, but Littlefield couldn't be budged.

Other witnesses testified that Webster had acted in a manner strongly suggesting guilt. And the prosecution produced a set of documents to show that Webster could not possibly have possessed the $483.60 he said he paid Parkman that Friday afternoon.

Things looked very bad for Dr. John Webster.

The next morning, Edward Sohier rose to present the defense. In a moving but flawed speech, he spoke of all the publicity the trial had received, so much of it damaging to his client. He exhorted the jurymen to put prejudice behind them. Webster was a "person of mild and amiable disposition, remarkable, even, for kindness to all about him . . . a man of constitutional timidity." With this picture of Webster in everyone's mind, Sohier launched suddenly into a discussion of the difference between a conviction for manslaughter and a conviction for murder. Surely this was an unfortunate juxtaposition. Finally, Sohier outlined his threefold argument: Webster was not the murdering kind; there were witnesses to testify they had seen Parkman in the streets *after* his supposedly fatal meeting with Webster; and Webster's behavior since the time of the alleged murder had been entirely out of keeping with that of a murderer.

The defense called twenty-six witnesses to the stand to testify that Webster was incapable of such a crime. Among them were a United States Congressman, the mayor of Cambridge, several Harvard professors, and the president of Harvard College, who was particularly insistent that Webster was a gentleman in every sense of the word.

Other witnesses asserted that Webster's behavior since the meeting with Parkman had been in no way extraordinary. He had talked with his usual animation about scientific topics. He had played whist. He had bought some cologne. Three of Webster's daughters won everyone's heart as they testified, a little nervously, a little tearfully, about playing games with their father, listening to him read aloud to them (Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*), having tea with him. All had gone just as usual. The youngest daughter said she had taken a walk with her father and, seeing a notice about Dr. Parkman's disappearance too high up on

a billboard for her to read, she had asked him to read it out to her, which he had done without hesitation.

Dr. William Morton, a practicing dentist credited with the discovery of ether, took the stand to say that there was nothing in the least distinctive about the false teeth found in the furnace and that there was no way they could be positively identified. He then took the same mold that Dr. Keep had used to produce such shattering evidence for the prosecution and inserted half a dozen sets of false teeth he had brought from his office. They all fit, some of them even more snugly than the teeth found in the furnace. The audience murmured in amazement.

Finally the defense called seven witnesses who stated that they had seen Dr. Parkman in the street at various times after two o'clock that Friday. All of them had known Parkman for many years and were absolutely certain they had seen him that afternoon. With that, the defense rested. It had done well.

Now the defense began its closing arguments. Pliny Merrick, who had been silent during most of the proceedings, delivered a six-and-a-half-hour speech that put forth more lines of defense than his client needed. On the one hand he argued that Parkman was still alive. But if, on the other, the remains found at the medical college did belong to Parkman, then it was Ephraim Littlefield who murdered him. And if not Littlefield, then somebody else.

It was now five o'clock. Despite the lateness of the hour, Chief Justice Shaw, an altogether mirthless man, began his long charge to the jury. It was a hanging charge if there ever was one.

In the prosecution's summary, Attorney General Clifford took a rather patronizing view of the opposition's arguments. He was "disappointed," he said, that Webster hadn't made a better defense. Hadn't his attorneys actually conceded his complicity in Parkman's death by bringing up the issue of a murder versus manslaughter conviction? And really, was the jury to believe that the solemn rites of burial—in Trinity Church, no less—had been pronounced over unknown bones?

It was now five o'clock. Despite the lateness of the hour, Chief Justice Shaw, a thick-set, heavily jowled, altogether mirthless man, began his long charge to the jury. As several commentators would later observe, it was a hanging charge if there ever was one. He told the jury that they were to assume that a crime had indeed taken place, even if there was insufficient evidence to ascertain the precise nature of the crime. This was a revolutionary departure from precedent: ordinarily, that a specific crime occurred had to be proven beyond the slightest doubt before a conviction could be handed down. Shaw changed this to "beyond a *reasonable* doubt," and said that here there was no reasonable doubt. He then dismissed the twenty-six character witnesses for Webster, saying, "Against facts strongly proven, good character cannot avail." And as for the witnesses who had seen Parkman after two o'clock, Shaw demanded rhetorically, "Would there not have been thousands of persons who would have seen him and sworn to it?"

The jury retired to begin its deliberations. Three hours later they returned. The foreman stepped forward. The clerk of the court asked the defendant to stand and raise his right hand while the verdict was delivered. Webster did so. There was a pause. The foreman spoke. "Guilty." Webster started as if he had been shot, his hand fell, and he sank to his chair and wept. The courtroom was stunned. No one moved for five minutes. Finally, Judge Shaw dismissed the jury, and Webster was led away to the Leverett Street jail.

The following Monday, Judge Shaw passed sentence. "You, John W. Webster," he intoned, "are to be removed from this place, and detained in close custody in the prison of this county; and thence taken at such time as the Executive Government of this Commonwealth may by their warrant appoint, to the place of execution, and there be hung by the neck until you are dead. And may God in His infinite goodness have mercy on your soul."

Webster slumped forward onto the railing and burst into tears.

By this time, the citizens of Boston were beginning to doubt that justice had been served. In an editorial, the Boston *Daily Times* proclaimed that Dr. Parkman was far more guilty than Webster. Parkman was a "Shylock seeking a pound of flesh." He was a "Tiger Creditor." Other periodicals declared that Webster hadn't gotten a fair trial. A widely circulated pamphlet by "A Member of the Legal Profession" excoriated Judge Shaw for his conduct during the trial. So did the Massachusetts-based *Monthly Law Reporter.* Medical journals attacked the testimony of the dentist, Dr. Keep. The *Cambridge Chronicle* asked, Did the evidence justify a conviction?

On July 2, however, John Webster confessed to the crime. Yes, he murdered Dr. Parkman. He hadn't meant to. Parkman just kept hounding him so. He sought Webster out on the street and in his house. He burst in on Webster when he was conducting his experiments. He interrupted Webster's lectures, coming late to sit in the front row and stare up at him. Parkman never gave Webster a moment's

peace.

Finally, when Parkman discovered Webster's duplicity over the mineral collection, he threatened to have Webster fired. Webster arranged the Friday appointment with Dr. Parkman to throw himself on Parkman's mercy and beg him for more time. But when Parkman arrived at the medical college, he was in no mood for clemency. "Are you ready for me, Dr. Webster?" he demanded as soon as he came in. "Have you got the money?"

Webster tried to explain, but Parkman wouldn't listen. He heaped insults upon the professor, calling him a liar and a cheat. Then he brandished a letter concerning Parkman's role in getting Webster his appointment at the medical college. "I got you into your position, Dr. Webster," he shouted, "and now I will get you out of it."

Parkman wouldn't stop his abuse. Finally Webster could bear it no longer. He grabbed the nearest thing, a length of wood he was using for an experiment, and smashed it over Parkman's head.

Parkman was killed instantly. Webster's first thought was to conceal what he had done. He stripped the body and threw the clothes into the fire. Then, with considerable effort, he managed to get Parkman into the sink. Using nothing more than a knife he had for cutting corks, Webster carved the body into pieces so that it might be more easily destroyed. He tossed the head and the hands and feet into the fire. The rest of the body he stored in a lead-lined sink under the lecture-room table; it was still there when the police first visited the college on Monday. But the body wouldn't burn! Stoke the fire as Webster might, the remains only smoldered. He squeezed the pelvis and parts of the legs down the privy hole, first tying them to a long string so he could pull them back up again and put them in the fire when the time was right. He stashed the rest of the body in the tea chest. But he never had a chance to burn it, thanks to Ephraim Littlefield. If it hadn't been for him, Webster would have destroyed every last trace of Dr. George Parkman.

On August 30, 1850, while over a thousand people watched, Dr. John Webster was hanged in front of the Leverett Street jail. To thwart grave-robbers, his body was buried secretly on Copps Hill, in an unmarked grave.

A collection was subsequently taken up for Mrs. Webster and the children. Of the $20,000 that were contributed, $500 were given by Mrs. George Parkman.

When Charles Dickens visited the city nearly twenty years later, he said the only sight he wished to see was Dr. Webster's laboratory. Indeed the Parkman murder seemed more likely to have been spun by Dickens's imagination than conceived by a cheery, round-faced professor of chemistry at the Harvard Medical College. □