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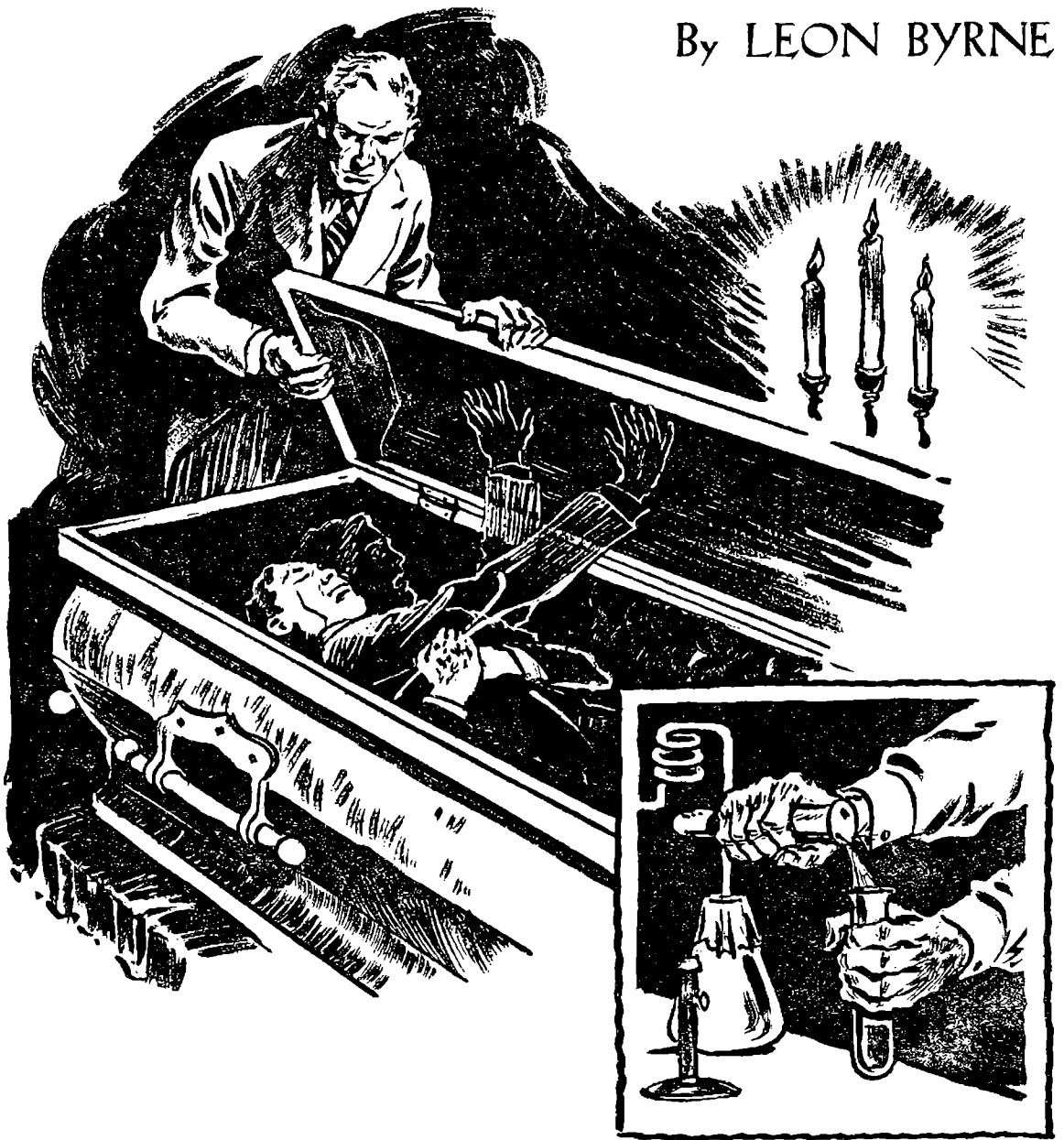
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HELP ME TO DIE!

By LEON BYRNE



That was my dead body they carried from this room last week—my body, yes; but I am not dead! Listen but a moment to my story, and then, if you can deny me still . . .

IN THE name of God, in the name of all you hold dear, I beg of you, I beseech you as no man has ever besought another—help me to die!

That was my body they nailed in the

coffin and carried out of here last week—my body, yes; but *I* am not dead. Listen but a moment and let me tell you, and then if you can deny me . . .

There never was a woman more beauti-

ful, more tender and fragile than the girl who had just become my bride, golden-haired, blue-eyed Stefanie. And because the love we shared was so great and so precious, I had brought her to this little village where we could be alone to savor to its fullest the blossoming of the tie between us.

That was why, when we first encountered the Ancient, my impulse was to turn back and avoid him. We were walking in the fields by the river—you can see the place from the window here. He was standing in the center of the path, staring down at the ground. There was nothing evil or alarming about his appearance, you understand—just the contrary. He reminded me of a venerable and kindly old patriarch, with his white beard and deep-set, pensive eyes—eyes that seemed to have been gazing at and appraising humanity with pity and tolerance for generation upon generation.

But, while Stefanie and I were still some distance away, he suddenly lifted his arms, as a man will do in a gesture of hopelessness, of resignation. Call me mad if you wish, yet I swear that, for an instant, I did not see a man standing there with outstretched arms—I saw a cross, a cross such as you will find in many a burial ground, standing as sentinel over a lonely grave, a cross that is a tombstone.

One moment I saw the cross there, limned in the glaring sunlight, a symbol of pain and death; then, as I brushed my hand across my eyes, it was gone. The tall, somber figure of the man had dropped his arms, lifted his eyes from the ground to gaze moodily at Stefanie and myself as we came up.

There was death there at his feet, tiny and immaterial death—but symbolic. It was a thrush, lying stricken on the grass, and when Stefanie saw it she ran forward with a little cry, picked it up tenderly in her small white hands.

"Oh!" she said impulsively. "The poor

little creature! What happened to it?"

The old man looked down at her musingly, said, "A snake caught it. It was dead before I could rescue it."

Stefanie stroked the feathery little body, still warm. "Such a pretty thing to have to die," she murmured.

"Ah, yes," the old man sighed. "The mortal clay it not so appealing to the eye once the spirit has fled."

I had said nothing all this while, and now, with a polite inclination of his head to Stefanie and me, the oldster turned and started away. But Stefanie, who is always loath to allow anyone to depart, said quickly: "Are you a stranger here in Brentwood? I don't remember having seen you—"

He turned, appreciation of her friendliness lighting his somber eyes. "Hardly a stranger," he said. "A newcomer, you might call me. I have taken the Farnsworth cottage for the summer," and he nodded toward this house where we are now. "I find this peaceful countryside ideal for my work and my studies."

The old man was so courteous, so obviously lonely, that, much as I wanted to be alone with Stefanie, I could not be rude to him, and I said, "What do you study, if I may ask?"

"Death," he said quietly. Then, when he saw the startled, questioning look in Stefanie's face he quickly added: "Death and its conqueror—life. I study the soul of man. I would be honored to receive you some afternoon when you have a few minutes to while away—you and the young lady, both." Then he turned and was gone down the path, with long, impatient strides.

That was our introduction to Dr. Nathaniel Creighton, and if I thought at the time that it was a crack-brained eccentric we had encountered, I quickly changed my opinion when Stefanie and I called on him—for we did accept his invitation. Diversions were few in the little

village of Brentwood, where Stefanie and I had come to spend our honeymoon, and though we wanted nothing more than each other's company, there was something about the old man—an elusive sense of hidden and strange powers, perhaps—that we could not seem to forget and that drew us to him.

We visited the old man two days later, spent a pleasant afternoon—and the next day at his request, I returned, alone, to his cottage.

DESPITE his countless years, Nathaniel Creighton's mind was brilliant, razor-keen, and he possessed a store of knowledge as vast and illimitable as the many-starred heavens.

"Life," he said that afternoon, "and death are two things that no one can avoid. We see them but do we know what they are? We can say when an organism begins to function, it is what we call life; when it apparently ceases to function, it is death. But in man, there is something beyond this mere bodily functioning, something beyond the mind, even. We choose to call it the soul. Where does this soul come from before we are born; where does it go when we die?"

"I am a scientist, mind you, and scientists can explain life and death in terms of physics and chemistry. The soul they cannot explain. That is why all true scientists are religious men. Cold reason tells them there is a Supreme Being, a Guardian of the Souls, a God, because there *must* be a God.

"Yet there is still much about life and death—and the soul—that man has not fathomed. When life ends, the soul returns whence it came. But what happens when life is suspended?"

"We see a girl swimmer suddenly seized with a cramp, see her go under. Half an hour later her body is dragged up from the bottom of the lake, stretched out on the shore.

"Her body is cold, she has stopped breathing, no heart-beat is registered. We say that she is dead. Then what do we see? An hour of furious resuscitation, of massage, of heat and oxygen applied, and the corpse stirs, moans, begins to gain color as lungs and heart start functioning again. She was dead, and now she is alive. And where, when she was dead, was her soul? It had not gone back, irretrievably, to her Maker, for it has again entered into her body. Was it not hovering near, pre-scient, hopeful, watchful?"

He stared at me long and penetratingly. "I have worked for years," he went on slowly, "many years, to perfect an elixir—an elixir that will liberate the spirit, the consciousness, the soul, from its earthly shell, the body. Yesterday, I believe I succeeded. I do not know for sure, but I think so. Only one thing remains—proof by experimentation." He looked at me eagerly. "Will you help me with the experiment?"

My sudden apprehension must have shown in my face, for he went on hurriedly: "No, no, do not misunderstand me. I do not wish to try the experiment on you; I will be the subject. But I must have your help. After I have injected the elixir into my veins, after its powerful chemical action has reduced my body to apparent death—and liberated my spirit—after this has continued for a period of minutes, a second hypodermic, containing the counter-agent, must be administered. If the elixir is perfect, my body will resume its functioning, again become alive."

I protested vigorously at first that there were certain things which belonged to God, with which man should not tamper—but even as I argued with him I was mentally scoffing at his theories and his claims. Nathaniel Creighton's mind was brilliant, yes—but it had cracked, and he was talking of something that was impossible, preposterous.

But he was not talking now, he was acting, with the swift determination of a zealot.

"You have no choice in the matter," he said fiercely as he thrust a hypodermic into my hands. "If you fail me, I am dead—forever. In ten minutes, inject this into a vein. Now—"

He strode to a couch—that cot beside which you are standing now—stretched himself out on it and pulled up his sleeve. Then he plunged a second hypodermic into his arm, slowly but firmly pushed the plunger until it was empty. The needle dropped from his hand and almost immediately he seemed to fall into a deep slumber.

Then, as I watched intently, his breathing slowly diminished, and stopped. I felt his pulse. It was faint, barely perceptible. In a moment it too had ceased. His sightless eyes rolled back, his entire body seemed to collapse—in death.

IT was a torturing, seemingly endless ten minutes I spent here with that body, so recently pulsating with life, now an immobile piece of senseless clay. More than once I was tempted to plunge the life-giving fluid into his arm, to end the terrible suspense—but I waited. Then, when I did use the hypodermic, I was so clumsy and nervous I feared at first that I had made a terrible mistake, missed the vein with the precious antidote.

But it worked—it worked as though it were a necromancer's magic potion—and as Nathaniel Creighton had died he came back to life—he returned to full consciousness a trembling, eager, wildly excited man who leaped from the couch, seized me by the arms. His eyes burning with a mystic fervor, he shouted at me:

"I have done it! I have done it! I have severed the cord binding consciousness and flesh! I have torn the spirit free from its earthly bondage! I tell you I have loosed the soul from the body!"

He stopped, almost overcome with the frenzy of his exultation, and I helped him to a chair. He sat there a moment, and after he had become more calm he went on, in low and vibrant tones:

"It was a—a tremendous experience, almost incredible. I felt consciousness leaving my mind; I felt a terrific physical and mental dizziness. Then, just as I was about to slip down into a black void, it seemed the walls of darkness parted, and I was hurled like a straw blasted from the mouth of a volcano, up into a dazzling blue firmament.

"My mind, my consciousness, were *outside* my body. I was here, still here in this room, and I had complete awareness of the room and everything that went on in it—yet I was free."

Reason told me that what he was saying was preposterous—that he was either playing some fantastic joke at my expense, or that he was suffering drug-induced delusions. But no, the man was not jesting—if ever a man was in deadly earnest, it was Nathaniel Creighton.

You will wonder, if I was so skeptical, why it was that I permitted him to pour that same powerful virus into my veins. My only explanation can be that the old scientist's enthusiasm was so contagious, his description of the disembodied state so rapturous, that my curiosity was whetted to a white heat.

The experiment had taken but ten minutes, it had not harmed him in any manner—and if he was telling me the truth, then I would share with him the honor of discovering, of exploring, huge new vistas on the horizon of the human mind and consciousness.

And as I asked him, then begged him, to let me share his secret, a voice within me whispered: "Some things are man's—some things belong to God!" But the voice was a tiny one, quickly silenced, and the old man was as eager for me to test and prove his alchemy as I was to try it.

Soon I was stretched out on the couch, felt the prick of the needle in my arm, felt an overwhelming rush of bewildering, dizzying exhilaration grip me, then—it is impossible to describe to you the amazing, the incredible feeling I experienced in the next few minutes.

You have watched a tiny chick emerge from a shell, seem suddenly to leap out into life, full born, from nothingness. I, too, seemed to leap out into a new life. I awoke from my daze an omniscient being. I could see, I could hear, I could sense things as never before, yet I was not a slave to eyes, or ears, of that fumbling mass of grey tissue we call the brain. I had the all-seeing eyes, the all-knowing wisdom of a god, of The God.

I COULD see the pale, still piece of flesh lying there on the couch—the body of Robert Gregory. I could see the tall, tense figure of the metaphysician, Nathaniel Creighton, bent over it, studying it, watching with eager, hawklike impatience for any visible symptoms of his experiment's success or failure.

I could hear him muttering, over and over, "Immortality—immortality is within our reach. The mystery of death and of life—the secrets of the Creator—"

I could see from above, from below, from all sides—I could see with a thousand eyes and hear with a million ears, for I was not seeing and hearing through crude sensory organs—I was feeling, and knowing, as a god would know, and my consciousness, my spirit, was all-pervading.

I saw Dr. Creighton cast a nervous, speculative glance around the room, as if he were seeking the location of my presence, and I laughed—my spirit laughed—at his confusion.

I saw him take a pin, and thrust it into the flesh of my body there on the cot to see if there was any reflex action—and I laughed again at myself for having felt

a momentary pang of alarm that I was about to be hurt, for the body did not quiver, and I—naturally, I felt nothing.

I saw him fingering the hypodermic in his hand nervously, looking at his watch from time to time. I wanted to shout to him to stay the injection, to permit me further moments of this glorious freedom, of release—but I had no voice, and the lax grey lips of the body there on the couch had no volition of their own—they were as uselessly immobile as the rest of the fleshly abode from which the spirit had risen.

No, I could not stop him. The hands of his watch swung around to eight, and to nine, and on toward ten minutes, and he put the watch down on the table—that table there behind you—and stepped quickly back to the couch, started to bend down over my body, with the hypodermic needle poised in his hand.

Then the laughter, the impatience, the exhilaration suddenly went out of me, for Dr. Nathaniel Creighton faltered, shook convulsively an instant, and sank to the floor with a moan.

The hypodermic thudded to the carpet, bounced under the couch, and the old man's eyes dilated wildly as he made a feeble, despairing effort to reach it, to jab it into my body, even if it was his last mortal act. For Dr. Creighton knew, as I knew, that he was dying—that the tumultuous happenings of the last half-hour had been too much for his feeble old heart.

He died quickly, while I watched, and as he died he cast his eyes dazedly upward, into space, as if seeking my spirit, and he muttered with bitter anguish, "My God, what have I done! Forgive me—forgive—me—"

You can understand—I do not need to tell you—the flood of despair that swept over me as I watched his gaunt frame stiffen and grow cold, lying there on the floor beside that other body—my body. I do not need to tell you how the ticking

of his watch there on the table, tolling off the seconds, sounded as a funeral knell to me as the minutes and the hours rolled by into eternity.

It had been just after noon when I came to the cottage to visit him—it seemed endless centuries later, although the watch showed that only six hours had passed—when I heard a footstep on the porch, recognized with a glad surge of thankfulness the voice of Stefanie calling my name.

I remembered, suddenly, that I had told her I was coming here to visit the doctor but for an hour or so. I realized that she had become anxious and alarmed because I had not returned, and had come to find me.

Grateful joy welled up within me at sound of her voice, and I started to rush out to meet her. Started? Yes, my spirit rushed out toward her, but my body lay immobile. My spirit called out to her, but my throat, paralyzed in seeming death, would not move.

I waited, and my spirit became ever more frantic as it echoed the growing fear in her tones while she sped from room to room, calling for me, seeking me.

THEN she came running into this room, this room where we are now, and I cried out to her: "Stefanie! Darling! I am here—I am her waiting for you. There is but a moment's task for you—seize the hypodermic and push its needle into my body. . . . There it is, there, under the couch! Take it, darling, quickly—quickly—"

I cried out—but she did not hear me. She heard nothing—but she saw. Those violet eyes swept over to the couch on which lay a body—the body of Robert Gregory—my body.

With a wild, sobbing cry she ran to the couch, flung herself down on me. She ran delicate, quivering fingers over my face, felt the cold immobility of my features,

stared with growing terror at my staring, sightless eyes.

"He's dead," she whispered. "Dead!"—and she drew back as though she had been struck cruelly in the face. Her eyes wandered down to the ghastly grey features of Nathaniel Creighton, lying there on the floor, then back up to mine. Something seemed to snap in her mind, and she hid her face in her hands, sobbed uncontrollably.

"No—no—" she whispered—"I can't live without you, Robert—I can't—"

Then, while I screamed a voiceless scream, and my spirit writhed in impotent fury at my helplessness, I saw her spring up, stare wildly about her for an instant, then run quickly to the doctor's desk, seize a steel-pointed letter-opener from its surface.

I reached frantic fingers to grasp it from her—and my fingers were wisps of air. I shouted, with all the might of my lungs: "Stefanie—don't!" But my voice stirred not the slightest echo, for it was a voice from beyond, which she could not hear.

As I watched, and my spirit sickened and died with her, she plunged the blade into her breast, deep into her heart. She staggered, tripped over the body of Nathaniel Creighton, fell prone upon me—upon the fleshly shroud of me, there on the couch. . . .

That was a week ago. What has happened since is only a wild and jumbled pattern in my tortured consciousness. I know they found us, found our bodies, a day, two days later. I know that my shattered spirit was dimly aware of the excited outcry that arose in the village, the press of curious, horrified throngs surging in to stare, and wonder, and speculate in hushed whispers.

I remember the melancholy intonation of the professional man in black: "The verdict of the coroner's jury is death from heart failure for the man known as Dr. Creighton; death by a self-inflicted

wound for Stefanie Gregory; death from causes unknown for Robert Gregory."

I remember vividly, the brief and furious but futile struggle I made to prevent them from placing my body in a casket, as they had done with the others. Much else I do not remember, for grief can strangle memory as well as voice, but I remember calling out to them: "Wait! That is not a corpse you are carrying off to bury in cold earth! It is the body, the undead body of Robert Gregory—my body—and I am not dead! For me there can never be peace, never be reunion with my beloved in His realm until you have freed me from this bondage—"

They did not hear me.

But you can hear me—I can tell by your expression that you hear me, that you understand my plea.

There! There it is—that thing you have in your hand—that hypodermic! You know where they buried the body of Robert Gregory—my body. Get there quickly—use that injection as I have told you it should be used. Let my body become alive again—if just for a moment, so that I can die decently, as other men die, as God intended them to die.

No, don't tamper with it like that; you may ruin it! Look at me—I am talking to you! Don't you hear me? I am calling you! *In the name of God, listen to me!*

THE real estate agent opened the front gate of his yard, slouched wearily up the path to the door of his home just as dusk was falling. He went in, walked through the house to the kitchen, where his wife Hannah was preparing supper.

"Well," he said with a tired sigh, "I cleaned up the Farnsworth cottage. Not very pleasant work, messing around where three people have just died.

"It may sound crazy to you, but all the time I was there I felt as though I wasn't alone. There wasn't anybody there, of course, but, well—it seemed as though I could almost *feel* somebody or something." He went to the window, stared vaguely out into the twilight. "It seemed that someone was trying to talk to me, begging me to help him—"

"Now, now," Hannah Dickinson reproved him, "don't you go letting your imagination run away with you. You finished cleaning up the place, did you?"

"Yes, it's spick and span. I boxed up all of the old man's things and put them away for the public administrator to dispose of—all except one thing, a hypodermic I found behind the couch. It was full of some funny-looking kind of stuff. Thought it might be poison, so I threw it in the river. Yes, I finished up everything; and yet, somehow, I don't know why, it seems to me there's something unfinished—something left undone. . . ."