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LISTENING DEATH

by
Don
Robert
Catlin



"Get back, or I'll smash this bottle on the floor!" he cried.

"I PERFORMED a decompression operation. First trepanning the skull, making a circular hole and piercing it, I withdrew the precious contents of the pineal gland and also the cerebrospinal fluid. I had no opportunity for quite some time to make use of the stimulative serum thus obtained, but it was preserved carefully; and, when I was later asked to operate on the brain of a man known for his dull-wittedness, I inoculated the patient with the serum. The operation was a splendid success, the results more than I had hoped for. Today, that dull-witted fellow is amazing all who know him by displaying flashes of positive genius! But enough of that—after all, I had fallen short of that which I had set out to do. Delving farther . . ."

The speaker, Dr. Frank Whitley, broke off his discourse and surveyed the candidly puzzled features of his

visitors. There were three of them, all men of the medical profession who had gained renown in surgery.

"Delving farther," continued Dr. Whitley, "I have made certain discoveries which I shall shortly disclose. But before going into that, I wish to say a word by way of preface. As all of you know, I have more or less dropped active practise to devote my attention to experimental work." Settling himself comfortably in his chair, Dr. Whitley shot a quick glance at the others. "Have you ever given thought to the fact that, were it possible to preserve the brains of our greatest inventors, savants and statesmen, almost incalculable good might result in future years? That unborn generations might, in hours of greatest need, have at their disposal the marvelous intellects of history's supermen?"

"It appears that the operation you have just described might solve that question," put in Dr. Reynolds.

Whitley shook his head. "Not so," he said; "though at first I thought as you. No, the transplanting, by inoculation, of the pineal gland contents and the cerebrospinal fluid does nothing but impart a portion of the original intellect. By the time several such transplantings had been accomplished, precious little of the original would remain because of contamination with lesser brains. I will concede that this disclosure caused me to fear that my fondest hopes were not to be realized."

Dr. Hazard, a white-haired surgeon of the old school, wagged his leonine head. "I take it, then, that you have been working upon some scheme to preserve through the ages the brain-power of our greatest men? You younger chaps are forever digging up something startling—but I shouldn't be down-hearted if I were you. Your success in transferring the vital secretions of the brain should do much in treating the feeble-minded."

"That, obviously, will be the ultimate use of that particular operation," assented Whitley. "But I am far from being downcast."

He arose and walked across the surgery to the door of an adjoining room. In a moment he was wheeling an operating table into the presence of his colleagues. Upon the table lay a still, covered figure which was, presumably, a cadaver. Dr. Whitley threw back the covering and disclosed the cold, white body.

"Will you gentlemen be kind enough to examine this?" he asked, indicating the cadaver.

Doctors Hazard, Reynolds and Truman went to the table and needed but a moment to ascertain that life was extinct, that the man was dead.

Whitley nodded at their verdict. A trace of a smile appeared in the corners of his sensitive mouth, and his lean, pale face lit up.

"Please be seated once more, gentlemen; and, I beg of you, be patient with me when I tell you that this body has lain just as it now is for more than four months!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Hazard. Then: "I beg pardon——"

"That's quite all right, Doctor," smiled Whitley. "To resume, then, the coherent trend of what I have been telling you: at the time of my greatest gloom over the failure of my brain-secretion inoculation, a noted Egyptologist unearthed the tomb and body of a long-dead Pharaoh. The association of ideas—preservation of body and preservation of brain—gave me further stimulation. Very well, then, I thought, since preservation of brain alone was denied me, I should preserve the entire body! I determined to conquer the mystery of the ages—and I have done so! For years I experimented along those lines: perfecting a preservative, an embalming fluid if you will, which would keep flesh and blood in an absolutely perfect state. This I have accomplished, and as witness I have my friend over there upon the table—one Blair Wilson, a pugilistic gentleman of doubtful antecedents."

"Do you mean, Doctor, that this body has been—er, embalmed with——"

"Exactly," Whitley answered young Dr. Truman. "Some four months past, he stumbled into my office. He was badly beaten up—suffering from contusions—and he fainted while I was administering a hypodermic. I was alone with him, having long since, as you know, dispensed with office girls and assistants. Judging by the man's appearance that he could drop from sight without incurring comment, I acted

upon impulse and injected my formula into his veins, having but lately completed my calculations."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed old Dr. Hazard.

"The man was an ideal subject upon which to experiment, Dr. Hazard! If I had erred in my calculations, his death was of no consequence to anyone but himself; a good riddance, in fact, for I rather suspect he has criminal tendencies. Obversely, if I succeeded, in a few months at most I should return his worthless life to him; and, through his services, science would have learned much. Professional ethics, you say, Doctor? My dear colleague, how many of us have lost patients because we dallied to experiment with some interesting matter! What is one life compared to the betterment of all life? But to continue: I injected my preparation into his veins. He sank into a stupor; respiration ceased; all vital organs completely stopped functioning. My preservative had been carried to every tissue of the flesh, through the blood. Life was extinct; the man was dead. And yet—decomposition did not set in!"

Dr. Reynolds shrewdly summed up the matter: "If, as you say, Whitley, this occurred four months ago, then your formula must have been accurately compounded. You have put to shame the embalmers of centuries past! I suppose you've kept check of temperatures?"

Dr. Whitley smiled wanly. "Truly, I had not erred. But I preferred to wait some time before making public my discovery. I wanted to be doubly sure before returning life into that dead body. Oh yes; I forgot to tell you that there is an antidote to the preserving fluid. At last, my dear sirs, I know the time has come. Here, in this surgery, is the means to prolong for eternity, if need be, the master

brains and supreme intellects of the world!"

"I am almost convinced, my dear Whitley, that you have divulged a wonderful thing," murmured old Dr. Hazard.

"With all modesty, I have, Doctor. Presently I shall restore life to that dead man upon the table, just as might be replaced upon earth, upon demand, any great man into whose veins had been injected my formula. And let me say here and now, gentlemen, that as soon as I have revived Blair Wilson I shall refute once and for all time any accusations of fakery by submitting myself to an inoculation so that you may experiment upon my own body. Belief and positive knowledge are matters entirely at variance; and as I've the courage of my convictions I demand that I be accorded an opportunity to demonstrate upon my own person the authenticity of my disclosures."

"There's hardly need of that," smiled Dr. Reynolds. "We all know that the man upon the table is dead, and if you bring him to life there can hardly be any doubt but that you have performed a surgical miracle!"

But Dr. Whitley merely smiled. He wheeled the operating table to the center of the room. "The preservative fluid," he went on as he prepared to administer the antidote, "will be utterly destroyed by this second injection, which will eat its way through his veins, running rampant."

Dr. Truman, youngest of the four surgeons, displayed unusual interest and animation. "I'm not following you, Whitley; I'm way ahead of you! When the antidote has eaten up and destroyed the preservative, you use adrenal chloride——"

Dr. Whitley was sterilizing some instruments. "Correct," he took time to answer, nodding his approv-

al at the younger man. "As we know, adrenal chloride is the most powerful and energetic heart stimulant known to science." With swift, sure fingers he injected a solution of the antidote into the veins of the recumbent Blair Wilson. "Now, allowing exactly three minutes for the antidote to perform its function, we have the subject in the customary state following natural death. A solution of the supra-renal capsule"

INTEREST growing in their eyes, the three surgeons watched with fascination as Dr. Whitley forced the powerful drug into the muscles of the dead man's heart. Then, as instruments clattered dully on the receiving tray, they sprang to Whitley's assistance. Deft hands massaged, kneading the cold flesh. . . .

Dr. Hazard looked up with a queer light in his eyes. "I am wondering what this man will think when he finds himself here—after a lapse of four months—"

"Money will speak his language," laughed Dr. Whitley. Turning to the patient, he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. "You will note that the pulse . . . The eyes! The eyes are opening!" And then, smiling down into the upturned face, "Feeling all right, old man? Your arm is hurting you? Legs, too? That will cease in a moment—"

Whitley whirled to face his colleagues. "Are you satisfied?"

"The thing is absurd—impossible—and yet—and yet—" Old Dr. Hazard gasped as he saw the supine figure twitching and moving about spasmodically.

Dr. Whitley was helping the revived man to his feet. "There, I know that you are feeling rather shaky, Wilson. Just relax in this chair. Now—I must confess that I have taken the liberty to do some experimental work on your person,

Wilson. And though I assure you that no ill effects will result, I feel that I not only owe you a debt of gratitude but a monetary reward as well. I have here a release, written in legal form, from any and all claims you might hereafter bring against me should you at any time feel that my unwarranted actions entitle you to redress under the law. If you will sign this release, I shall tender you one thousand dollars—in cash."

The ex-pugilist seemed in a daze. His eyes, glazed over like some wild thing's, swept the circle of forms confronting him. A trembling hand passed over his face, and when he spoke his voice was harsh and rasping. "You gimme them thousand bucks before you change your mind!"

Dr. Whitley threw a quick glance at his colleagues. "That's fine, my man. Just sign here—and now Dr. Hazard and Dr. Reynolds will sign as witnesses—good!" He folded the paper and placed it in his pocket, then handed the dazed man ten one-hundred dollar bills. "How are you feeling now?"

The man was rubbing his arms. "Kinda numb, like I had the cramps or something," he rasped. "Kinda tingling all over. an' I got a headache—"

"Try and relax, Wilson. And drink this." He handed the ex-pugilist a stimulant.

Then, crossing the room, Dr. Whitley busied himself at his desk. A phial of some greenish-blue, mottled liquid he placed in the center of the broad top, and beside it a sheet of paper upon which were several closely typed lines. His body bent to shield his actions, he thrust a hypodermic needle into a vein in his forearm.

When he turned to face the others a curious smile of triumph tinged his lips. "I knew that you three would

not be willing to see me undergo the inoculation, gentlemen No; it is too late, now. I've injected the preservative." And to Blair Wilson, groggily reclining in the easy chair, he added, "I am taking the same treatment I gave you, so you will see that no harmful after-results will ensue, otherwise I'd not subject myself to it."

The three surgeons were uneasy, apprehension gripping them. "But, Doctor——"

"I have only a very few minutes, gentlemen! If you will take notes as the drug takes effect ? On my desk you will find explicit directions as to the administering of the antidote, and the phial containing it." His eyes drooped for a moment. "A slow, creeping fire seems to be shrouding me——" Again that curious smile of triumph tinged his lips. "The courage of my convictions, eh, gentlemen?" He shuddered. "Perhaps I'd best lie down, for a numbness has taken possession of me——"

Gentle hands aided him as he climbed to the operating table; and over the prostrate form Dr. Hazard's old eyes met the horrified ones of Dr. Reynolds.

Whitley gave a little sigh; his body was convulsed; and then he lay quite still.

"Is he——?" young Truman asked in a strained voice.

Dr. Hazard bent above the body. As he straightened, after making an examination, he nodded. "Dead," he whispered. "It was foolhardy of Whitley to undertake this—but please note that——" His voice dropped even lower: "I'd forgotten the ex-pugilist, Reynolds. Best get him out of the way, if he has sufficiently recovered, eh?"

Dr. Reynolds turned. "My God!" his voice rang in the elder surgeon's ears. "Put that phial back on the desk—carefully!"

The others whirled, and to their horror saw that Blair Wilson, lurching heavily to his feet, had advanced to the desk and taken up the container of the antidote.

"Don't drop that, man! Place it back—no, hand it to me!"

Blair Wilson's features were twisted into a knowing leer. "Not so fast! Get back, or I'll smash this on the floor! Try any funny stuff and this hellish drug gets smeared from wall to wall!"

"But you don't understand——"

"The hell I don't! You doctor guys think you know it all; you figured I was just a poor dumb mutt, and maybe I am. But every dog has his day, and believe me this is mine!" He chuckled insanely, leering owlshly at the bewildered countenances of the three surgeons. "The doc, over there," indicating the still body of Dr. Whitley, "is having a hell of a time right now, and maybe I don't know it! Aw, you can't kid me, bozo," as Hazard would have spoken; "I know all about the doc's shot in the arm. You see, old chin-whiskers, there's one mistake the doc made in making his drug; it kills you, all right—deader than hell—*all but your brain!* You can't feel the doc stuck me with knives, and I guess I oughta know. You can't talk, cause your body's dead. But your brain ain't dead, not by a long shot. You can think and thinking and listening is all I been doing for about a million years! Maybe you doctors can explain that part of it—I don't know and I don't care—but you can sure hear, all right. Get back or I'll smash this bottle! There, we can talk now. Yeah, I gotta lot of talking to do. And while I'm talking I know the doc over there is suffering the torments of hell—for he don't know what I'm gonna do with his precious drug!" He laughed fiendishly, ghoulishly. "Maybe you guys think I'm crazy, and I guess I

am. I'm just crazy enough to send the doc down into the hell he had me in! Let me tell you, there ain't no torture in the world to compare with knowing that your body's dead—dead—dead . . . and laying there, thinking and listening! It didn't bother me so bad at first; I could hear the doc talking to himself, and putting two and two together I figures out what he's aiming to do. I thought he'd bring me out of it right away . . . and then I heard him say he'd wait a few months . . . and then . . . I'd listen for his voice, listen for his footsteps. Listen; listen; always listening! 'Today's the day,' I'd tell myself; and then I'd hear the doc leaving me all alone again—alone with the demons of hell, of torment. I'd try to yell, try to make him hear me, try to move . . . God! Then I'd realize that I was dead. That my heart wasn't beating. The horror of it! Just to lie there, a dead man, thinking and listening!

"Was it daytime or night? I didn't know. Only when the doc came I knew it was day—but it would be months and years before I heard him again. I could think of a million things happening to him: he'd been in an accident, got killed . . . and there I was with a thousand million centuries ahead of me, centuries of thinking and listening, a dead man! You think I'm bug-house? I can tell you every word you guys said after you come in the office! It's a wonder I ain't plain nutty, after what I been through. . . . I promised myself that if I ever got back to life again I was gonna kill the doc; that's the only pleasant thing I had to think about. I figured out more ways of torturing and killing him than man ever thought of before. To hurt him, to tear him apart with my hands, to make his agony last as long as I could before I checked him out! God! how I was gonna laugh as he died!

"And now my time's come, only different than I figured. I heard the doc offer to take that shot himself; and I knew he meant to do it, to prove he wasn't faking. So I lays low, takes his money, and keeps my mouth shut until he passes out." The man's laughter rose shrilly into a crescendo of hate and horror. "Now I've got the whip-hand. I've got his drug . . . and there ain't no more of it, and there ain't no written directions how to make it! I'm gonna take this stuff with me, and if any of you guys tries to stop me, it goes smash on the floor! Maybe—maybe—I'll bring it back—some day!"

Terrified at the culmination of Dr. Whitley's weird experiment, yet daring not to move, daring not to attempt retrieval of the precious antidote, the three surgeons watched the ex-pugilist walk to the door and open it.

"From now on, the doc can do a little thinking and listening for himself. There ain't nothing gonna interrupt him!" And the crazed man chuckled at his own jibe. "He can do just what I did: he can listen—listen—listen for me to come back with his drug. Maybe I'll come—maybe I won't. *That is what the doc is gonna be worried about!*"

The door slammed behind him.

"No! Don't try to stop him!" old Dr. Hazard cried as the younger and more impulsive Truman would have gone in pursuit. "There isn't a chance of getting the phial from him without crushing it. The man is demented—he'd not have the slightest compunction in breaking the fragile container!"

"But, Doctor! Many things may happen; he may go completely insane, or get killed in a drunken brawl——"

"That, my son, rests upon the knees of the gods," said Hazard slowly.

"I can't—I can't chance it!" Truman burst forth. His face working with emotion, the younger man dashed into the hallway.

Dr. Hazard and Dr. Reynolds, drawn together by a mutual instinct, waited breathlessly. They heard a furious commotion; sounds of conflict, scuffling, a hoarse, enraged cry from the rasping throat of Blair Wilson. And then—a shivering, a tinkling of fragile glass upon the tiled floor!

Old Dr. Hazard clutched at Dr. Reynolds' arm as the bedraggled figure of young Truman re-entered the surgery. In Truman's eyes they saw a dreadful horror, a nameless dread.

"Broken!" said Truman in answer to the unspoken question. "My God!" And then, trembling, he added furiously: "There was a chance—and I had to take it! Now that

the antidote is lost to us, there is but one thing we can do: we must, we must put poor Whitley out of his misery. My God! we can't permit him to go on through time suffering mental torment——"

"You forget," said Dr. Hazard, abjectly, "that nothing we can do will place Dr. Whitley beyond that which faces him . . . for we could but deprive him of life . . . and he is already dead!"

Truman gazed in open-eyed horror at the placid face of Dr. Whitley, as if seeking to discover some sign of understanding on that calm visage. But if Dr. Whitley heard, or knew, or understood, he gave no sign; not even the flicker of an eyelid betrayed the thoughts that must have seethed in his troubled brain. He was dead, truly, as far as any test could discover; yet he seemed to be intently listening—listening. . . .