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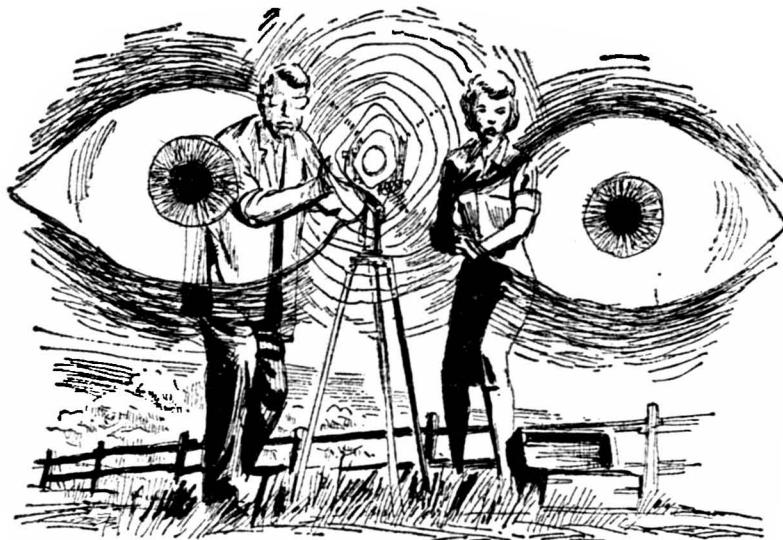


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No Harm Done

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS



Humorist Sharkey puts away his jester's cap to write a chilling tale that never telegraphs—and only once, subtly, hints at—its shocking ending.

THE BOY was a good-looking youth, with shiny—if over-long—blond hair, and bright white teeth. But his eyes were cloudy with the emptiness that lay behind them, and the blue circles of their irises hinted at

no more mental activity than do the opaque black dots on a rag doll. He sat with vacuous docility upon the small metal stool the guards had provided, and let his arms dangle limp as broken clothesline at his sides, not even

crossing them in his lap. He had been led to the chair, told to sit, and left. If he were not told to arise, he would remain there until the dissolution of his muscle cells following death by starvation caused him to topple from his low perch.

"Total schizophrenia," said Dr. Manton. "For all practical purposes, he is an ambulant—when instructed to move, of course—vegetable."

"How terrible," said Lisa, albeit perfunctorily. Lisa Nugent, for all her lovely twenty-seven years, was a trained psychologist, and rarely allowed emotion to take her mind from its well-ordered paths of analysis. To be unfeeling was heartless—But to become emotional about a patient was pointless.

"Yes, it's intolerable," nodded Dr. Jeff Manton, keeping his mind strictly on Lisa's scientific qualifications, and deliberately blocking out any other information sent to his brain by his alert senses. The warmth of her smile, the flash of sunlight in her auburn hair, the companionable lilt she could not keep out of her "on-duty" voice—All these were observed, noted, and filed for future reference. At the moment, nothing must go wrong with their capacity for observation of the patient. Emotion had a way of befuddling even the most dedicated minds.

"But why out here?" Lisa said suddenly, returning the conversation to a prior topic. "I should think conditions would be easier to control in the lab."

"Simply because," said Jeff, patting the small metal camera-like device on its rigid tripod, "I as yet have no experimental knowledge of the range of my machine. It may simply be absorbed by the plaster in the walls, back inside the sanatorium. Then again, it may penetrate, likely or not, even the steel beams of the building, with roentgenic ease. There are too many other people in the building, Li—Dr. Nugent. Until I can be certain just what effect the rays have upon a human brain, I dare not use it any place where there might be leakage, possible synaptic damage."

"I understand," said Lisa, nodding after a brief smile at his near-slip with her name. "You assume the earth will absorb any rays that pass beyond this boy's brain, and render them—if not harmless—at least beyond the contamination point with another human being."

"Precisely," said Jeff Manton, moving the tripod a short distance closer to the seated boy. "Now, I want you to assist me in watching him, and if you note in him any change—either in his expression or posture—tell me at once. Then we can turn off

the machine and test him for results. For positive results, at any rate."

LISA could not repress a slight tremor. The trouble with schizophrenia in its most advanced stage was the inability of contacting the patient. The boy, although readily capable of executing simple commands, could not be counted on to aid Dr. Manton nor herself in even the most basic test of his mental abilities. If the machine made him any worse—there would hardly be a way for them to discover it. If better—then new hope was born for other similarly afflicted.

"Steady, now," said Jeff, turning the tiny knob at the side of the metal box a quarter turn. "Keep your eye on him. I'm going to turn it on."

Lisa felt the sweat prickling along her back as Jeff flicked the toggle switch atop the box. Her eyes began to burn, and she realized she wasn't even blinking as she locked her gaze upon the figure of the boy through whose brain was now coursing a ray of relatively unknown effect. Rabbits and rats and monkeys in the lab were one thing. This, now, was a human being. Whether the effect upon him would be similar to that of the ray upon test-animals (scientifically driven crazy before exposure) remained to be seen.

"Anything?" muttered Jeff, sighting anxiously along the side of the box. "Anything at all?"

"He—No. He just sits there, Doctor. So far as I can see, there is no appreciable effect." She sighed resignedly. "He doesn't even flicker a muscle."

"Damn," said Jeff. He kept his finger lightly atop the sun-glinting toggle switch. "I'm going to give it one more minute before I give up. This thing *should* be vitalizing his brain by now!"

"But he's not even—" Lisa began, discouraged.

"Keep your eyes on him, damn it!" snapped Jeff, catching the turn of her head from the corner of his eye. "This *must* work! We daren't miss the least sign that it has!"

Man and woman stood side by side in the hot light of the afternoon sun, staring, staring at the immobile form of the patient, the patient whose disrupted mind they were attempting to reunite into an intelligent whole . . .

My name, he thought. Funny, I should know my own name. I've heard it often enough . . . It's . . . Is it—is it Garret? That sounds like it, but—I can't seem to recall . . .

He thought about the man who tended and took care of him. He had called him by name, hadn't he? And it was most certainly Garret. Yes, of course it was Garret . . . *Or was it Curt?*

His mind, like badly exposed film, refused to give him an accurate sensation, from any of his senses. All he got for strenuous mental gymnastics was vague, blurry reception and muddled thought. And yet, there was a warm sensation that had never been in his mind before—Before what? Try as he might, he could not recall anything coherent before this moment in time. Just vague feelings of being alive, and simply growing up . . .

THE warmth of the sun was beginning to penetrate. He could feel it, coursing down upon him, soaking into him, revitalizing him . . . But it was unlike this other warmth, this *penetrating* warmth, that tingled through his mind. With the awareness of the sunlight came a slow awareness of shades of light, then of color, then of figures. And, for the first time, he made a strong effort, and—and *looked*.

He saw the man and woman standing in the sunlight a few feet from himself, saw the harsh glitter of that sunlight upon the strange object on three legs that rested on the ground before them. He tried to speak to them, but something restrained him.

If I can move . . . If I can just move a little bit, he realized, *they'll see me, and they'll know I'm alive and well and aware.*

He tried. He tried desperately to move. His body felt rigid, imprisoned. Just a little frantic, he thought of blinking at them, of moving his eyes toward them for sharp definite focus, so that they would *know* . . .

Nothing happened.

I'm paralyzed! he thought for a terrifying moment. Then—*No, I'm just not used to directing myself. I haven't the necessary coordination or experience, that must be it. Take it easy, now. Slow and easy. Don't panic.*

He strained desperately, and felt just the slightest hint of movement. Had they seen? he wondered. He was certain he had moved. What was the matter with the two of them?!

He watched them there in the sunlight, this man and woman who stood so intensely still, the man's hand upon that metallic thing on three legs. Then he knew that that thing was the source of the warmth in his mind. It had brought him to awareness.

But what good is it! his mind screamed. *To be alive and aware, and unable to let them know it!* The coldly frantic feeling was growing within him, now, taking hold of his brain with the frightening fingers of raw panic.

"Look!" he cried out, then knew with crushing despair that the word had gone no farther than his brain. *Please*, he begged

silently, see me here, see that I am alive, that I am not what I was!

Desperately, he strove to rise, felt the strange sensation of bondage that restrained his body, fought it . . . and won. It hurt. The sensation was unbearable. Yet he had moved. Perhaps only the quarter part of an inch, but he had moved. The woman—Had she seen?

Then he saw the man straighten up, heave his shoulders in a great sigh, and cut off the machine with a finger-flick. The tingling warmth died within his brain, and for an icy moment, he expected to plunge back to semi-comatose nothingness. But, after a giddy scintilla of dizziness, his mind remained strong and intelligent and alive.

Ignoring the blaze of pain that racked his entire being, he tensed himself, pushed, with strangled cries bursting inside his brain at the self-torture, and made himself move another quarter of an inch.

Did they see? Did they? Did they know? Would they free his mind, and leave his body imprisoned to his innermost pleas for release?

No, he thought, giddy with joy. They . . . They're coming nearer! . . .

IT'S NO use, Lisa," said Jeff, looking down upon the motionless figure on the stool. "The machine is a flop. Rabbits and lesser creatures, fine, but for the mind of man, no use at all."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," said Lisa, knowing that his calling her by her first name meant that work was done for that day. "Maybe, with some adjustments—"

"Yeah," he grunted bitterly, as two white-jacketed guards led the boy back to his cell, "maybe!"

"At least," said Lisa, taking him gently by the arm, "he's no worse off. The experiment just didn't work out, that's all. But there's no harm done, at any rate."

"Nope. I suppose you're right," Jeff said bitterly, reaching to lift the stool from its patch of sunlight. Then, with a brief surge of anger at the futility he felt, he lashed out with his foot and kicked the green parsley-like top clean off a carrot that jutted just a bit higher than its fellows in the garden bed behind the stool. "No harm done," he muttered angrily, and went back with Lisa toward the sanatarium.

While a silent, agony-filled voice behind him kept shrieking, over and over, "My eyes! He kicked out my eyes! I'm blind! Help me! Help me!"

THE END