

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*Can the Dead Return to Life?
Before You Answer, Read*

The Conquering Will

By TED OLSON

GORDON PAIGE is dead now, and surely there can be no harm in giving to the world this mad story, contained in the manuscript he left behind. Many will think that the man WAS mad; many will believe that he was attempting to perpetrate an immense and grotesque hoax. I do not know. I do know that Gordon always impressed me as the sanest of men, and surely he never seemed a man to father so strange and horrible a practical joke. But it is not for me to tell you what I believe, or attempt to force upon you my own opinion. Rather I shall offer the story as he left it, and let you interpret it as a joke or a madman's dream, or a remarkable document from that mysterious border realm of which we know so little.

WHAT is Soul? Who can define it? What is that intangible quality that makes me what I am, that brands me as a creature distinct, individual, with an entity that is my own and none other's?

Who can answer? I do not know. I can only tell you my story—the story of Malcolm Rae—and ask that you give it what credence you can.

It was two years ago that I bade Jane Cavanaugh good-by at the railway station in our little home town of Radford. She was weeping, and clumsily I tried to comfort her.

"I sha'n't be gone long, dearest," I said. "A year isn't long. I'll be back in June, when my work is done. Then—we'll be married, and we'll never be separated again."

"I know," she answered. "I'm foolish." She smiled up at me bravely, an April smile, with the tears still glistening in her brown eyes. "But—I've been frightened, somehow. It

seems so far, up in that cold wilderness, and I've had you such a short time. I won't be foolish again."

The northbound train began to move, and for the last time I caught her in my arms and pressed my lips to hers.

"In June, dear. I'll be back. I promise. Don't worry," I said again, as I swung upon the step of the Pullman.

She was smiling—that brave, April smile—and I watched her until the train carried me beyond sight of her.

NORTHWARD we went, Dan Murdock and I. Somewhere in those barren mountains in the untrammelled Northwest of Canada, a grizzled old prospector had unearthed a store of that precious stuff, tungsten. Murdock and I had been sent by our government to investigate it, determine its value, its quantity, and report.

It was a long task that awaited us. August was already upon us. The

road inland was long and hard. It would be winter when we reached the prospect, spring before we could hope to complete our data and return.

Four days took us to the end of the railroad—a station tumbled in the midst of scarce-broken prairie and timberland. There we met the prospector, a shriveled, wiry, hairy old man, marked indelibly with the brand that men bear who have lived much in solitude.

From there our trail led northwest. Up waterways we pressed, across silent, silver lakes, hemmed in to the very brim with an untouched growth of pine and spruce; across portages, where streams thundered down precipitous canyons while we laboriously transported canoe and duffel through the timber, following faint paths that told plainly how rarely they had known human foot prints.

August passed—a series of long days filled only with the toil of paddle and portage. September was on us, and the days grew shorter, and sharp at either end. We were in a veritable untrodden land now. The mountains were close upon us. The portages grew more frequent, the way more rough and toilsome. Norton, the leathery-skinned old prospector, informed us curtly one morning, "Four more days, and we're there."

That day we abandoned the canoe, cacheing it safely in shrubbery and underbush. For two days we pressed upward, packing across a ridge that tested our strength to the utmost.

The morning of the third day found us once more on water. We had reached a deep, swift river, a stream that flowed to the north. We had crossed the divide and were on a tributary of the Mackenzie. From a cunning cache Norton drew forth another canoe, and we sped at ease down the stream.

And then—came the tragedy. It was noon of the fourth day. From round the bend in the river we heard the unmistakable roar of rapids.

"Portage?" queried Dan of our guide.

Norton shook his head. "Shoot 'er," he answered curtly.

A moment later we swung round the bend. Before us the banks drew suddenly closer together, and the river narrowed and shot down between granite walls. The channel was checkered with boulders, around them the tortured waters spat and hissed, flung themselves high in unavailing anger, yelled their rage in deafening uproar.

Dan and I glanced questioningly. One narrow channel we could see—perilously narrow, perilously swift. But it was too late to reconsider. Already the waters quickened beneath us, bore us on with an insidious smoothness that was belied by the speed with which the canyon walls shot by. Norton sat poised at the bow, alert, ready. Murdock and I gripped our paddles. In a moment we were in it.

With sickening speed we shot into the turmoil. The roar rang in our ears terrifyingly. Spray shot over and drenched us. We battled furiously, plunging our paddles deep as Norton signaled us. The light craft seemed to leap and bound, like a runner at the hurdles, gathering impetus at each new thrust.

Then—a rock seemed to leap up in our very path. Dan, kneeling amidships, gave a cry of terror, and plunged wildly with his paddle. The delicately-balanced boat swayed, lost for a moment its poise, slued sideways.

A splintering crash, and I found myself in the seething water.

How I lived I do not know. I was a strong swimmer, but in that blind turmoil, skill availed little. I was borne headlong. I was conscious of boulders bludgeoning me cruelly. But suddenly the waters grew quieter. I was swept into an eddy at the foot of the canyon. Somehow, I struck

out weakly, and, blind, breathless, and beaten, drew myself on a gravelly bar.

How long I lay there I can only guess. Bit by bit my strength returned. I sat up. I was on the edge of a mountain meadow, through which the stream swept, still foaming and boisterous. The thunder of the canyon came to me noisily.

The sound of it called me suddenly to a realization of my position. I strove to rise. A sickening, terrible pain shot through me, and as I dropped back to the sand I knew that my left leg was shattered.

It was not long before I knew the worst. Murdock and Norton were dead. I could not doubt the truth. Dan, as I knew, could not swim: and even had he been an expert swimmer it would be but through blind good fortune that any man could live in that seething torrent.

By such blind luck I had been saved. For what? Crippled, alone, with neither food nor shelter, in a wilderness hundreds of miles from human aid, with winter hanging imminent, what chance did I have? Saved? Yes—for death by slow torture!

For a moment, as the realization sent a sick despair through me, I was tempted to plunge once more into the river, and let the waters finish their work. But I dismissed the cowardly impulse. I would not despair. *I would not die!*

I took a more careful review of my surroundings. For the first time I saw, on the bank not a hundred yards away, a cabin—a mere pen of mud-plastered logs, but still a cabin. On the hillside above it was a scar in the earth. It was Norton's cabin, Norton's mine. But Norton was dead.

The sight gave me new courage. There was yet hope. I dragged myself to a kneeling position, gritting my teeth until the pain cleared a bit, and then began to creep toward the cabin.

IT WAS torture, every inch of the way. Twice I fainted with the sheer agony. But I kept on. It had been noon when we neared the canyon. The sun was setting when I drew my body across the cabin door and fell in a stupor on the floor. There I lay until morning.

The pale dawn found me tossing in a high fever. I must have been delirious for days. But after a time I woke, very weak, but rational. I began to take stock of my surroundings.

I had hoped to find the cabin well stocked with provisions. A hasty survey proved that my hopes were vain. The tiny room was almost barren. A hand made cupboard stood in one corner, but it was all but empty. A dribble of flour, a strip of moldy bacon, a few shreds of jerked venison. Again despair shook me nauseatingly, again I banished it with grim resolve.

With the scant supply of wood I built a fire, dragging myself somehow around the room to get what I needed. There was water in a pail by the fireplace. I brewed the jerked meat for an hour. The resultant mixture was a weak, tasteless broth. Yet it was food—the first I had tasted for days. I drank some of it, and felt stronger.

My shattered leg had begun to knit. I had set it as best I could before the fever took me. Now it pained greatly, but with the aid of an old broom that I found I made shift to move around. And again hope flared warm in my heart. I built the fire high, and crawled under the robes in Norton's bunk.

In the night I woke uneasily. First I was conscious of the throbbing in my leg; then I realized that what had aroused me was the sound of the wind roaring and shrieking past the walls, yelling like a horde of demons without.

Above my head was a window, made of caribou skin scraped parchment-thin, and against this I could hear the spit and rattle of snow. The fire had died to embers, and a bitter chill

crept through the cabin. Winter had come.

At dawn it was still storming. For three days the blizzard kept up. I huddled in my robes, fed the fire from the diminishing pile of wood, ate sparingly of the scanty food. And again the fear began to play upon my heart with chill fingers; again I strove to banish it with grim resolve.

On the fourth day the snow ceased, but the wind remained unabated. It grew terribly cold. And on that day my woodpile dwindled to nothing, my last scrap of food vanished.

It grew colder. I kept the fire burning charily, feeding it, bit by bit, the scanty furniture that Norton had made with axe and hammer. I husbanded every bit, crouching over the merest spark of a flame, wrapping my thin body in robe and fur to conserve the precious warmth.

And still the storm raved around the cabin. Still the screaming wind drove the snowflakes against the windows, through badly-chinked crevices—a malicious, devilish wind, that seemed, to my disordered brain, to be an embodied spirit of evil bent on my destruction. And still the cold penetrated, mocking my efforts to stave it off.

Hunger and cold and pain combined to sap my strength. I grew delirious. For hours I forgot where I was, lived again the hours I had spent with Jane, saw her as I remembered her, a slim, exquisite thing, dark of hair, luminous of face, a spirit thing, too fine for man's possession. And again I pressed her in my arms, and swore that I would return.

Waking from such visions, the will to live burned very strong in me. I *would* live; I *would* return. I swore it. Death could not conquer me: could not conquer love. Yet all the time I grew weaker; the flame of life flickered lower in my emaciated body.

The body was dying. I knew it. It scarce had strength now to cast more wood on the dying fire. Within it

the pulse of existence flickered feebly. But never was the real *me* more alive. I burned fiercely with the desire to live. I swore I should not die.

Then one morning I awoke. The fire was out. Yet I was not cold. I attempted to rise; my body did not answer. I attempted to speak; no words came. Then I knew.

In the night the body had died. It lay there now, stiff, still. It had ceased to live.

But *I* was not dead. I could see my body lying there, a cast-off thing. But *I* was here.

The entity that was I had not perished with the flesh. The will to live was still mine. And I was alive! I was infinitely alive.

My perceptions were a hundred times clearer. I saw, I heard, I felt, as I never had before. And it seemed as if my whole being were concentrated in the one desire—to see Jane, to tell her I still lived.

And then there shot through my brain a terrible, sickening thought. To all the world's knowledge I was dead. I was no longer flesh, but spirit. I could see Jane, no doubt, but I could never make myself known to her. I had lost her.

THE most exquisite torture of soul racked me as the realization came. I was not dead. There was no death; my will had conquered it. But I was hopelessly and forever exiled from the world I had known. That warm familiar world that held love and so many other things, was forever taken away from me.

Hopelessly exiled! Again my will revolted at the thought. Why was I forever condemned to such exile? There lay the body. It had ceased to live, in truth. I had shed it as one does a garment. But why could I not don it again?

The body had stopped because of external, physical reasons. The soul had fled because living soul could not inhabit dead flesh. But if the phys-

ical conditions that had ended life were removed, could not the soul again restore it to life. If aid, food, warmth were to come, could I not live again in the body?

And so I waited. Soul kept vigil over body in that room—the two that had been linked so inextricably for thirty-one years, now divorced so irrevocably. You call it bizarre? That is because I tell it to you thus. How do you know but that it has happened times without number? You have watched by dead bodies, perhaps. How do you know that strange, invisible guest may not have shared the vigil with you?

And so I waited. Night came. The wind had died a little outside, and through the cold I heard the distant howl of wolves.

Again the howls came, and closer this time. It was a pack in full cry, spurred on by hunger, questing through the frozen solitudes for food. And now I could hear them in the clearing, and suddenly I realized what they sought.

Forgetting my impotence, I strove with desperate hands to bar the door more tightly. I seized my rifle—or tried to seize it. It was vain. Spirit has no fear from dangers of this world; equally it has no means of defense.

Round the cabin the wolves circled cautiously. I could hear them sniffing at the door.

Then one brute dashed himself against the panels. The stout frame quivered, but held. A long-drawn howl came: it thrilled me with terror. Then another clawed at the caribou-skin of the window.

A gleaming claw shot through, a pair of slavering jaws followed. In a minute they were in.

Can you dream of a thing so horrible as to watch your own body being torn apart by wild beasts?

They snarled, they fought. Their fangs clipped and tore. I grew sick

with despair. The night was hideous with their snarls and yowling.

Unable to endure it, I fled. And horror tore at my heart. For now I knew I was indeed exile. The fleshly cloak that I had forsaken, that I had hoped to resume, was torn, destroyed.

I had only one wish now. To see Jane again, even though I could not speak to her, could not hold her in my arms. To see her at least, bitter as it would be, were still consolation.

There are no bounds of time or space to the unfettered soul. And so I found myself, without knowing how, in that long, homelike room where we had sat so often, with the fire flaming cheerily on the great hearth, the friendly books and pictures, everything that was so good a setting for the girl I loved. In the quiet peace of it I forgot that desolate solitude, that cabin with its howling, fighting inmates.

Jane was seated reading by the window, but as I watched she laid aside the book, and sat looking out of the window across the silent, moonlit fields. And I saw two tears glide from her eyelashes, and glisten on her cheeks. She spoke my name.

That evidence of her love was more than I could bear. I knelt beside her, strove to take her in my arms, whispered a thousand broken endearments. And she sat pensive, unresponsive, utterly unconscious of me. The tragedy smote me again. I was spirit: she spirit in flesh. I was exiled.

And, with the ecstasy of despair, there flamed once more in me that dogged, unreasoning will to live—to live again. I must say.

And, with it, I fled the room, guided somehow, blindly, by a new hope.

I found myself in another house—in a bedroom that was very quiet, with an unnatural silence. In the bed lay a man. I knew him. It was my old friend, Gordon Paige.

There were others, too. Gordon's mother sat with her face in her hands.

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his sister, her eyes dry and bright, knelt beside her and pressed her in comforting arms. Then I saw the white-haired doctor turn mutely away. And I knew why I had come.

The body of Gordon Paige lay there, inert, lifeless. With all the power I knew I willed myself toward it.

The body of Gordon Paige stirred. He spoke. The light of sanity came back into his dead eyes. The doctor turned to him in amazement. A minute later he turned again.

"He lives! God knows how, but he lives. The crisis is past. He will recover."

And he *did* recover. The body of Gordon Paige won back to life and health.

But the soul within his body was the soul of Malcolm Rae!

WHAT is soul? What is self? I speak to you with the voice of Gordon Paige. I write, and the handwriting is that of Gordon Paige.

But I—the entity that dwells in the body of Paige—I am Malcolm Rae.

In the spring they brought the news of Malcolm Rae's death to Jane Cavanaugh. She loved him—she was heart-broken. But she found comfort in the presence of her old friend Gordon Paige.

We were married last week, Jane and I. It was in June, just a year after the June in which Rae had promised to return. When I told Jane I loved her, she said:

"I do love you, Gordon. But sometimes it seems wrong—after poor Malcolm dying. But—you're like him, Gordon. You're so like Malcolm that I can't blame myself for caring.

I wish I could tell her—that I am Malcolm.

But the world is too incredulous. I do not dare.