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AN ADVENTURE IN ANESTHESIA

by EVERIL WORRELL



"There were swooping shadows and darting reflections of great, lurid flames."

HERE is a stage known as "Fool's Paradise" in the course of acute appendicitis, and this stage Brown had reached. It is caused by the relaxation of tortured nerves incident to the relief occasioned by the bursting of a distended appendix, and is not in itself an encouraging symptom; but the corresponding mental relief, after the preoccupation of pain and nausea, made it easy for Brown's anticipations of the new experience to be wildly exciting. Taking an anesthetic—well, the patient with the soundest heart *sometimes* fails to come back. Being sliced with a surgeon's knife, and returning to consciousness with

a deep wound—that, too, is a thing to make the pulses throb with the effort of meeting the issue without panic.

However, when the doctors asked him if he had any objection to the use of a new gas called ethysene, his curiosity was slight.

"I don't want to be experimented on," he told them, "but if it will keep me from feeling you slice me, and if it's all right on the heart, go ahead. I suppose you fellows know all those things well enough, or you wouldn't be planning to use it on me."

"We know those things," he was assured. "We've used this gas in this hospital. It is highly desirable to use

it, because of the very things you mention. Shock is slight, heart action good, the physical condition fine. But—”

“Here’s the dope, Brown,” interrupted the house doctor. “We gave ethysene to a man named Hallam, who had a tonsillectomy here. All right. He took it well, and rallied well. Only, when he had regained consciousness, he insisted that the new gas had an effect on the *soul*, and that it had sent his to heaven. He liked it so well in heaven, that after he got out and about, he took gas again—illuminating-gas, in his room, with the keyhole plugged and that sort of thing, you know—in order to go back to heaven again. I guess he succeeded—at least he died.”

Brown laughed.

“Well, I’m pretty well satisfied that my family tree goes back to a fine, hairy ape. I guess that answers your question. Unless, of course, the gas had the effect of making him loco. Do you mean he’s the only patient hero who ever took ethysene, and that I would be the second?”

“Oh, no, no!” The surgeon and house doctor answered together, and the house doctor continued:

“Three cases—names were Newton, Moredith and Canby—we’ve been offering it pretty freely, though most of our patients want the old-fashioned stuff. Newton, Meredith and Canby, they all three had ethysene inside the last month. Well, none of them went to heaven. So, now, what do you say?”

“Oh, make it ethysene, by all means,” said Brown. “I say, let’s get it over. Let’s go.”

Brown had had a reason for asking to be taken to Franklin Hospital. His sweetheart, Dorothy Wood, a pretty girl with gray eyes and dark auburn hair, was a student nurse there. While Brown was being prepared for the operating-room, a coarse hospital gown buttoned at his neck, coarse white wrappings fastened

over his feet and legs, and a hypodermic needle jabbed into his arm, the girl hovered in the corridor outside his door. When they wheeled him into the hall, his brain hazy from the injected opiate, she met his gaze with a tender, tremulous smile. It raised Brown’s spirits, and the effect of the morphine was to make him light-headed.

“Tell you all about heaven when I get back, Dorothy,” he called, as they wheeled him toward the elevator.

For a moment the girl named Dorothy stood motionless, unconscious of sympathetic glances from two other nurses and a young intern who stood near by. All at once she started forward.

“Did he mean—are they going to give him that ethysene gas?” she asked the young intern.

“Yes, but that’s all right. Don’t worry, Miss Wood,” he consoled her. “There was only that fellow, Hallam. They’ve used it since, and it’s perfectly fine. Hallam was crazy.”

“But it might—it might affect the soul.”

The intern raised his eyebrows.

“Well, if Brown goes to heaven, he’ll come back, as poor Hallam said that he did. And then I guess you can keep him here, can’t you, Miss Wood?”

He chuckled and went off down the corridor.

BRown lay flat on his back, his face encased in an air-tight mask. There were isinglass eye-holes, through which he looked. Through a tube in front of his mouth and nose, the anesthetic was being pumped in. His heart beat hard, with the excitement and fear that were overmastering him at last. He wanted to kick and struggle, but he would not let himself do that. He would breathe deeply, and get it over.

“Let’s go—let’s go,” he muttered inside the mask.

His lungs burned as he inhaled deeply. Little pains like knives shot through them. But his effort to co-operate was having an effect. His heart did not pound now. He felt weak—yes, faint. He was going. At every pump stroke, the white faces he now saw dimly through the isinglass dissolved into white mist. Between strokes they became faces again, but each time more featureless, more indistinct. Somebody spoke to him.

"Lift your hand. Can you lift your hand?"

They must not think he was unconscious. He lifted his hand with an effort.

Now everything was a white mist. He was floating—

"Again. Lift your hand."

Brown made a supreme effort. He willed to lift his whole arm—to lift it high. For he was not unconscious, but they would think so. The world was unreal about him—he could not see; he could hardly hear—but he was intensely conscious, and they must not begin to cut. He directed the whole force of his will, of his consciousness, into the lifting of his arm—and somehow knew that he had raised one finger, just a little.

He was floating—going away. Up in the upper right-hand corner of the room, he felt that he stopped. Somehow, he felt that he stopped there, although he was adrift in a mist through which he could not see. Anxiety held him there for a moment. A little way down there was the table, and what was going on there was of vital importance. Yet he could not hold himself near. He was adrift, and going far and fast.

He was dizzy with rushing through space—dizzy with not seeing, with not feeling anything to lay hold on, with having nothing to orient himself by. He was desperate. He clutched with his hands.

And suddenly, both hands were caught in a firm grip. The relief he felt measured the horror that had

been engulfing him. He felt his feet on something solid, and saw the mist thinning around him. Only a little, for he could not see far in any direction. But he could see, now, that he stood, not by one person, but between two men, and each had one of his hands.

He blinked his eyes, looking from one to the other. Both of them resembled him! Not exactly. There were differences of expression. And they did not dress as he did, nor wear their hair just as he did—Brown's hair was very sleek and flat on his head, unless his progress through space had changed that. But they looked sufficiently like him to make the coincidence a strange one, and to give him a strange sensation as he regarded them.

One spoke to Brown. He, Brown at once decided, was the more attractive of the two, the more desirable version of himself, if they did resemble him as much as he thought. As he looked longer at their faces, differences between themselves and him, between each of them and the other, became apparent. This one who spoke now was shrewder, keener-looking, more clever and snappy, a good businessman type, according to Brown's standard.

"I came to offer you convoy," he said in a voice that matched well with his appearance. "The trails here aren't well marked, unless you know how to see them. I will be very glad to take you with me, and keep you with me while you stay. You're the kind of man we want where I come from. We've watched you on earth. You are the surviving type, the type of man who gets ahead, as you say there. The same qualities are just as desirable where I reside as they are on earth. We saw you when you earned your last raise from your firm, and you're the kind of man we want."

Brown felt a warm glow pervade what he supposed was his astral body.

Then he had a surviving part, yes—a soul! And what you did on earth counted after you went out—went on and on with you. That was good. He *was* a surviving type. That was putting it neatly. And Nietzsche's philosophy, which had always appealed to him, because he had always felt that way about himself, wasn't so badly received in the next world as the old-fashioned moralists liked to think it would be.

But at this point his thoughts were interrupted by the other man, who still held his right hand.

"I came to offer my convoy, too," he said. "But I'll tell you frankly that you'll have to change a good bit if you want to get along, if you go with me. I know a good deal about you, too, Brown. I know about the 'raise' you earned recently—you misrepresented the work of a good man and kept him from getting the salary of the work he was doing. So, because you cut down the salary roll, you managed to get yourself a good whack-off. That's the truth about the way you earned that raise, isn't it?"

Brown looked at the speaker and disliked him. It wasn't only what he said. He was a type Brown hated, a type he had once feared he had it in him to be. He had standardized himself now, and his personality was nothing but an asset: but when he was a boy he had come very near to turning into an impractical, dreamer sort of fellow, the sort people accused of having too many ideals. A person who looked like this one who was speaking to him, and as Brown had once been afraid he would look, would be capable of just this sort of judgment and this lack of tact.

Brown laughed a little light-headed, as if the morphine which had been shot into his corporeal body had slightly affected his astral one.

"It seems to me that we have more in common," he replied to the last speaker, indicating the other with an

inclination of his head. "So I guess I will choose accordingly. I'm quite as much obliged."

A second more, and the undesired guide had disappeared.

HE WAS rushing along again, but in a definite, directed manner. The floating, whirling sensation, and the feeling of being loosed from the chains of gravity and horribly lost without them, were gone. And again, his feet found foothold, and they were walking hand in hand. A door seemed to open before them. A close passageway engulfed them, and the way seemed too narrow. Then it widened out, and they stood together, he and his guide, in a strange place, in—

"Hell!" Brown screamed horribly, and struggled with his guide. "Let me go. Let me go back! You didn't tell me *that* was what I was deciding. My God! Give me a chance! I didn't know. I didn't want to go to hell!"

A chorus of laughter greeted his ravings.

"The only myth is that there are myths."

Somewhere, Brown had read that. It flashed across his mind, now, even in his first panic. It meant that back of every myth, every legend, every superstition, was somewhere—a fact. And sometimes, at least, that was true. The references to hell that Brown had read in the Bible as a child—the ravings of itinerant preachers—the majestic, dreadful imaginings of Milton—Shakespeare— He thought of Lady Macbeth's words: "My lord, hell is murky." It was.

It was as though the light was of low vibration in quality, just over the line from heat. And it was hot. Just endurable enough, as to excess heat, so that it could be endured, so that one, kept there long enough, would wish it were not endurable, so that there might be an end. Also, there were swooping shadows and darting reflections of great, lurid flames, so

that Brown felt that the worst was as yet beyond his imagining. It was no modified Hades, but the old-fashioned hell that, on earth, has become more a joke than a legend. But here, it was no joke.

And yet, none of this was what made the place so horrible that Brown screamed and raved and struggled, and would rather have died than come through the door and the narrow passage, if he had known. It was the Things in the place—Things to which not the Bible, the itinerant preachers, Milton, Shakespeare nor any of the others had done justice. Deformed monstrosities—there were too many of them. If one of them ever lived in any form approaching the present one, it would have been hard for it not to merit hell. And probably many of them had grown, here, progressively worse for a long, long time, so that their like could never have been seen on earth.

But there were human things, and things that had changed from humanity, so that Brown was not sure. There was a man with a hideous, mad face carrying the dead body of a woman, and beating it constantly over the head.

"That man killed his wife," Brown heard in his ear. "So his punishment, partly, is to carry her so, through all eternity, beating her like that, as he did when he killed her. A century from now, as you count, you won't recognize either one of them; they will have become so much worse."

"But she—she was his victim. Why does *she* stay here?"

Brown's teeth chattered. But his curiosity was awakening.

"She—oh, she deserved to be killed, you see. She got what was coming to her. So, here they both are."

The speaker, standing somewhere behind Brown, broke off in a peal of the wild, echoing laughter that

seemed to greet everything of a horrible or distressful nature. Brown was reminded of an insane asylum he had once visited.

Another figure caught his eye—a man who must have come lately, for there was a natural, human look about him that warmed Brown's trembling heart. But—he had strapped to him, somehow, a coil of tubing that ended in an ordinary gas jet just in front of his nostrils, so that he seemed constantly in the throes of suffocation and disgust at the smell of fumes which issued from the jet, like ordinary illuminating-gas from a gas light. The unfortunate creature kept trying to turn his head away, but the jet with the nauseating fumes turned with him.

"I knew of someone—I heard of someone lately—" began Brown.

"Yes. Hallam. That's Hallam." The unseen voice resumed explanations. "You see he killed himself, to get to heaven. But there's an old, old law against that. So he was sent here, because he was a suicide. His punishment, partly, is to go on enduring the pain, sickness, disgust and regret that he felt just before he passed out. They expect to go through that stage. But they don't know that they go right on going through it, until it's too late."

Brown turned quickly. He could not bear to hear again that laugh, which he was sure was about to follow these words. And, having turned, he encountered a look which made the laugh unnecessary—a look that in itself made a mock of all decent feeling, pity and sympathy. And the look was on the unspeakably evil face and out of the unspeakably evil eyes of a gentleman in red, with a horn in the center of his forehead and one cloven hoof where his right foot should be.

"The only myth is that there are myths," thought Brown again; and suddenly became aware that the place was full of smaller, subservient-

appearing beings, decorated each with one horn and a single cloven hoof.

"But—"

The Devil interrupted his half-formed thought.

"They do exaggerate things," he sneered. "One horn is enough, and one hoof is enough, and one of each is easier to disguise than two when we go to earth, as some of us do. I do, quite often. Some of our information on *your* case, I gathered myself. You don't amount to much, but you have some very nasty tendencies. You haven't had much chance. Your environment nearly turned you into a good man, but you're our own sort. You might go a long way with us, if you try to fit in with our ways. So, what do you say?"

The question had a familiar ring, like an echo.

"I say, let's go." Brown was quoting himself, but he was not quite sure just when he had said that recently before. "I say, it's a hard life, and I'll try to make the best of it," he enlarged.

"That's good," said the Devil, giving him a violent blow on the forehead with something hard and sharp. "We all wear those."

Those were the horns. Brown, dizzy with pain, had put up his hand and felt a distinct bump springing up on his forehead. It would not be a very well-defined horn, but he was marked. Still dizzy with pain and shock, suddenly he was seized again with panic. He wanted to die. But souls did not die. An awful despair settled down on him, so that he hardly listened to what was being said to him.

"There's a real reason for that," he finally caught. "Your astral and physical bodies are still connected, and that blow has an effect on your brain cells as well. When you go back, you will be surprised at yourself. You will be quite a different sort of person. And you will be able to confer distinguishing marks on

people who are near and dear to you, and who love you, now and then. Oh, yes, many—*very* many—of the old legends have foundations. But you won't exactly *love* those who are near and dear to you, after you go back. You will—well, you will see. However, you'll keep our patents of nobility."

Brown felt of his head again. It was less painful. Pondering over the Devil's last words, he looked at the Devil's cloven hoof.

"A token like that would be embarrassing on earth," he suggested.

"You can't be too particular," retorted the Devil.

He signed to Brown's guide, whom Brown had forgotten.

"Take him back—for the present," he said shortly.

Brown was hurried toward the narrow passageway. At its entrance he held back, curiosity once more dominant.

"Newton, Meredith, and Canby, who took ethysene—did they come here and go back to earth? Or did they go to heaven?"

The Devil burst into a paroxysm of laughter. He was hideous when he laughed, and more evil than at any other time.

"That brings us to one of the best jokes of the ages," he finally gasped. "While people on earth are quarreling over the question of evolution, it seems impossible that not one of them has even guessed at the truth of the matter. What's the matter with their brains? They were supposed to have been endowed with good brains, through evolution and one thing and another. But speaking of evolution—you know, their bodies evolved from the ape. Oh, yes! But a dual race developed. One branch was endowed with a soul, with individual souls, you know—it was done with the best of intentions. Ha! Ha! The other branch dies as dead as a dog or cat. Naturally, ethysene would not affect members of that

branch. Newton, Meredith and Canby all belonged to that family, see? You and Hallam belong to the other branch, having souls—and here you both are. Pretty good batting average for hell, is it not?

"If they guessed it on earth, all the savants would be laying claims to personal souls, instead of disclaiming their existence. But the cream of the joke is, that while many who are sure they have souls have them, and many who are sure they have none, have none—just as many are sure they have souls and then die like their ape forefathers, and as many who are sure they have none find out, too late, that they have!"

"Complicated, but good. Think it over."

Brown, pushed into the smothering, close passageway, was thinking. It *was* a good joke, although it was on him too.

THEY said that Brown came out of the anesthetic in fine shape, but he could not agree with them. He was utterly miserable, if that was being in fine shape. He was burning and cold, as though he had been chilled by some wind between the worlds of consciousness, and scorched by a hot, unhealthful vapor.

People seemed to have changed in their attitude toward him, and he toward them. He had been a hospital favorite; now, one would hardly call him that. He was strangely sensitive about one of his feet—the right one. He moved it as though it were stiff, or injured, or in pain, although it was none of these things. He felt as though, when he walked again, he would walk with a halt. Perhaps it had something to do with the appendicitis, which had sent stabs of pain shooting down his right leg before the operation; or perhaps it had something to do with—something he had dreamed.

Another thing which he tried not to think of was the discolored contu-

sion which he wore down from the operating-room. There were comments about that, and dismay. Some carelessness must be responsible for it, carelessness in moving him, or in handling him. But when the house doctor tried to tell him how sorry he was that it should have happened, Brown taught him not to discuss the personal appearance of his patients, by unleashing upon him a devil of a temper that he did not remember ever having displayed before in his life.

It developed, during Brown's convalescence, that the nurse Dorothy Wood was more deeply smitten with him than he had known—a phenomenon which, before his operation, he would have hailed with almost incredulous delight. As it was, the childish little nurse was the only thing about the hospital which amused him. It amused him to lead her on to talk tenderly to him, to show her anxiety for him, to show the depth of the fears she had felt while he lay unconscious. It amused him to see that she had thought he loved her, in that time which lay behind his recent illness; that she had thought, even, that he wanted to marry her some day. If he had ever hinted at such a thing, it struck him now as the essence of supreme humor. He, Brown, wasn't going to marry for love and a pretty face; he was going to climb higher in the future than he had ever climbed. He knew a girl he could marry. He hadn't liked her over well, in the past, but if he hadn't meant to marry her and her bank account he must have been "light" in the head. It was the thing to do: such chancery didn't come every day. As for Dorothy, and pretty little nobodies like her who dreamed of catching a successful man with nothing to offer but love, they would do to play with.

It was fun to make her break hospital regulations, and slip into his room from her ward duty, and stay

for long talks that would have gotten her discharged any time the head nurse happened in. When they put her on night duty, it was funnier still, because her discharge would have been even more certain, then, and because she was so forgetful of herself in her childish feeling for him.

At last, one night when he had progressed a long way back toward health and strength, he drew her head down to his pillow, and kissed her squarely on the lips. It was a long kiss; and when it was over, Dorothy slipped swiftly to the floor. Not to her feet—that would have put her too far from him; to her knees, so that their faces were still on a level. Her regard for professional etiquette, which had been deeply rooted in her once, had been able to do so much toward separating them, but it could do no more.

She knelt there, looking at him. And Brown, looking at her transfigured face, felt the laugh freeze on his lips.

It had been fun to play with her, to see how far he could make her go in the breaking of the rigid laws she was bound to obey. It had been fun to see how easily he could get that kiss—the first he had ever had from her. But there was something, now, about her eyes—

They were the eyes of a little girl, to whom fairyland has opened. They were the eyes of a very young girl, whose first dream of love has come true. They were the eyes of an angel—of a woman—

They made another face rise before Brown's "mind's eye"—a face like his, which seemed made to answer that new look on Dorothy's face. A face like his, and yet not quite like his; a face that might belong to a man with a touch of the visionary in him, with a bit of other-worldliness about him that didn't fit in with the picture of a successful executive, perhaps—a face that might be framed by hair a bit unruly and unheeded,

because its owner's eyes were on far things.

And then both faces—Dorothy's face, and that other face of Brown's fancy—were put out of the foreground by the consciousness that a third face, very real and near, was peering through a crack in the door.

It was the head nurse. It was a face which must have been created especially to be the face of a head nurse.

"I've been watching you for some time, Miss Wood," it said triumphantly. "I think you'll find there isn't room on our hospital staff for girls of your sort, who are capable of such indiscretions as this. I think you'll find it hard to get on the staff of another hospital. I have never been so outraged—right under my nose, Miss—"

The head nurse was working herself up.

Dorothy Wood put out her hands, only a little way, in a broken gesture of pleading.

"Oh, please—" she said to Brown.

It wasn't clear just what she wanted of him. But she wanted some intervention that only he could give. It flashed through Brown's mind that if he said they were engaged, the hospital board might have clemency. It might mean a hard thing in a girl's life, to be discharged from a nursing staff with a bad character. It wouldn't hurt him to say that saving thing; even if he never married her, it wouldn't hurt—

But why should he? What had he to gain by shielding this girl who seemed so sure that he had once been very fond of her, that she hadn't discerned the change in his nature which he, himself, knew to have taken place. It was all rather funny.

He wanted to laugh. The head nurse's expression, and Dorothy's expression, were so very funny, in their solemn assumption that this affair was a thing of great importance to

everybody. It wasn't important to Brown, and it needn't be. Say Dorothy Wood was fired tomorrow, and he never saw her again, and the head nurse glared at him until he went home quite well—would he remember the incident a year from now? His was to be a busy life, a life of climbing over other people to the top, which only the fit attained.

He did laugh, flinging out his arms in a sudden passionate enjoyment of the joke, while the two women stared at him, Dorothy still on her knees. In her eyes, something was dying, and something was springing to life. His carelessly outflung hand struck against her forehead—not very hard—just with the knuckle. He was watching that new look in her eyes—a something hard and reckless, and not in the least childish; and then he saw the mark that he had made upon the smooth whiteness of her forehead.

Where had he seen one just like that before? A swelling bruise, a discolored contusion—why, it was very like the one he had worn down from the operating-room—the sight of which stirred those awful memories he had put away from him with such an effort.

He heard his own voice, laughing on. What devil had he heard laugh, somewhere, like that? He thought the word "devil," as one thinks those epithets, carelessly, expecting to recall the laugh of some malicious practical joker of his acquaintance, but it recalled something more than that:

A scene of lurid darkness, a blow, a Thing that laughed, and a promise that he would be able to present certain little tokens to those who loved him—

The laugh died in Brown's throat, and he screamed sharply in anguish:

"Oh, it's a mistake—a horrible mistake! I never meant—"

The bitter look in Dorothy's eyes wavered. Her gaze was fixed upon him trustingly, again. She thought he meant to speak up in her behalf, at last.

Once more, for a fleeting instant, he saw that other vision of himself: a man who had kindness written in his face, and not much thought of self. Like one reaching in the dark for a friendly hand, he felt himself reaching out toward it. It was a face which mightn't get on—but it was a face which would be strangely out of place in—

He touched the bruise on the young nurse's head with pitiful, tender fingers.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said gently. "I didn't mean to get you into trouble, either. Please don't report her—don't be hard on her. I came to this hospital because we are sweethearts. We haven't told anyone of our engagement yet, but that's why she was so indiscreet, and because I've coaxed her to spend a few minutes here, now and then, against the rules. She's been worried about me, since I've been here. You don't have to report her because I've been selfish, and she a little foolish, do you, nurse?"

A heaviness seemed to be lifting from the air of the little room. There was a cool, sweet breeze blowing in at the window, from some place where there were many flowers.

The head nurse smiled.

"If you'll both have respect for the rules in future, I'll let this go," she said. "After all, the hospital owes you something, sir. We don't often get our patients injured in handling—

"I'll declare, I'm right glad to see that mark fading from your forehead. It's odd you've bruised Miss Wood's forehead, in the same place. But hers won't show by tomorrow."

