

# Weird Tales

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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# Death Is a Temporary Indisposition

By MAX BROD

*An odd little story, told in a psychiatric clinic*

**T**HE party of Danish visitors entered the psychiatric clinic.

Inspector Rottky received them and led them along a series of narrow corridors. Several of the inmates worked their way past the visitors, equipped with pails and brooms, dressed in dark blue smocks which came clear down to their ankles. The inspector led the foreign students into Professor Hoerberlein's reception room. He invited them to sit down and wait while he hunted for the professor. Doctor Hoerberlein could not be far away, he was sure, but it might take several minutes to locate him.

It was a large, elegant room with expensive armchairs, with handsomely wainscoted walls and book-cases crammed with books. Through the open windows the young Danes had an excellent view of the beautifully kept gardens of the asylum. The visitors, six of them in all, stood and looked around curiously and then settled themselves cozily in the great chairs. In a few minutes a tall, slender man with an extraordinarily high and handsome forehead and a neat pointed gray beard, stepped into the room. When he saw the six students, he started with surprise. Then he bowed slightly.

"I am Professor Jastrau," he said.

At the sound of the famous name the Danish students sprang up obsequiously and a little nervously from their broad, low chairs.

"Keep your seats, gentlemen, keep

your seats!" said Professor Jastrau, and waved his beautifully kept hand with an elegant, slightly weary gesture. He glanced around the room. "My friend Doctor Hoerberlein seems a little slow in getting back." There was a touch of severity in his gaze, but there was in it also something of nonchalance, perhaps rather of preoccupation, that was puzzling but full of charm. "As soon as he comes in, we will go over the whole establishment."

With an easy gesture he drew a cigarette out of a leather case which lay on the table.

"Where have you been thus far, gentlemen? What have you seen?" he inquired politely.

The spokesman of the party started zealously to clamber out of the giant chair into whose soft depths he had just settled for the second time. "We have been in Berlin, Breslau——"

"Please, please, don't disturb yourself," said Professor Jastrau with a charming smile, and his delicate white hand with the cigarette rose from the dark table and with mesmeric cordiality waved the guest back into the depths of his chair again. The professor was a man of the world. His amiable suppleness contrasted strikingly with the stiff and awkward formality of his young guests. "Yes, and what did you see after Breslau?"

"Then we went to Goettingen, and they showed us all over the university

• Adapted by Roy Temple House from the German.

there. Now we have been studying your very fine institutions here."

"Well, well—and it's all rather monotonous, rather ineffectual, don't you think?"

Axel Mundt of Copenhagen turned red with surprize and a degree of indignation. "I beg your pardon, Professor," he said stoutly. "I am sure we should all agree that we have learned something new and very much worth while wherever we have been. Why, even since we have come into your institution here"—he turned toward his companions as if to assure himself of their approval—"we have noticed that the doctors here wear exactly the same sort of dress as the patients. It seems to me that is a very wise arrangement. It is certainly reassuring and soothing for a poor fellow whose mental condition is not quite what it should be, to be identified in appearance with the wise, strong men who are helping him regain his balance——"

There was a strange glint in the professor's eyes for an instant; then he smiled, a little condescendingly. "Very true, very true! You are an extremely observant young man. But I am afraid that here in Germany we are for the most part a little over-conservative. Now just compare us with our neighbors to the southwest, whom a great many Germans are inclined to be a little critical of. For instance, there is an institution in Arles, down on the Mediterranean. It is a modest little place, and not much heard of. But there wasn't a keener investigator or a more remarkable scholar than Professor Debaudy, at the Institute of Arles. You never heard of him? Well, I'm not at all surprized. He was a very cautious and conservative man—very cautious and conservative, indeed. He was not willing to publish his findings till there wasn't the slightest shadow of a doubt about the smallest detail. Ah—

Debaudy! I could tell you stories about his wonderful work. Friend Hoerberlein is very slow today. Something must have happened——"

**T**HE professor lighted another cigarette. His finely chiseled face was turned toward the window, and the greenish light from the garden gave it an almost supernatural appearance. "I had never heard of the Institute till I happened to have occasion to visit Arles, a few years ago. I was very much astonished, when I ran into Debaudy's laboratory by the merest chance. It was housed in an extension of the neglected old Roman museum. The French don't always keep up their public places as carefully as one might wish. Well, gentlemen, there sat old Professor Debaudy, in a gloomy, dusty, dirty corner room, beside an Egyptian mummy with the bandages unrolled from it, reading articulation exercises in a loud voice. First, phrases with no vowel in them but 'ah,' then phrases with other vowels in turn—the arrangements of sounds that actors use to improve their speech technique.

"I started to get out of the room the way I had come, so as not to disturb the great psychiatrist, but my shoes creaked a little, and he looked up and I had to go back and introduce myself. He was kind enough to remember some of my published articles and to compliment me on them. He was very cordial to me at first, but after a few sentences there came a lull in the conversation. It was perfectly evident that Debaudy wanted to get me out of the way so that he could go on with his exercises. Consumed as I was with curiosity, I stepped over to look at the mummy, although Debaudy was very visibly anxious that I should stay away from it, and even laid his hand on my arm with an instinctive movement as if

he wished to push me back, a gesture which he at once inhibited.

"What are you trying to do with this mummy, Professor?" I asked. I had a feeling that I should respect the old scientist's desire for privacy, a desire with which I could sympathize perfectly, since caution and a close mouth should be among the fundamental qualities of every serious student. But I had a presentiment as if something of profound importance were going on there, although I had no inkling of what it signified; and I trembled with eagerness to understand it.

"The two of us stood and looked at the ancient mummy. It had dried and shriveled till the earth-brown body looked like the form of a small child, although it was no doubt the remains of a full-grown man. The skin was like parchment, and it was drawn so tightly over the projecting bones that it seemed as if they were ready to burst through it. Debaudy raised his sullen greenish eyes to mine, and was silent for a moment. Then he seemed to make an effort and come to a decision. 'If you must know, I am giving the mummy therapeutic exercises.'—Shall I go on, gentlemen?"

The Danish students did not answer. They did not dare even to clear their throats. They were listening as if their lives depended on their not missing a sound. Professor Jastrau smiled at them, genially pleased by the effect of his narrative. Then he turned his white, intellectual face toward the windows again, and the yellow-green light which made his pale cheeks even paler and appeared to deepen the sockets of his sunken eyes, seemed to heighten the mystery of the strange experience which he was relating.

"I am giving the dead man therapeutic exercises," said Debaudy.

"He looked me over to see how I was taking it; then he went on in a moment, 'That was an art which the Egyptians

understood thoroughly. But other peoples have known something about it, too—the Maoris, the Burmans, the Marquesas tribes. It seems as if we modern Europeans have lost touch entirely with the fact that—well, that our dead are not really dead at all. We don't understand any longer that it is our duty to take care of them, to look after them. There is always the possibility that if we apply the right treatment to them—very tedious and difficult treatment, it is true—we can bring them back into a condition which can scarcely be called life, at least as far as our present knowledge goes, but which is no longer that hopeless and terrible condition that is absolute death. What we carelessly assume to be death is in many cases, as I have proved beyond a doubt by my own investigations, only an unfortunate pathological condition which may pass. It is, to be sure, usually accompanied by very serious alterations in the physical organism. But it is not necessarily incurable, as we impatiently take for granted when we pack the dead man into a box like a rotten horse and shovel the dirt over him. I know that the revolt which we all instinctively feel against this brutal smothering of a corpse is based on an instinct of divination within us. When one of your dear ones dies, haven't you noticed how your whole being protests against it, how every clod of earth, every stone that drops into the grave hurts you like a monstrous torture inflicted on the helpless departed? Of course you may say that these are mere foolish feelings and have no objective significance. And then there have been dreams, all sorts of remarkable dreams with regard to people who were supposed to have died. And you will say that they don't count, either.

"But experience — experience, sir! Death is curable, I tell you! I can cure death myself, to a certain degree. I

haven't gone very far yet, you understand. But this much I have already proved conclusively: The body of a dead person can be healed of injuries. I have healed wounds on a dead body, bacillary disease, cancer. One does not need to stop the treatment when the patient dies. I do not know yet whether it will ever be possible to reestore such a person to his normal pre-mortem life again. You throw a dead man into a hole, so and so many feet beneath the surface, clay and filth between his teeth—good God, how ghastly! It will be pretty hard to make a perfect man of him again, after all that. One of *our* men, I mean! Now the Egyptians treated their dead with balsamic resin, they cleansed them of everything which could by any chance cause decay, they laid them away in pleasant rock caves, in dry, wholesome air——”

Professor Jastrau was visibly excited by his own narrative. He stood up by the window and breathed in a great draft of the breeze that blew over the flower-beds and through the green trees. And his hearers, completely under his spell, found themselves taking long breaths too, as if to drive out of their lungs the sickening, dull corpse-and-tomb atmosphere.

**I**N A moment Professor Jastrau went on with his narrative.

“Professor Debaudy had no more secrets from me. He showed me a second mummy. He kept this one behind curtains, in a great class case, in a sitting position.

“‘This is a better scholar!’ he said when he presented it, and as he spoke he waved a negligent gesture of disparagement and dismissal at the prostrate mummy out in the room. Then he crept into the glass beside the sitting mummy, sat down on a chair which was placed there ready for him, and began to whisper into the sitting figure’s ear.

“‘Now listen! He will answer me,’ said the old professor.

“‘I am afraid I heard nothing, or next to nothing. There was, it is true, a faint sort of crackling. But I could not catch an intelligible sound. I am not even sure that all the cracking did not come from the fact that Debaudy moved his hand over the mummy, as one might stroke a child, while we were listening.

“‘I did not want to seem unsympathetic or incredulous, so I nodded approvingly, and before he had had an opportunity to ask what I had heard, I inquired: ‘Do you expect to publish your findings soon? I had never heard anything about these studies of yours, and yet you must have been at them for a long time.’

“‘Thirty-five years,’ he answered.

“‘And you haven’t published a hint of them in all that time?’

“‘I don’t belong to the clan of publicity hounds,’ he said, ‘who burst out every now and then with sensational discoveries which they can’t substantiate. I haven’t any use for your quack scientists, with their rejuvenation methods, hormones and all that rubbish. I haven’t any particular use for fame or money. I am studying a very difficult and complicated biological problem. Somebody else can figure out the popular formula, the slogan, for my work. There is plenty of time for all that. This thing can’t be hurried.’

“‘I must confess that his attitude was beginning to irritate me. I am afraid I answered him a little hotly. ‘But don’t you realize, sir, that there is something involved here besides your personal whims and scruples? Perhaps *you* can wait, as you say, but humanity cannot wait. Especially just now, after this terrible war, with its millions of corpses! Can’t you see, can’t you understand, that if you really are on the track of a great biological discovery, you may be able to

change the whole face of the world? If it is true that it is only necessary to treat a dead body expertly——'

"Debaudy looked at me compassionately and I think a little contemptuously. 'If you had listened a trifle more attentively, you would have noticed that I was careful not to say anything of the sort. My investigations have established that war is an even more terrible thing than is commonly supposed. I see no hope except for bodies that are well preserved. But with our contemporary weapons of destruction, bodies are blown into a thousand fragments. For such corpses as those, there is no resurrection. And I have no help for the poor wretches who are cremated. There is no physician for them, no God, no future. But is it my duty to inform our brave militarists that they are robbing our young men not merely of a few years of life, but of eternity?'

"'It is your duty to inform them of just that! You must give to the world all the knowledge you have, at once, not only to prolong life where it is possible, but to do what you can to prevent the hideous sin against eternal life that is perpetrated on our battlefields, in our crematories, in our cemeteries——'

"Gentlemen!" Professor Jastrau sprang out of his narrative with a suddenness that raised the hair on the heads of his startled listeners. "The responsibility that rests on us scientists came over me so strongly that moment that I was half crazy with the pain and the burden of it. This old man playing with the trifling details of his discovery, and men and women dying for time and eternity all over the world, all around him! I argued with him, I shouted at him, I lost my temper completely. I——"

Jastrau trembled.

"It is a little hard to tell the rest of it, gentlemen. I declare to you that I got

down on my knees before that heartless pedant and begged him to give his findings to the world, and I swear to you that he refused me. It wasn't merely stubbornness or callousness. He despised the human race, he hated his brothers. But I realize that all of this is not sufficient to explain or extenuate my horrible deed. As I pleaded with him there with tears in my eyes, as I argued with him, as I racked my brain for arguments, for inducements, for warnings, someone came into the laboratory. It was his assistant. The funeral director in the next building wanted to see the professor on a matter of business. I followed the two into the funeral parlors. I had no business there, but they paid no attention to me, and the curious proximity of the two establishments gripped me strangely. Moreover, I was determined that the cruel sadist should not escape me.

"Gentlemen, there was a coffin in those parlors. An open coffin. And in that coffin lay a beautiful young girl, pale as wax, with shining, red-blond hair. Her lips were twisted with pain, and about her mouth there was such a reproach, such a reproach—what men were about to do with her—the reproach of the dark, murderous grave they were carrying her to. And that fiend in human shape stood there above her coffin and talked of indifferent matters and lifted not a finger to save her! Gentlemen—may the Lord forgive me!—I know nothing can excuse what I did—I keep my hand steady with a little revolver practise every day, and I had my revolver in my pocket at that moment—I shot Debaudy—I deprived the world of that great but sadly sterile genius—I——"

A red-checked little fat man stepped into the room. It was Doctor Hoerberlein. "Pardon me, gentlemen, I was unavoidably detained. Ah, Klas, you rascal, what are *you* doing in here?"

He rushed angrily at Professor Jastrau, who ran around and took refuge on the other side of the table. "Rottky! Rottky!" Doctor Hoerberlein called impatiently.

The inspector appeared in the door.

"Rottky, what are you thinking about to let Klas run around in the corridors and disturb the visitors?"

Rottky seized the ostensible Professor Jastrau by the arm.

"I'll warrant you," said Professor Hoe-

berlein to the young Danes, "that Klas has been borrowing Jastrau's name, hasn't he, gentlemen? Ah! And he has been borrowing something else. My cigarettes! Take them away from him, Rottky!"

The inspector jerked the cigarette case out of the tall man's hands and handed it to the doctor. The muscles of Jastrau-Klas's fine face twitched and his shoulders drooped pitifully. Student Axel Mundt of Copenhagen, who was a kind-hearted lad, felt his eyes fill with tears.