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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Death Dallies Awhile

By LESLIE F. STONE

*Within that microscopic universe created by the genius of a great scientist,
men prayed frantically for the death that was denied them*

"WELL, Talal Tar," sighed Nikro Nor with some weariness, "this great experiment of ours is at end. I know now both the origin of life and its meaning. You and I have brought a micro-universe into being, watched hot stars evolve, planets form, life created out of a blob of protoplasm. You and I have treated this life-germ with every device known to our science. We have given it the impetus to live, to grow, to evolve into the higher forms of life, equal to our own. We have trained death-rays upon it, and we have dissected it, studied it in all its stages of growth. We have instilled ideas in its brain, given it a concept of a godhead; we have forced thoughts of war upon it, of high ideals, of scientific achievement. And now we are done. We know what the soul is, what is life itself. And I am satisfied. You may, at your leisure, disassemble the globe.

"It's been an interesting work, eh?"

Nikro Nor gazed at his assistant with kindly eye. He loved Talal Tar as a son. He had never had an assistant to equal him in loyalty or intellect. Foremost scientist of Guerm that he was, he rated Talal Tar as second only to himself.

The younger man looked up from his ultra-ultramicroscope. "Ay, it has been interesting, Master, absorbingly so. But I—I——" He stammered as he eyed the object his master had given orders to destroy.

"Yes, Talal Tar?"

"I—I realize I am presuming, Master, but I—well, I dislike the thought of—of

disassembling the micro-universe. I feel as if I—er—we——"

"I know, my good friend. You have taken this experiment to heart more than I—you cannot destroy that which you have helped to create. But really, I cannot see how their fleeting little lives, less than a few minutes' time, can fill you with such reverence. I had hoped—but never mind. You have been faithful, and you have done as much as I. It was you who thought of giving them a God. It was you who instilled the idea of life after death. I gave them life of body, you gave them spiritual being! And I came along with pestilence, war, horror! They should hate me—just as they should respect you."

"Ay, they call you the Grim Reaper, Master, Death the Destroyer!"

"I can understand that. I have taken babes from their mother's breast, young children in full expectancy. But I have also relieved the sick of their ills, the aged of their infirmities, the depressed of their prison. Only thus could I know the full meaning of Life. Have they a name for you?"

"I am not certain, Master, for they give me many guises. I—I like to think that which they worship beyond all else—Love—designates me.

"It has been most difficult, delving into brains so small. Sometimes the thought impulses are so slight. And if I awaken them, their fears are too great to permit clear thoughts to rise to the surface." Talal Tar pointed to the minute thing

upon the microscope slide. Having found it impossible to revolve them into sight with an instrument that magnified microns to thousands, he had developed his own lenses that made it possible to see an object one hundred-thousandth of a micron. And by its means one could see the midget thing that was in human likeness, eyes closed, wearing the microscopic "thought-amplifier" of Nikro Nor's invention. One of the Little Ones of the micro-universe.

Much as he disliked taking the Infinitesimals from the midst of home and family, it had to be done so that Talal Tar could fathom the brain. He knew that "back home" the mite was one of the "missing," one of hundreds that "disappeared" annually from their known haunts, never to be seen again.

Once he had tried putting the microscopic creatures back on their native heath when he was finished with them, but he found they knew only great unhappiness, in consequence. For no matter how quickly he worked over them, the ticking seconds marked the passage of all they had been familiar with on the home planet. A century might pass upon their tiny world while he picked answers to his questioning from their sleeping minds. Unlike Nikro Nor, he could not kill them outright. Therefore, when his work was done his tiny subjects were placed upon another world, shielded from the death-rays where they could enjoy the company of their fellows, likewise torn from their own people.

"And so—if I give you the Globe, Talal Tar? You will continue the experiment? And what line of departure will you take from our past methods? Or will you continue the work I have been following?"

"I—I would make but one change, Master, if it is to be permitted. I would

turn off the death-rays! I would like the Little Ones to live on, out of their minute of life to enjoy the benefits of their own science! You know that many times of late they have thwarted you, holding back the tide of death for a moment. They hate so—to die. I would like them to live on—as they wish."

"I see. A noble experiment. You and I might wish for the same gift. Talal Tar, the micro-universe is your own."

With that Nikro Nor turned to his notebook, to inscribe finis to his records. He scarcely noticed that Talal Tar moved across the chamber to the huge globe filling one portion of the room, and on which were fitted half a dozen small mechanisms. Directly to one of these mechanisms Talal walked, and threw back a lever. Then he put his eyes to the eye-piece, which was an intricacy of delicate ground lenses of varying degrees of thickness.

2

DOCTOR HORACE STACK sat at the bedside of his dying patient. Hour after hour had passed, and still the ancient lingered on, refusing to let go his tenuous hold upon life. "I can't understand it," the doctor muttered. "By all right this man should have been dead ten hours ago. His heart is rotten—and yet it continues to pump, pump."

In the delivery room of the Bennington Lying-in Home the obstetrician stood up with a slow, tired smile wreathing his face. "The mother will live, poor thing. This is her fourth still-born child. I should hate to break the news to her. Here, what's that? A baby's cry!"

"Doctor! The baby's alive! It begins to breathe! A miracle."

In the accident ward of the Emergency Hospital the body over which the nurses and doctors had worked frantically for

hours without success suddenly stirred. "I don't want to live! God, don't let me live!" the would-be suicide moaned pitifully.

An old woman sat up amid her silken sheets. She chuckled. "So, my dear nephew tried to poison me, eh? And I am still alive. I warned him I would outlive him—and all the rest of my dear, loving family, waiting like vultures for my moneys. And I'll fool them all—the ingrates! I'll show them!"

The white-faced child lay stretched upon the couch, eyes staring vacantly at the weeping mother. The family physician looked on with pity.

"And he'll never be a normal child, again, doctor?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Moore. I can't understand how he lived after that head blow. Forgive me—but it would be better—that he had died—a witless idiot—now."

All over the earth such things were happening. There were hundreds of cases of people who should have been dead, but were not. In Europe where a war was in progress the overworked medical corps was calling for more and more aid. Of all the thousands that had fallen in battle that day, *not one was dead!* Some, horribly mangled, lived against all precedent. Men with head wounds, punctured lungs, heart wounds lived, somehow. A man with half his heart shot away lived and breathed five hours after he had been shot, and *continued to live*. Another that was only half a man also lived, moaning in awful torment. He begged one of the surgeons to put him out of his pain, and in his compassion the medical man complied. That is, he gave what he knew to be an overdose of chloroform, and yet, an hour later, he found the man *still alive!* And there were more that should have died, who in living would be mere traves-

ties of men, unable to do for themselves, future drains upon the State.

In a mine explosion twenty miners were buried in a living tomb, beneath tons of debris. But none of them died, not even those that lay crushed under the dirt and rocks. It would be days before help could reach them, but they would live, suffering pain, hunger, thirst, disease.

From a high tower two young things that had signed a suicide pact made their leap to the ground. Unrecognizable blobs of bone, flesh and blood, they could not die, but lived on, on.

In the Alps a famous mountain-climber lost footing and dropped into a deep, narrow crevice. His companions had to return to the distant village for help to drag him to the surface. A terrific blizzard descended upon the rescue party. They were forced to wait days before they returned to the spot and retrieved the body, frozen hard. Several hours later, in the thaw of a warm room the "dead man" awoke, little the worse for his experience.

Nor did these "queer accidents" stop with human life. In the abattoir at the stockyards cattle were not dropping at the death-blow, nor sheep, nor hogs. Bellowing they staggered in their tracks, and butchers stood around not knowing what to do about it.

Mrs. Hannah Slocum was killing chickens for "company." She chopped off their heads, but the beheaded bodies continued to flop around the yard. Grabbing them up in her sturdy hands she dipped them into scalding water, and they continued to jump about the tub. Even when they were bare of their feathers they showed movement. In despair she called her husband. Scratching his bald pate, Si proposed that they try cutting the carcasses into pieces. But even he shuddered at

jumping muscles, quivering, living flesh as his knife cut through. When they were disemboweled he paled, and then screaming fled from the sight of severed organs each endowed with life.

Chef Pedro Cascro patted the plump, green, squirming lobster fresh from its salt-water bath. Lifting the lid from the pot of boiling water, he dropped the crustacean into it. Later he returned to lift the lid once more. "*Madre de Dios!*" he screamed as the scarlet-boiled lobster waved living claws in his face!

In Kenya Chester K. Morrison watched his beaters drive a young lion out of the tall grasses. In his boma of thorn bushes he put his rifle to his shoulder. He was proud of his marksmanship, and he scored a perfect shot to the heart. But the lion did not follow the rules. He did not fall, but came on, blood streaming from his wound. In one leap he cleared the thorns and threw himself snarling upon the huntsman while Jim Corbin, Morrison's paid hunter, pumped lead into the lion's side. A few moments later, when Corbin and his blacks tore the beast from the millionaire's bleeding form, both were alive, although both had wounds enough to kill two lions and two men!

Mother Flycatcher had been a very busy bird, catching her youngster's dinner. Now as she flew back to the nest she was perturbed. That last batch of insects were not behaving right in her alimentary tract. It was with great relief that she regurgitated them into her children's widening maws. But the birdlings liked the meal no better than she, this food that would not stop its wiggling and admit that it was down!

Bruin lay on the water's edge catching salmon for his dinner. One, two, three, they flopped upon the bank and continued to flop. Turning from the water the bear

picked one of the fish up in his mouth. That bite should have killed, but the finny thing kept right on wiggling. Peeling a long strip of flesh from its side, the animal went about the business of chewing. Every once in a while he paused at the strange touch of the flesh wiggling between his teeth, muscles that jumped each time he bit through them. Soon all the fish were gone, but he did not feel like catching any more. His stomach was filled with strange quiverings.

Two wolves had driven their prey into a cul-de-sac amid the hills. Breathing hard through distended nostrils the deer turned to do battle. Simultaneously the pair struck, one to hamstring a hind leg, the other leaping for the slender throat. Even with a torn jugular the deer did not fall. It took the hamstringing of the other hind leg to bring it down on its haunches. Warily the wolves circled their quarry. Again they leaped, and by their weight downed the creature. But after they had torn into the hide and stripped the flesh away the poor beast shivered and quivered. Anxiously the wolves sat back on their haunches, licking their bloody chops. Again they attacked the deer. Again they withdrew from the twitching carcass.

ON THE first day of these world-stirring events the newspapers took little cognizance of this new situation, simply using these "freak" stories for fillers. By the second day they had to recognize the fact that something unusual was taking place. Summing up a long series of strange happenings, one smart headline writer recalled a novel of several years back and headed a column with the caption *Death Takes a Holiday*, going on to show the analogy of these real-life occurrences to the fictional episodes enumerated in the once popular book.

Two days later people were seizing upon the idea. It was no longer a joke. In four days not a single obituary notice had been printed in any newspaper in all the world!

There were those who were more than delighted, naturally; those who had lived in fear of losing dear ones, those who lived in fear of death, those who had long fought a losing battle against the destruction of animal life. The scientist was seeing a dream realized, a long future wherein he could continue to contribute to the welfare of humanity. The dictator that had foreseen his world crumbling upon his own death felt that the Powers above had put the stamp of approval upon his works. The octogenarian, living upon bread and milk, ordered a porter-house smothered in onions to be topped by strawberry shortcake.

It was for the truly intelligent men to be frightened. They could foresee a time when Man would be driven from the face of the earth by the myriad of domestic and wild life. Slapping a mosquito did no good. The butterfly did not succumb following its day in the sun. And what of those destructive hordes of insects with which Man had always fought for his own livelihood? What would happen when the plains were overrun by cattle? What would happen when the predatory beasts of forest and field multiplied a thousandfold? What of those billions of young oysters that spawned yearly, of herring, of codfish? What would happen when the sea would no longer hold them all—none dying? And if there was to be no more death, what of the germ, the disease germ? Was all life to become diseased, and diseased live on with no surcease from living? The middle-aged that had looked longingly to that time when Man's life-span should be elongated beyond his three-score and ten were fear-

ful, horror-struck. Life for ever? The same routine? The same worn rut? Immortality?

Death! Where was he? What was he about? Death! *Death!*

People commenced to look fearfully at the stranger in their midst. A new face could bring the sweat pouring from their glands. What if *he* were Death, in human dress, stalking among the millions—enjoying *his* joke. *Death!* where is thy sting? Death! *DEATH!* Death!

And the days, the weeks rolled on. All over all Earth not a thing died, not a cripple, not the diseased, the aged, man, mammal, reptile, fish, insect.

Man found it impossible to eat flesh that continued to twitch and quiver even after it had been in the roasting-pan, for life did not cease with the removal of the heart. Each individual cell retained its life-spark, and even weeks later muscular reflexes reacted to touch. Perforce Man became a vegetarian. He knew that plant-life knew life and death, but it, at least, had no voice, no motion. Only there was no wilting, no drying out of the sap. A felled tree remained green, and new sprouts showed after the uprooting.

Yet it was apparent that there would be no harvest that year of any great proportion. Man was not the only vegetarian. The increase of insect-life was without precedent. Birds, like man, had turned against their natural food. They could no more than man hold down the squirming, pulsing life. With the insects they devoured the fruits of the field and the orchard, they, in turn, multiplying as their enemies no longer hunted them. Predatory birds were also joining the hordes, unable to eat prey that would not die. And from the forest and the plain came the carnivorous animal, learning to eat vegetables, melons, grain; so that it was not an uncommon sight to see wolves,

deer, crow, hawks dining side by side in a corn-field! For Death had released his minions from their policing duties. All the world was becoming an Eden where in the lion lay down with the lamb.

Only Eden it would not remain long. Mathematicians attempted to compute how many harvests would remain before the entire globe was denuded of its plant-life, but that task was too monumental for their abstractions. In desperation chemists were experimenting with green wood-pulp, devising ways and means of making it palatable. And in their hearts they cried out for the return of Death!

3

NIKRO NOR looked up from his notes with some annoyance. "You called me, Talal Tar? Heavens, man, what is wrong with you?" In wonder he surveyed the trembling form, the white face with eyes burning as if from fever. "Are you sick?"

Sadly the young scientist faced his superior. "Yes, Master, sick at heart."

"Why? What has happened to you?"

"It's the micro-universe, Master. Will you look within the Globe?"

Mystified, Nikro Nor moved toward the great silvery sphere, put his eyes to the vision-plate. With a hand that almost trembled he adjusted the lenses. Before him lay the micro-universe he had created from a handful of dust. In miniature, great suns burned in brilliant magnificence. They lay in spiral form just as the great universe of which Gal, Guerm's sun, was a part, although here and there a bit of matter had torn loose from the outer layers to form little islands of light. Great stars and small, blue-white stars, yellow stars, green stars, red stars, violet stars, and here and there a burned-out bit of dust swam in the spiral, or several of these dust-motes adhered together, obscuring living stars from view.

About a dozen stars had planetary systems. These had been most difficult to create. They had necessitated the bringing together of two star-motes to cause great enough tides so that bits of matter could be drawn away from the parent. Nikro Nor was proud of that achievement. He had written a scholarly treatise which had had wide circulation throughout Guerm.

Producing life upon the planets had been the next step. He had fashioned a delicate wand to be manipulated, from where he sat, into the plane of the spiral. After the planets had been inoculated with the life-germ they had been treated with various measures to nourish it, to make it grow, to change its form and to permit it to die once its mission in life had been accomplished. But not always had he waited for it to live its natural life-span. With the wand he killed the young infant, the growing creature, the middle-aged; and when it behooved Talal Tar or himself they used the wand to lift one of the tiny beings from the surface of its home-planet and bring it into the laboratory for dissection and study.

After his cursory study Nikro Nor could find nothing upsetting in the miniature universe. He said as much to Talal Tar.

"The planets! the planets! Adjust to combination 3-4-72 and see for yourself!"

Nikro Nor frowned. He was beginning to feel provoked over his assistant's behavior. He acted like a high-strung woman instead of a clear-thinking scientist. To humor him, however, Nikro Nor spun the designated lenses into place and watched a small bright body revolve into view. He knew it to be a planet by its reflected light. Its reddish tint showed him it was one of the barren worlds lying too close to the sun. He gave the mechanism under hand another twist so that a second planet came within his ken. For

several tense moments he studied it. Another turn and a third planet appeared. One after another he magnified a dozen planets, lying in various parts of the universe. Then he turned to Talal Tar.

"Something is apparently wrong with our Little Ones. The little worlds have a—a diseased look, but still I do not comprehend."

From its bracket Talal Tar took down a head-piece that fitted upon the temple. Tiny, almost invisible wires ran from it into the globe. "Listen!" he admonished his master.

For a moment or two Nikro Nor "listened." A puzzled expression spread across his face. At last he took the thought-amplifier off with an impatient gesture. "I never had the success with this that you have, Talal Tar. Now, out with it. What is happening to the Little Ones? What is that roar I heard?"

"Prayer, Master!"

"Prayer? For what?"

"Prayer for Death!"

"Death?"

"You recall that I told you I intended to switch off the death-rays, to give the Little Ones that which they have been seeking many generations? Immortality? Well, Master, that is just what I did do—five or ten seconds ago. I gave them life everlasting! And they ask again for Death! On every planet their hearts cry out, calling Death, Death the Destroyer!"

A gentle smile creased Nikro Nor's face. "Ah—they are wise—far wiser than I would have dared believe possible! Our Little Ones, my dear Talal Tar, have become divine of thought. It is a lesson for ourselves. By all means—give them Death. For Death is Life's greatest gift, surcease from pain, from living—from thinking. What is more miraculous than Death?" And in his heart there was no longer a fear of the Grim Stalker. . . .