



WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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*What is to be will be. Our only refuge
lies in that which might not have been.*

SUCCESS STORY

By Robert Turner

Illustrated by KELLY FREAS

*December 8th, 1952, Two-Thirty
A. M.*

AFTER awhile the blinding light was like actual physical pressure against his tightly squinched eyes. He tried to burrow deeper into the protectively warm, cave-like place where he'd been safe from them for so long. But he couldn't escape them. Their hands, their big, red, hideously smooth hands had him, now. They were tugging and pulling at him with a strength impossible to fight. Still he struggled.

He tried to cry out but there was no sound from his constricted throat. There were only the frightening noises from outside, louder, now. He tried to twist and squirm against the hands dragging him toward that harsh, blinding light. He was too small, too weak, compared to them. He couldn't fight them off. He felt himself being stretched and strained and forced with cruel determination. He didn't want to go

out there. He knew what was waiting for him out there. He couldn't go. Not out there, where . . .

When Jeff McKinney was three years old he tipped a pot of scalding water from the stove onto himself. He was badly burned and scarred. He hovered between life and death for several weeks. Jeff's father was out of work at the time and they were living in a cold water tenement. Something about the case caught a tabloid's attention and it was played up as a human interest sob story. It came to the attention of a wealthy man who volunteered to pay for plastic surgery. Then followed, long months of that kind of torture, but Jeff McKinney came out of it not too badly scarred. Not on the surface, anyhow. But his face had a strange hue. There was a frozen, mask-like cast to his features when he smiled.

He was eight when he saw his father killed. He was in the taxi the



KELLY FREAS-

older McKinney now drove for a living when the father stepped out of the driver's side onto a busy street without looking back first. The speeding truck took the car door and Jeff's father with it for half a block, wedged between front wheel and fender. Jeff never forgot the sound of that, and the screaming. Nor his shock when he suddenly realized that the screams were his own.

Jeff was a strange boy. He didn't have an average childhood. The poverty was more extreme after his father's death. He stayed home alone while his mother was out working at whatever job she could get, reading too much and thinking too much. Once, he looked at her with haunted eyes and said: "Mother, why is life so bad? Why are people even born into a world like this?"

What could she say to a question like that? She said: "Please, Jefferson! Please don't talk that way. Life isn't all bad. You'll see. Some day, in spite of everything, you'll be somebody and you'll be happy. The good times will come."

They did, of course. A few of them. There was the day he went upstate on an outing for underprivileged boys and went fishing for the first time. He caught a whopping trout and won a prize for it. That was nice; that was fun. That was when he was thirteen. That was the year the gang of kids caught him on the way home from school and beat him unconscious because he never laughed; because they couldn't *make* him laugh. The year before his mother died.

At the orphanage he didn't min-

gle much with the other boys. He spent most of his after-classes hours alone in the school's chemistry lab. He liked to tinker with chemicals. They were cold, emotionless, immune to joy and sadness, yet they had purpose. He played the cello, too, with haunting beauty, but not in the school band, only when he wanted to, when nobody was around and he could really feel the music.

Once, on the way home from his cello lesson in the music building, he saw some boys playing football on the orphanage athletic field. He was suddenly seized with a fierce determination to belong, to grab at some of the shouting, laughing happiness these boys seemed to have. He told them he wanted to join in and play, too. He didn't understand why they laughed so at this idea.

They stopped laughing, though, after the first time he ran with the ball, and they all piled up on him and he didn't get up. He lay there, looking so ghostly and breathing so harshly and with the trickle of blood coming out of his ears. But Jeff didn't know they had stopped laughing.

He recovered from that skull fracture, all right. Worse, though, than any of the unhappiness he suffered during his life, worse even than the shocks of his father's and mother's deaths, was the thing that happened to him when he was twenty and working at the laboratories of a big drug company.

He met and fell hopelessly in love with a girl named Nina, a girl a few years older than he was. They married and for the first few weeks Jeff McKinney had happiness he'd

never known before. Until he came home from work sick, one afternoon and saw Nina with the man from the apartment over them. She didn't whine and beg for forgiveness, Nina didn't. She stood boldly while the other man laughed and laughed and she screamed invective upon Jefferson McKinney, telling him what she really thought of him, a gloomy, puny weakling who couldn't even make a decent living, telling him that she was through with him.

A blank spot came into Jeff's life right then. When it was over, Nina and the other man were on the floor and there was blood on the kitchen carving knife in Jeff's hand.

They didn't find him for awhile. He changed his name and appearance and hid in the soiled seams and ragged fringes of society. He learned the anaesthetic powers of drugs and alcohol. He gave up trying to get anything out of this life. Then they finally picked him up, fished him from the river into which he'd jumped. There were days of torture after that, without the alcohol and drugs his wrecked system craved. Right there was the final hell that could have broken him completely. But it didn't. It was like the terrible crisis after a long illness. Things began to get better, to go to the other extreme after that.

A state psychiatrist brought Jeff's case to the attention of a noted criminal lawyer. Neither Nina nor her lover had died from their knife wounds. On the plea of the unwritten law, Jeff McKinney got off with a suspended sentence. The lawyer and psychiatrist learned of

his interest and knowledge and talent for chemistry and got him another job in the experimental laboratory of a big university.

Later he married a girl named Elaine, who worked at the lab with him. They had two children, and lived in a small comfortable cottage just off the University campus. For several years, they had all they wanted of life—comfort, health, happiness. Jeff thought that life could never be more wonderful. All of his former, bitter, cynical views fell away from him. Hadn't he, with all odds against him, finally won out and acquired peace and contentment and a purpose in life? What was wrong with a world in which that could happen?

Then there was the topper. Jefferson McKinney discovered a new drug which would cure and eventually eliminate a disease that was one of the world's worst killers, the drug for which thousands of scientists had been seeking for years.

He was feted and honored, became a national hero. The story of his life and his discovery temporarily pushed even the doleful forecasts of an early Third War, the Big War, off the front pages. And Jeff was humbly proud and grateful that he had paid now the debt he owed to a society that could make a final victory, like his, possible.

In a zenith of almost holy happiness, he stood one evening on a lecture platform in a huge auditorium in a great city, before thousands of worshipping people to make a thank-you speech after being awarded a world prize for his great scientific discovery.

(Continued on page 94)

SUCCESS STORY

(Continued from page 69)

But in the middle of his talk he broke off suddenly. A flash of blinding brilliance slashed through the windows. Horror painted his face. In a whisper, he cried: "No! No! It would make it all so senseless!" His eyes looked like the eyes of a man with flaming splinters jammed under his fingernails. His face seemed to pucker, and grow infantile. Then he screamed: "No! Leave me alone! I *told* you I didn't want to come *out here*, to be one of *you!* Damn you, why did you bring me *out here?* For—*for this? . . .*"

There were the shards of glass from the great auditorium windows, floating inward, turning lazily. There were the brick walls crumbling, tumbling inward, scattering through the air in the same seeming slow motion. The dust cloud and the sound, the flat blast-sound, came after that, as the entire building—perhaps the world—

disintegrated in the eye-searing light . . .

December 8th, 1952, Two-Thirty A. M.

The flat of a rubber-gloved hand striking flesh made a splatting noise. A thin, breathless but concentrated crying followed. The doctor looked down at his charity clinic patient, the woman under the bright delivery room lights.

"Look at him—fighting like a little demon!" the doctor said. "Seemed almost as though he didn't want to come out and join us . . . What's the matter, son? This is a bright, new, wonderful world to be born into . . . What are you going to call the boy, Mrs. McKinney?"

The woman under the lights forced a tired smile. "Jeff. Jefferson McKinney. That's going to be his name," she whispered proudly.

The baby's terrified squalling subsided into fretful, whimpering resignation.