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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Electric Chair

by George Waight

Whether the tale of the German captain and the British spies in the opening of this story is true or fictitious, we cannot say. But we can say that the basic principle is all too true . . .

*"'Tis an awkward thing to play
with souls
And matter enough to save one's
own."*

—Browning.

IT ALL BEGAN in a conversation that took place one afternoon in the smoking room of the Athenæum Club, of which Dr. Ainsworth was a member.

The talk had turned on the subject of death and the fear of death. Mortimer, the actor, had given it as his opinion that it is not death which men fear so much as the uncertainty of what is beyond. Almost inevitably he

quoted "Hamlet" in support of his contention.

Hamilton, the Harley Street brain specialist, joined the discussion at this point.

"If that is true," he remarked thoughtfully, "it should follow that if a man were confronted with a mystery stranger even than the mystery of death, he would choose death rather than face the greater mystery. I doubt it. I doubt it very much."

"By Jove, yes!" Wordsworth, the soldier and celebrated explorer, remarked suddenly. "That reminds me of a story I read somewhere during the war.

Some German captain had captured a number of British spies, and instead of shooting them outright, he gave each of them a chance. For half an hour he put them, separately, of course, into a room out of which two doors led. He told them that one door led straight to the waiting firing party, but where the other door led he refused to tell them. Each man was given his choice. This German fellow had the reputation of being a pretty cunning fiend, I remember."

"They chose the firing party, I fancy," Mortimer remarked sotto voce.

"Each man," Wordsworth continued quietly. "Each man guessed that something pretty grisly lay behind that other door — tortures, mutilation, hanging. Each man, as it came to his turn, chose the firing party. With that they knew exactly what they were in for."

Arthur Sinclair, the young author whose book, "The Slender Hope," it will be remembered, made such a sensation in the last year of the war for the keenness of its sensitive imagination, had so far taken no part in the discussion. Now he suddenly broke in, speaking with sharp conviction.

"But that's absurd!" he said. "Why, the other door might have led to freedom, for all they knew!"

"That's exactly where it did

lead," the soldier finished quietly. "I told you that the German was reputed to be a pretty considerable expert in frightfulness. You see, none of them had the courage (and they were brave men, too, or they couldn't have been spies in wartime) to face the horror of the unknown. They chose the death they knew."

For a time there was silence. Each of his hearers was interpreting the story in accordance with his own thought.

"I wonder, I wonder," Dr. Ainsworth muttered, half to himself. "I wonder."

2

SINCLAIR WAS TAKEN by surprise when Dr. Ainsworth invited him to dine at his house about a month later. He had never been able to determine whether the doctor objected to him personally, or whether the natural reluctance of a man of fixed habits to lose an efficient and charming housekeeper accounted for the doctor's strong hostility to Sinclair's engagement to his niece. As the date of their wedding approached, the scientist's opposition intensified rather than diminished, so that when he went out of his way to invite the young man to dinner, the latter surprisedly wondered whether this was to be construed as a flag of truce.

At any rate, on this occasion,

the doctor showed not the slightest sign of hostility. At dinner, seated with his guest on one side of him while Mildred, his niece, faced him at the other end of the table, he was affability itself.

After the port had gone round the table, Mildred left the two men with their cigars, with an admonition not to be too long before joining her in the drawing room.

When she had left the room, the doctor passed the decanter again to his guest and continued to engage him in close conversation. By the time that an inch and a half of white ash showed at the end of his cigar, he pushed back his chair and rose from the table.

"Before we join Mildred, I should like you to see one or two little things in my laboratory, which I believe may interest you," he remarked, and led the way upstairs, past the door of the drawing room, to the top floor of the house, which was given up entirely to his researches.

Sinclair had never entered the laboratory before. His first impression was a swift recollection of schoolboy days, when he had worked in a room that presented just such an unbroken array of bottles and balances and strange-looking instruments, except that here there seemed to be more of them. His attention was attracted by a line of

cases on the right of the room apparently containing a series of waxworks, of which he did not immediately appreciate the significance. It was as he was moving over to examine these that he first became aware of a strange sensation of dizziness stealing over him. The room darkened and he felt that he was about to fall. The voice of his host sounded for a moment as from an immense distance before it trailed off into nothingness.

3

SINCLAIR STIRRED slightly, and his eyes opened. Once more his brain was beginning to function dimly, and he had a vague sensation of being closed in. He made to move his hand and discovered that he could not. His head felt as if it were rigidly held in a vise.

Slowly, as consciousness came back to him, he became aware of his surroundings. He remembered entering the doctor's laboratory. Then the sudden blackness had come. He saw now that he was still in the laboratory. He supposed he had fainted. That no doubt accounted for the sensation of being bound. He became aware that he was sitting upright in a large, hard chair. He could not see the doctor.

Slowly, as if testing his faculties, he tried to turn his head.

He felt as if something was pressing his head down, and discovered he could not move it. A new dizziness swept over him. Visions of sudden paralysis flickered through his brain. With an effort he regained control of himself. At least he could move his eyes. That was something, anyway. At this point he caught sight of his hands, which were lying along the arms of his chair, and he discovered that iron bands encircled his wrists and that these bands were fastened by a chain to the arms of the chair. Utterly at a loss, he tried to move his feet, only to learn, after moving them about six inches, that they were similarly fastened.

He closed his eyes, attempting to shake off what he supposed must be the nightmare of a dream.

At that moment he heard a step. Opening his eyes again, he discovered that Dr. Ainsworth had come round in front of him and was watching him smilingly.

"Ah, conscious again, I see," Ainsworth remarked in a tone of satisfaction. "Quite comfortable, I trust?"

Sinclair made a motion to pass his hands over his eyes and was reminded again that his hands were fastened. He looked stupidly at the other man.

"What has happened?"

"A little experiment. Just a little experiment."

He turned away and came back with a mirror, which he held up before the younger man.

Sinclair looked, and saw his head crowned with a metal cap to which were attached strange-looking wires.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "I fainted, didn't I?"

The doctor laughed.

"Not exactly," he said. "No, not exactly. I'm afraid I must plead guilty to having put something into your coffee."

Sinclair would have shaken his head in bewilderment, but his head was secured, as he had noticed in the mirror, by a vise attached to the back of the chair.

"I don't understand," he repeated. "Please explain what has happened. Why am I fastened like this?"

The doctor had laid aside the mirror and now stood facing the young man in the chair. Behind him, long rows of labeled bottles and phials formed an appropriate background, together with instruments of which Sinclair could not guess the use.

The doctor's manner was now that of a lecturer addressing his class.

"I shall have to take your mind back some time," he began. "You will no doubt recall hearing that very interesting little story of a German captain and his captured spies, who were given the choice, you will

remember, of going to a known certain death or of meeting a fate the nature of which remained a mystery."

He paused. Sinclair had almost forgotten the incident, but he now recalled it.

"In that story, each of the victims chose to face the firing party. You, I remember," he continued in a tone of easy reminiscence, "were scornful of this and declared that they ought to have chosen the other door which might have led, as it actually did lead, to freedom. Personally, I keep an open mind as to the psychology of the problem involved. I find it an interesting speculation — intensely interesting. This evening, however, we are going to put this most interesting psychological problem to the test."

He paused a moment.

"And you, my dear Sinclair, are going to be the means of solving it."

Sinclair had not yet understood to what this introduction was leading, but already he felt a vague premonition of disaster.

"It may occur to you to wonder why I have chosen you personally as the subject of this experiment," Dr. Ainsworth continued, assuming more and more the manner of a lecturer. "I have had two reasons for that. In the first place, it was necessary for me to find a man of keenly sensitive imagination, as you will realize later. In the

second place, you are aware that I regard with the greatest distaste your intention of marrying my niece, Mildred. The idea of such a marriage is, in the highest degree, repugnant to me. However, considerations such as those must always come second to a man of science. I only mention them as affording an additional ground for my reasons in selecting you. The psychological experiment is, of course, the main thing."

By now Sinclair had serious doubts as to the sanity of this extraordinary old man.

"You have not yet explained why you have fastened me to this chair," he said. "At least, I suppose it is you that I have to thank for it."

Dr. Ainsworth nodded brightly.

"I am coming to that. I decided to use you, as I said, for my experiment. As you will remember, the problem is this: if a man is faced with the choice of alternatives, one of which leads to certain death and the other to some unknown fate which may range from freedom on the one hand, to a slow, revolting form of torture ending in a loathsome death on the other hand — if he is faced with choice, which alternative will he select? This is our problem, and this evening I look to you to decide that problem by being faced with just such a choice."

Taking no notice of the

young man's startled exclamation, he continued blandly.

"It was, of course, comparatively easy to get you here. It was a more difficult question to reconstruct the factors of the problem. I have given some considerable thought to this matter. You may not have noticed very carefully the chair in which you are sitting. I recommend it to your careful study."

HE PAUSED A moment to allow his next words their full significance.

"It is an electric chair such as is used in executions in America," the doctor went on. "On your head, as you have seen in the mirror, is a metal cap to which are attached two wires connecting with the storage batteries, which you cannot see but which are close behind you. Near your right hand" (the doctor indicated a small table set close to the chair, which Sinclair now noticed for the first time) you will see a switch. Press that switch to the right and a current of electricity of enormous power (I need not weary you with the exact figures) will run through the metal cap on your head, through the metal chair on which you sit, and passing through your body, it will make a complete circuit, with the result that you will be instantaneously and painlessly electrocuted. That constitutes

one horn of the delimita. That is the way of certain and known death. You will recognize that that corresponds to the firing party in the original story. Do I make myself clear?"

Sinclair shivered. The doctor had made himself only too clear.

"We now come to the alternative," Ainsworth continued. "The uncertain factor."

He opened a drawer and took out a small syringe and held it up to the light. Sinclair could see that it was filled with a colorless liquid like water.

"You may have heard, my dear Sinclair, of some researches I have made into the causes of certain diseases. I have succeeded in isolating the germs of a number of the better known diseases and of some others less widely known. All round this room you can see test-tubes filled with various liquids. Each of these contains the bacilli of some disease or other. This, for instance" (he picked up one at random), "contains the germs of the disease generally known as meningitis."

He picked up the syringe once more and held it lightly in his right hand.

"What does this contain? That is the question, isn't it? You see, you are to have the choice between electrocuting yourself or injecting yourself with the liquid in this phial. You remember you gave it as your opinion that the men in

the story would have chosen the fate which, as a matter of fact, led to freedom. Well you may do the same. You may choose, if you wish, the contents of this phial. It may have the same result. It may perhaps contain merely water, in which case you will be none the worse for your little adventure. On the other hand it may contain the same as this tube." (He again picked up the tube in which were stored the germs of meningitis.) "In that case you will not have long to wait for your fate. In three or four days the symptoms should develop, and in about three weeks you will be dead. Not a very pleasant form of death, perhaps, but comparatively rapid. Then, of course, there is the cerebro-spinal variety of meningitis. It may be that. Also, I fear, not very pleasant. Or tetanus — what you call lockjaw. That would be rather disagreeable."

His voice had sunk to a sort of drone, and now he hardly glanced at his victim in the chair. All his attention seemed focused on the glass tubes, which he picked up one by one and named, dwelling on them, as if to handle them gave him pleasure.

"This is lupus," he went on. "It is an Eastern disease. I have a model of a sufferer from this disease."

He went across the room and came back with a glass case

containing a model in wax of a man's head. The nose had completely rotted away, the teeth were entirely outside the mouth and festooned round the protruding tongue like a necklace. It was difficult to imagine anything more revolting.

"Of course, the model was taken from a patient in the last stages. In your case, the disease would develop in a day or two, but you would not reach the stage I have shown you for many years.

"But I weary you with this recital. You will see for yourself that there are many more tubes from which I may have chosen."

He waved a hand to indicate the array of phials.

"I think I have said enough to convince you that if you choose to inject yourself with the contents of this hypodermic syringe you will go in fear of death or some form of disease that is a thousand times more horrible than death for a number of years at least. On the other hand, the contents may be perfectly harmless. See, I place it beside your left hand. You will find you have just sufficient freedom of movement to inject yourself with this, or if you prefer it, to push over the switch and electrocute yourself painlessly and immediately. The choice is yours."

He stopped and regarded his victim with interested eyes, trying to mark what emotions were

racing through the young man's mind.

"You will have half an hour in which to make your decision."

WITH A GREAT effort Sinclair threw off the horror that was seizing hold of him, and when he spoke he had succeeded in infusing some degree of calmness into his manner.

"But this is perfectly ridiculous," he protested. "I don't know whether you consider it a practical joke or not. If so, it seems to me to be in extraordinarily bad taste. In any case, I shall certainly refuse to make either one choice or the other."

The doctor looked down at him thoughtfully.

"I had anticipated that," he remarked. "For a time I was at some loss to devise a means which would force you to a choice. I think you will admit I have succeeded."

The doctor walked across to the corner of the room, and came back dragging with him a large metal cylinder, which he placed just in front of the other man.

"I have a supply of gas here," he continued. "You will notice this wire."

He indicated a length of tubing.

"One end is attached to a tap-valve on the cylinder. The other end I shall attach to the clock in the corner of the room in

such a manner that when the clock strikes the hour, the tap will automatically be opened and the gases released."

The doctor had never raised his voice. All the time he had spoken in a quiet, calm manner that served only to lend an added horror to the proceedings.

Sinclair passed his tongue over his lips, which had become quite dry.

"How am I to know the whole thing is not a bluff?" he demanded.

"It is, of course, very important that you should be convinced on that point," the doctor admitted. "Otherwise the whole psychological value of the experiment would be lost. I think this little experiment will satisfy you."

He disappeared behind Sinclair's chair. When he returned he was carrying a small metal cage.

"Here, as you see, I have a rat in a cage. Please watch what I do."

After setting down the cage on a bench at some distance from Sinclair he came across to the chair. "I now detach the terminals from your skull cap and attach them to the bars of this cage, so. Next I fasten this piece of rubber tubing to the tap of the gas cylinder, so. Now I connect this wire from the gas cylinder to the striker of the clock. We will move back the hands to two minutes to 9 for

the purpose of this experiment . . . there. As we are dealing with only a very small animal, a whiff of gas will be sufficient, and I shall turn off the tap almost immediately. You will not require a mask, but is as well to be on the safe side."

He saturated a handkerchief with some liquid and tied it in front of Sinclair's mouth and nose. He then saturated a similar handkerchief for himself.

"This will protect us," he remarked. "Now when I give the word, I want you to press your switch over. You see, I have adjusted the current of that also, to our needs."

He made some adjustment of another switch.

"There is still one minute to go. Watch."

THE NEXT SIXTY seconds seemed an eternity to Sinclair, whose eyes wandered backwards and forwards between the clock and the doomed rat.

At last the clock began to strike and as it did so, Sinclair observed that the wire had jerked open the gas cylinder. Almost immediately the doctor reached out a hand and closed it again. But the gas had already served its purpose. The mouth of the rubber tube leading from the cylinder had been within a few inches of the cage. Suddenly the rat rolled over on the floor of its cage and commenced to struggle violently.

For a moment the doctor watched its convulsions, then "Switch on!" he commanded suddenly.

Mechanically Sinclair pressed over the switch by his right hand. A blue spark flashed at the bars of the cage. The rat gave a tiny shiver and its struggle ceased forever.

"You see, it is quite dead," the doctor remarked. "Switch off."

For a minute there was silence in the room. The doctor busied himself refastening the electric terminals to Sinclair's skull cap and rearranging the mechanism of the clock, which he again set at the correct time: half past 9. When he had quite satisfied himself with these proceedings, he turned back to his victim.

"That the electrocuting machine and the gas cylinder, at least, are no bluff, I'm sure you are convinced. The injecting syringe may be, of course."

Sinclair could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"But this is sheer murder!" he made a last protest. "Don't you realize that you will be hanged if I am found dead in this room?"

The doctor smiled.

"Your solicitude for my welfare is charming," he said. "But be sure that the small knowledge of science to which I may perhaps lay claim has not left me without efficient means of disposing of any trace of your

body. Always supposing, of course, that your tastes lead you toward the electric switch. I shall leave you now. You have half an hour in which to make your choice. At 10 o'clock the gas cylinder will come into action. I shall come back a few seconds earlier to disconnect that, if you have already chosen. If not, be under no delusion that I shall interfere. I give you my solemn word of honor that I shall not do so. I need hardly say that I await the result of your deliberations with the liveliest interest."

Ainsworth crossed toward the door. At the threshold he paused.

"Just one word more. This room has been sound-proofed. To shout would be the merest waste of breath on your part."

A moment later the door had closed behind him.

4

ALMOST INEVITABLY Sinclair employed the first few minutes of his half hour in shouting for help, only to discover that Ainsworth had spoken no more than the truth.

He soon desisted and attempted to focus his mind on his situation, but the horror of it was such that only with the greatest difficulty could he escape from the paralysis that had seized his brain. Sheer numbing terror gripped him. The experiment

with the rat had convinced him that it was indeed no bluff with which he was dealing. Meanwhile the hands of the clock inexorably traveled toward the moment when even deliberate choice would be denied him by an agency more terrible than either horn of his dilemma could be. Helplessly his eyes traveled from the switch, so conveniently close to his right hand, to the hypodermic syringe equally handy on the left.

Gradually he forced himself to realize that it must be one or the other.

He looked at the electric switch. Certain, instantaneous, painless, but — death.

The syringe looked harmless enough. Water perhaps. That would not do a fellow any harm — but then one couldn't be sure. One wouldn't even know afterwards, not for a year perhaps, not for two, three, four, or even longer. How could one go on, dreading from day to day the outbreak of some awful disease, like the man in the model. Who knew whether any treatment would be effective?

Still, to die suddenly with all the world bright and inviting, and love . . .

This brought another aspect of the problem to his mind.

Suppose he chose the syringe, and kept his life for the time at least: what was he to do with it? After all, what was death? Clean, swift (when one had

seen five years of war, death wasn't quite the staring horror it seemed to the man in the street). Pretty rotten, of course. One hated to be snuffed out like that, but there were worse things.

His mind went back by a freakish turn to the story of the captured spies who preferred the death they knew. He remembered his own unbelief.

"Damn it, the fellows were right!" he cried bitterly.

It was just three minutes to 10 when he shut his eyes tight, gave a little gasp, and pushed over the switch.

5

THE DOCTOR had returned from the dining room. He had no intention of joining his niece until he knew the result of his experiment. He lit himself another cigar, and sat down to wait and speculate.

He was interrupted in this reverie by his niece, who suddenly appeared at the door.

"However much longer are you going to be?" she demanded; then, coming into the room, she perceived that the doctor was alone. "Why! what have you done with Arthur?"

Dr. Ainsworth looked at his watch. It was a quarter to 10.

"We are having a little experiment, a very fascinating experiment," the doctor continued. "Listen, dear, and tell me what

you think will be the outcome. For myself, I am unable to make up my mind."

He thereupon went over the facts of the case to the girl, speaking as he would have spoken of any other scientific experiment of his. He did not even notice the horror in his hearer's face.

"Why! You're murdering him, uncle!" she cried, springing up. The doctor looked at her agitation with surprise. Then he smiled a slow smile.

"My dear, it's quite harmless," he said. "There is no danger. When I came out of the room, I disconnected the current of the batteries. He can do himself no harm."

"But the other thing! He may be choosing that!"

Ainsworth laughed outright. "Water, dear, water. I shall, of course, tell him afterwards, when he has made his choice. There only remains the gas, and that is disconnected also. You see, dear, it is quite bloodless."

The clock then pointed to five minutes to 10.

"Oh, hurry, uncle, hurry!" the girl panted. "It's torture! I think you must be mad. It's cruel — cruel!"

"On the contrary, dear, it is as fascinating an experiment as any I have undertaken. Doubtless he is making his decision now."

He had allowed the girl to drag him upstairs.

"I have always supposed that experiments with the human mind would be of all experiments the most fascinating, and I see now that I was right in supposing so," he remarked on the way up.

"By the way, if by any chance this young man of yours has chosen to face the uncertainty of the injection, and if, suspecting his blood to be tainted, he asks to be released from his engagement to you, before knowing the injection to be harmless,

I shall entirely withdraw my opposition to your marriage. A most fascinating problem."

He had reached the door of the laboratory and fumbled with the handle.

"Oh, hurry, uncle, hurry. He must have had such a terrible fright."

The old man chuckled, "I dare say he has."

He had.

When they reached him, he was quite dead.

