

Weird Tales

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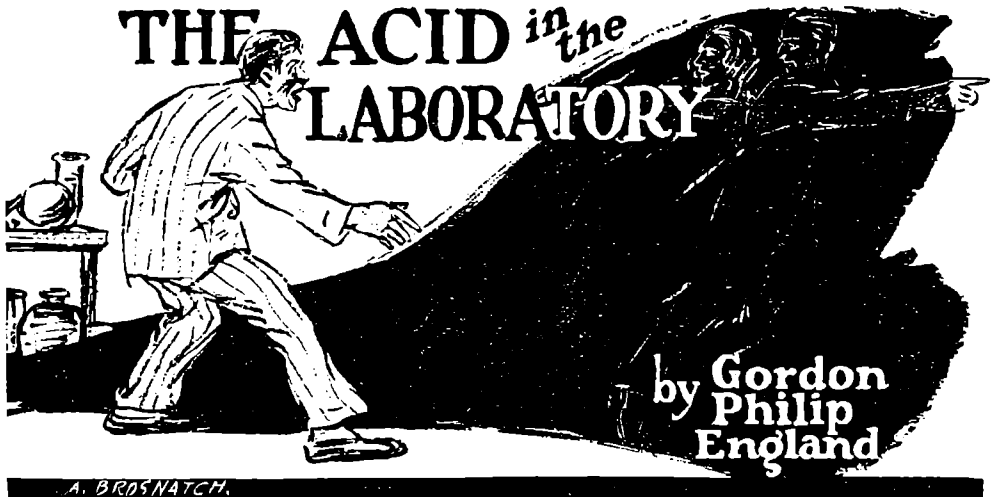
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Indianapolis, Ind.

THE ACID *in the* LABORATORY



A. BROSNATCH.

by Gordon
Philip
England

Author of "The Master of Hell," "Adventures of An Astral," etc.

I AM writing tonight in a desperate effort to keep awake. During the past few weeks I have slept too much. I hate sleep, for slumber brings me not rest but torturing nightmares that are slowly driving me mad.

Nor are the awful visions the worst that could happen while I sleep. A more deadly menace is held over me—a threat that endangers my very life. So sleep I dare not, for it is a question whether I should ever again awake.

If I did not awake I should die, and how I dread death! I used to believe that death ends all—that the body returns again to dust, and that the soul is a mere figment of over-developed imagination. But I am no longer an unbeliever. Now I realize that there *is* a supernatural. I know now that there *are* spirits, and how I fear to face the infuriated spirits of George and Emily!

Nightly they have tormented me with hallucinations and terrifying suggestions, but tonight I will not sleep. My eyelids are heavy and I find it increasingly difficult to hold open my eyes, but I will not sleep! That I can not remain awake many more nights I know, but tonight, at

least, I shall be free from those agonizing visions.

Now for my narrative.

IT is five years since I, Harley Denton Grimsby, began practising medicine in this little town of Oaksden. I had spent five years at McGill University, graduating with high honors. They offered me a place on the surgical staff at the General Hospital, Montreal, but unwilling to forsake my native country I returned to the United States and followed my profession here at Oaksden.

I soon gained the confidence of my patients and at the end of two years had built up a considerable practise. Then like a flash from the blue came a stroke of unexpected fortune. A distant cousin had struck luck at the Australian gold mines, and soon afterward had accidentally lost his life. By his will I, as sole heir, received nearly £60,000 and became independently rich.

Upon hearing of my good fortune I immediately gave up my ordinary work, and equipping myself with an up-to-date laboratory, devoted my time to medical research.

At about this time the One Woman took up her residence in Oaksden. The

instant I saw Emily Lammerford I knew I had met my ideal. I loved her from her golden crown of hair to the soles of her dainty little feet. And I think she might have loved me in return had it not been for George Hannington.

Hannington was head surgeon at the Oaksden Hospital. A man of strong personality, laboring for the love of his patients rather than for mere fame and reputation, he was a heroic figure well calculated to fascinate such a woman as Emily, who was idealistic to the Nth degree.

Yet despite her friendship with Hannington, Emily admitted that she liked me also, and I felt sure that were Hannington's influence removed she would fulfill my fondest hopes. Believing this, I began planning how to effect his removal.

At first I thought of enticing him from Oaksden by offering him a position on the staff of a large Chicago hospital which friends of mine controlled. But after consideration, I realized that this plan was impracticable. He would correspond with Emily; would tell her his Utopian ideas, and though separated in person would be united with her in spirit. No, that would never do. Nothing short of Hannington's death could accomplish my desire. I began to plan how I might destroy him.

I thought over different means of death until my brain reeled. None of the things I thought of satisfied me. They were too dangerous. It was no part of my plan that I should suffer for my deed after slaying him. His death would effect only half my purpose; the other half would be the winning of Emily—no easy task.

I thought of poisons, of the knife, of disease germs—I dismissed all as unsatisfactory. I wanted something safer—something that would disintegrate and utterly destroy every vestige of my victim's body. But where

could I find so mighty an implement of death?

It was by accident that I finally discovered what I had sought. I had been working in my laboratory one night and had mixed several compounds to form a certain acid which I intended using in an experiment. But when the acid was ready I found I had made a mistake while mixing the ingredients, and instead of the acid I had desired I had an altogether different kind. The new acid was transparent and colorless as water.

Picking up a dead frog which I had used in a former experiment, I dropped it into the vessel containing the acid, then busied myself with other work for a few minutes. Then I looked in the vessel to see what effect the acid had had upon the frog. The acid was no longer transparent but was like roily water in appearance. I got an iron spoon and fished about in the dish, but could find no trace of the frog. The acid had utterly devoured it.

A sudden thought rushed into my mind, and for a moment its possibilities almost stunned me. Then I decided I must pursue this experiment to the end. A frog's bones were too soft; I must try something better. But what?

Walking to the other end of the laboratory, I opened a small cage in which I had imprisoned several small animals which I used for dissecting purposes. Reaching in, I caught up a kitten and carried it over to the dish of acid. It squirmed for a moment in my grasp, then I lowered it into the acid. The body disappeared with incredible swiftness. Flesh and bone simply melted beneath the attack of the consuming liquid.

DURING the next week I conducted several other tests and was completely satisfied with their results. In this incomparable acid I held a positive means of destruction.

"Now for Hannington!" I jubilantly exclaimed.

It would not be difficult to entice my rival to my laboratory. Before the arrival of Emily we had been friends and often he had assisted me with some particularly interesting experiment. Indeed, so well had I concealed my true feelings toward him that neither he nor Emily realized my friendship had turned to hatred.

Feverishly I got ready for his reception. I made a large quantity of the acid, and carrying it into a little bathroom at the farther end of the laboratory began filling the bath. I had only poured in a few drops when a smell of burning rubber attracted my attention, and after examination I saw that the acid had destroyed the rubber plug of the outlet. But after searching the laboratory I discovered a round piece of steel which just fitted the hole. Then I poured in the rest of the acid.

Having made all preparations, I went to the telephone.

Hannington had bachelor quarters and his house was on the same street as mine. As I have already mentioned, we had been closely associated in experimenting along the lines of medical research, and to facilitate secrecy regarding these experiments we had run a private line between our houses. I now chuckled with glee as I remembered this.

Before giving Hannington a call, I glanced at my watch. It was 1 o'clock in the morning.

A moment later I was ringing Hannington. I rang several times before he came to the telephone.

"What's the matter?" he asked crossly. "I was just asleep."

"Come over at once!" I shouted. "I've got a surprize for you—something that will revolutionize your ideas!"

A new experiment was to Hannington what honey is to a bee. Eagerly he grabbed at the bait.

"I'll be right over," he called back.

Five minutes later he arrived, clad in his surgeon's uniform. I surveyed him critically.

"Good," I told myself. "Those clothes will dissolve almost instantly. There's no metal about them."

Aloud I said:

"You didn't see anyone on the street, did you? I'd hate to have this leak out. It's the most important experiment I've ever tried."

"I didn't see a soul," he assured me, "and the street lights are off, too."

"Then come on to the laboratory!" I exclaimed.

Quickly he followed me through the laboratory into the bathroom. I locked the door and put the key in my pocket. And then I turned and faced him. All hell must have shone in my eyes, for instinctively he realized he was trapped. With a cry of alarm he sprang at me. He might as well have assailed the Rock of Gibraltar. He was small and slight; I was a giant in strength. He fought desperately, but the end was never in doubt. After a moment he fell back before my heavy blows and screamed for help.

"Yes, scream," I laughed harshly. "It is pleasant to hear you. And no one else can hear. These laboratory walls are sound-proof!"

"Have you gone mad?" he cried.

"No," I quietly answered, "I am perfectly sane. But Hannington, I am also determined. You have stood between me and the choice of my heart for nearly two years, and by heaven! you shall do so no longer!"

I paused, while he frantically glanced about for a way of escape. Then I spoke again:

"I hate you, Hannington, yet I could almost pity you because of the agony of your death. Do you see that water in that tub? Harmless-looking, isn't it? Well, Hannington, you are

soon going to find out exactly how harmless and innocent it is."

Hannington glanced at the tub of seemingly clear water and his face paled. Some instinct, together with my cryptic words, told him of his danger and he partly guessed the truth.

And guessing it, he became like a madman. He flung himself upon me with a rush that actually bore me to the floor. But his triumph was not of long duration. My steel muscles soon told against him, and rolling him off I gripped him with both hands and raised him to hurl into the acid. But he struggled from my grasp and beat at me desperately with his fists. I smote him to the floor. He rose again, and again I knocked him down. Finally he stood facing me, his back toward the tub, and terror in his eyes.

"Are you through?" I asked coldly. "What a fool you were to think you could defeat me! What a fool to have come here tonight! You might have known that no man who loved Emily could ever be a friend of yours."

I taunted him, tried to provoke him to further resistance, but he stood silently staring at me. At last he spoke hoarsely:

"Grimsby, you win now, but this is not the end. I will return."

I laughed derisively.

"You fool," I said. "In a few minutes you will have ceased to exist. Your body will be entirely destroyed—not a fragment of it will remain. And yet you talk of returning!"

Hannington's gaze did not falter.

"It is you who are the fool, Grimsby. You can never kill the more important part of me—my soul."

His words fell over me like a cold shower. For an instant I hesitated, but only for an instant. With terrific force I shot out my fist, striking him full in his jaw. Lifted from his feet, he fell backward into the acid.

THE disappearance of George Hannington created much excitement. Many theories were advanced to account for it, but all fell wide of the truth. The police worked indefatigably, conducting a general search throughout the town. Armed with a search warrant, they even entered my laboratory, but they found nothing. What was there to find? The disintegrated body of Hannington had disappeared down the drain-pipes and not a trace of it remained to convict me. When the police inspected the bathroom they found nothing to arouse their suspicions.

Months passed and still the affair remained an unsolved mystery. How I used to chuckle to myself when the detectives would announce they had discovered some new clue—that Hannington had left town because of blackmailers, or for some equally improbable reason! What would they not have given to have learned the truth!

During these months I was not idle. Gradually, little by little, I overcame the resistance of Emily, and finally she agreed to marry me. But though she accepted me, she did not love me. By sheer will-power I had won her.

Six months after Hannington's "disappearance," I married Emily. That was my day of triumph. But that night I dreamed that George Hannington's spirit came and stood beside me and threatened me, and I woke with hair on end and cold sweat oozing from every pore.

A few weeks later I awoke to the fact that my marriage was a failure. I had married a woman whose heart belonged to a dead man. Gradually I came to realize that though dead, Hannington still held a mighty influence over my wife. And I became wildly jealous.

One morning about three months ago I had gone to my laboratory after breakfast as usual. While there, I remembered I had left my pocket-

knife on my bureau. Returning for it I saw a strange sight. Emily was standing with her back to the door, and in her hands was a miniature of Hannington. And while I looked she pressed her lips tenderly against his pictured face.

For a moment I watched, my fingers working convulsively, my features contorted with fury. And as I watched, all my love for her turned to implacable hatred.

She was still unaware of my presence. For an instant I was on the point of leaping forward and fastening my fingers in her soft white throat. Then another idea came to me, and mastering myself, I quietly left the room and went back to the laboratory.

"She loves him," I muttered to myself fiercely. "Well, so be it then. She shall go to him!"

For the next few hours I worked steadily. By noon I had the bath ready.

After dinner I said to Emily:

"Will you come to the laboratory for a few minutes, dear? I have a surprize there for you."

My honeyed tones utterly deceived her. Without a word she followed me. Not until she was within the bathroom with the door locked did I reveal my fury—and then it was too late for her to escape.

IF THE disappearance of Hannington had caused a sensation in Oaksden, then the equally mysterious disappearance of Emily raised a furor. Now I was openly under suspicion, and again coming with a warrant the police ransacked the whole house. They found no proof of my guilt, but they did find something which helped to prove my innocence. Pinned to the under side of my pillow they found a note from Emily saying that she could no longer bear to live with me and was going away. The note was dated on the day she had

disappeared, and she had probably written it that forenoon while I was in the laboratory.

Nothing could have been more fortunate. Those dull-brained police never thought of arresting me after that. I posed as an injured, heart-broken husband and offered huge rewards for the return of my wife. Detectives searched for her all over the country while I laughed in my sleeve. What fools they were!

I now began to believe myself all-powerful. In my hands I held a secret by which I could destroy my enemies at will. After the excitement had died down, I filled the tub again with the acid, ready for the next unlucky man who should offend me.

But all this time I was oppressed with an indefinable dread. At night my sleep was troubled with hideous dreams—dreams in which my two victims would come and stand beside my bed and menace me.

As time passed, I realized that these were not ordinary dreams but were inspired by the spirits of my victims. I had always sneered at supernatural beliefs, but after a time I became convinced that death does *not* end all, and realized that malignant influences were encompassing me. And nightly my dreams grew worse.

Then my dreams became living nightmares. The spirits would come and beckon me to the laboratory and I would follow. I would not want to follow, but I could not resist them for long. They would lead me to the tub of acid and then sink into it and disappear, leaving me staring down after them in fascination.

As the weeks passed, I began wondering if these visions were not more than visions. They seemed so clear that it seemed almost impossible that they were mere dreams. I asked myself whether I really remained in bed while they were taking place or if I actually went to the laboratory.

Last Sunday night my questions found an answer. I had been dreaming as usual and was following the spirits to the bathroom when suddenly I awoke. Great heaven! I was standing in the middle of the laboratory. I was standing in pitch-blackness, my heart beating like a trip-hammer, my ears strained listening for a sound.

How long I stood like this I do not know, but all at once I heard a laugh. I recognized the voice—it was Hannington's! Then sounded another laugh, low and mocking, and I knew it was Emily's. And then I heard them speak: "Friday night, Harley. Beware of Friday night!" And then the dark laboratory was wrapped in the silence of the grave.

Uttering a frantic cry, I staggered to the electric switch. I snapped it. No result. The laboratory was still enshrouded in Stygian blackness.

I felt my way back to my room, hands before my face, knocking against different objects as I reeled blindly forward. Twice I could have sworn that a cold hand slapped my burning face. Finally reaching my bed, I crawled between the sheets and tossed in misery the remainder of the long night.

That was six nights ago. Tonight is Friday night. Since Sunday night I have not slept a wink. I dare not sleep. I know that if I sleep some danger will assail me. What that danger is I do not know—but I *do know* that it exists.

My narrative is finished. I do not intend that any mortal shall ever read it, however, and in the morning I will destroy it. I have written it in an effort to keep awake. My eyelids feel like leaden weights; my nights of sleeplessness are beginning to tell against me. What would I not give

for one little hour of perfect rest—one hour of blissful unconsciousness! But I dare not sleep.

But how sore my eyes are—how they smart! Perhaps I had better close them and rest them a little while. That is what I will do. I will close my eyes and try to drive these awful thoughts from my mind. But I must not keep them closed too long, for if I did that I might fall asleep. And I must not sleep!

[*Extract from letter of Mrs. Pier-son, Dr. Grimsby's nearest neighbor, to her niece in Boston.*]

Dear Ellen:

The most horrible thing has happened! You remember how George Hannington and Mrs. Grimsby disappeared. Well, Ellen, they have solved the mystery at last. It was Dr. Grimsby who murdered them. Oh, it was awful, awful! He discovered a terrible acid that would melt up a person's body just as you would melt up soap, and destroyed them with it. But Nemesis has overtaken the brute at last. For several days there had been no sign of life at Dr. Grimsby's, so this morning the police investigated. What do you suppose they found? Listen, Ellen, for this is terribly exciting! They found the table in his bedroom covered with sheets of manuscript—the full story of how he had done his fiendish work. Then they went to the laboratory and what do you suppose they found there? In a little bathroom at the end of the laboratory was a tub partly full of the acid *and it was the color of turbid water*. The police tested the acid and found it would melt things in a few minutes. They say that the doctor must have fallen asleep and while sleep-walking have thrown himself into the acid.