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THE COLD, COLD GRAVE

By J. P. Caravan

DID you ever hear of a mad scientist who did something for the benefit of humanity? Of course not. Mad scientists do evil, evil, evil all the time. They have to: it's their job.

Yet one of the maddest of mad scientists once stumbled across a discovery which made the whole world thank him and think kind thoughts about him. It was a discovery which helped the lives of two billion people. He did a thing so good that when he found out about it he went into his office and cried for ninety-eight point six days, and his tears took the varnish right off his desk.

This is what happened.

He was calling the roll one day in his classroom, hoping to find one of his students absent so he could fail him for the term. He always failed everybody anyway, but he liked to be mean about it.

"Finnegan," he called.

"Present."

"Bloom."

"Present."

"Earwicker."

"Present."

"John."

"Bresent."

The professor looked up from his roll book.

"You have a cold?"

John nodded miserably.

"Good." And on he went, calling the roll. When it was over he pounded his head against the wall. "Silence!" he cried. "I have a new rule to tell you." The students whipped out notebooks and filing cards. "Starting today any student who comes to class with a cold will automatically fail. Do you understand?"

The students nodded.

"And now I will give you a small exercise in logic. Premise: students with colds fail this course. Statement of fact: John has a cold. Ergo: ergo what?"

"Ergo: John fails," the class shouted.

"Q.E.D." replied the professor. "Quod erat demonstrandum: that which was to be shown. Well done, class." And he happily swallowed two test tubes and a bunsen burner. "John fails." And he laughed, and his laughter was like the sound of turtles being crushed under falling palm trees, a sound nearly impossible



to describe, a horrible sound. an unforgettable sound. The class shuddered.

"John fails. John will never be a scientist. Go, John, and starve!" For he hated John.

"Kerchoo!" replied John in the saddest tone imaginable. for he didn't especially want to starve. Starving may be a valuable habit for artists, but scientists need lots of food to cover up the liquor on their breath. Scientists are nearly always drunk,

which explains many of the strange things they do. He got up sadly from his stool and walked slowly from the room. He looked hungry already.

"Now," shouted the professor, "that is the end of John," and he laughed again.

This time his laughter was like the sound of ships sinking, and all the students looked down at their notebooks and trembled.

"Out with your microscopes!" cried the old and evil professor.

"Quickly!" He rushed up and down the aisles of the lab as the students whisked their microscopes from the locker and set them up on the tables. "Faster!" he screeched, whirling wildly around. The tail of his tuxedo (he always wore evening clothes when plotting evil) whisked out and knocked two microscopes to the floor and he leaped on them and ground them to bent brass and broken glass beneath his evil heels. "Clumsy!" he shouted to the two nearest students. "You fail." And he leaped to the front of the room and screamed for silence.

"Silence," he screamed, and the class was silent. You could hear John's unhappy footsteps crossing the campus outside, heading for the edge of the high cliff on which the old and famous university stood, for it was the custom for students to fling themselves over this precipice whenever they failed, which was pretty often.

"Histology," shouted the professor, "today we study histology. A small quiz first! What is histology?" and he pointed his evil forefinger at a terrified coed, who fainted. "Wrong," he cried. "Histology is the study of tissues!" And he failed her. "Somebody bring her to. Here. Pour this on her." He gave one of the students a flask full of colorless liquid. "Don't get any on the floor," he said, but the girl had already recovered and fled from the room.

Then the professor stood quietly in front of the room and smiled at the class. Seeing his smile, the class shifted uneasily, for the professor never smiled unless he was happy, and noth-

ing made him happy except the knowledge that he had some evil plan up his wrinkled sleeve. He smiled such a smile that three frogs, seeing it from the specimen tank, leaped seven feet into the air and fell dead; two windows cracked and shattered, and a pig embryo floating in a jar of alcohol turned bright green and sank to the bottom.

It was not a nice smile.

"Next question," he said. "What are the smallest cells in the human body?"

Trembling, the students slipped underneath the tables, for nobody knew the answer. They looked fearfully at one another, for the professor used to occasionally dissect a student who failed to properly answer. "I'll split you like an infinitive!" he used to horribly yell, but this time he didn't say a word; and when the frightened young scientists peeked over their lab tables, they saw him sitting quietly on the chandelier, grinning down at them. "You don't know?" he asked mildly. "You don't know what the smallest unit of life in the human body is? Sit up in your seats and we will have a small experiment to find out." And he leaped, thump! down to the floor and ran to his desk.

Opening a drawer, he took out a flask filled with a fiercely fluttering fluid. "Look! Look! Here is a chemical I've just invented. One drop will be enough to go right to the smallest living part of the body and destroy it utterly. Better yet! Whatever type of cell that may be, my little invention will destroy every other cell of its

type: Yes! Utterly! Utterly! What will happen then?"

"Death," said one of the students, "Death quickly or death slowly, but death and the cold, cold, grave: for if all the cells of one type in the body are destroyed there can be no regeneration and no healing. Aristotle says . . ."

"Silence!" shouted the old and evil professor, "You talk too much. You fail." He waved the flask. "But you are correct. Whatever it may be, that smallest unit of life in the body, it will be destroyed and all similar cells will be destroyed. Suppose it is a nerve: all nerve cells will go. Ha! Suppose it is connective tissue. Ha! A muscle cell, perhaps. How foolish you would look without muscles! And I have discovered it." He looked at them. "I want a volunteer," he said softly. "Who'll try it first?" And he began to prow! quietly up and down the laboratory. "Speak!" he shrieked. "First one to speak gets to drink it all. I have more."

Suddenly the door opened and John poked his head in. "Good afternoon," he said. "I'm back. I went to fling myself over the cliff but there was a line ahead of me so I came back to hear the rest of the lecture."

"Hello, John," said the old and evil professor. "Come in, my son. Take your old seat. Sit down. I'm glad to see you back. I'm sorry I failed you, John, sorry, sorry, sorry. But nothing can be done about it now." And he smiled horribly. "Wait," he said. "Perhaps you would like to help in a small experiment.

Perhaps I can pass you after all."

John looked surprised: nobody ever passed the evil old scholar's courses. "Fine," he said.

"Drink this."

John drank it. "I think a touch of nutmeg might have helped the flavor," he said. "What was it?"

"Nothing, John," said the old and evil professor. "How is your cold?"

"Kerchool!" said John. "Getting worse."

"Well, don't worry about it. According to my figures you'll be dead in three hours and seven minutes, so you won't have to be bothered with handkerchiefs for a long time to come."

"Kerchool!"

"The liquid you just drank was a poison which is already starting to dissolve the smallest units of life in your body. Farewell."

"Kerchool!" said John. "May I have the rest of the period off? I'd like to say goodbye to my wife."

And now the evil old professor began to laugh. "Yeek, yeek," he laughed. "Yeek, yeek. Yes, John. Go and say goodbye, but return in three hours and six minutes so we may watch you perish."

So away went John, and the poison worked inside him.

And in three hours and six minutes he came back into the classroom.

"Hello, John," said the professor. "How are you?"

"I feel fine," said John.

"Good. Would you mind climbing up on the demonstration table? You have almost fifty seconds to live."

John leaped up on the table. "I never felt better," he said.

"Forty seconds."

"Ha, ha," said John.

"Thirty seconds. You might be interested in the formula." And the evil old scientist went like a huge spider to the blackboard and filled it with figures and peculiar signs. "It is one of my best inventions. You have twenty seconds to live."

"Very interesting," said John, memorizing the formula.

"Ten seconds."

"Goodbye."

"Five seconds. Goodbye."

"I've never been poisoned before."

"Time's up." And the professor turned happily to the class and crunched pieces of chalk between his happy fangs. "There you have it. John is dead. I expect a full report in your laboratory manuals. Green ink for the numbers, pink pencil for the diagrams." And he leaped high into the air, whirling for joy and kicking cheerfully at the students. "John is dead."

"No I'm not," John said.

"Nonsense!" screamed the evil old professor. "Science proves you dead."

"But I'm not."

"Subjective error! Hallucination! Unscientific sentimentality! The poison couldn't fail."

"Oh, the poison worked fine," John said. "But I'm not dead."

"Why not? Why not?" he howled, and his thin hair streamed up and shot out sparks.

"It's this way," John said, dodging. "That poison of yours was designed

to kill everything of the type of the smallest unit of life in my body. If the smallest cell was a muscle cell every muscle in my body—striated or smooth—would be destroyed. Right?"

"Right!"

"But you assumed the smallest living unit in my body was a cell."

"Wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

John smiled happily. "I had a cold," he said. "I was full of viruses, and the filterable virus is so small it can't even be seen with an ordinary microscope." He climbed down from the demonstration table. "Some of them are only a single protein molecule. Your poison killed them. You've discovered a cure for the common cold."

He held out his hand to congratulate the old and evil professor, but with a wail of rage he knocked John to the floor and rushed like a hateful crab into his office, where he remained for ninety-eight point six days, weeping, while the great news of his cold cure spread out over the earth and two billion people were thankful. He remained in his office thinking and plotting, and planning and persevering, but he never became unhappy enough to commit suicide, which was a pity.

And John went home to his wife and never had a cold again, but he developed an ingrown toenail from being stamped on by the evil old professor, and when the professor heard this he became happy enough to sing, and his singing made cracks in the science building's walls.