

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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THE ESCAPE

"ARE YOU sure?"
The doctor nodded briefly. "Very sure, and the quicker the better!"

Donaldson gripped the back of the chair beside him till his knuckles showed white.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," the doctor spoke a trifle contemptuously. "Appendicitis is quite commonplace. We operate for it as many as a hundred times a year at the hospital."

Donaldson rose slowly to his feet.

"I'll let you know sometime soon," he said, staring about him vaguely.

"All right. But I'd advise you to have it done quickly."

Donaldson shuffled toward the door.

"I'll let you know," he murmured, and went out.

He descended to the street. He was a man of average height, and rather thin. He was dressed respectably in clothes of a few years back, but still good. One felt that he was careful of them, timidly careful. His blue eyes wandered in odd moments from one object to another, and his thin lips tried to maintain a firm line, but drooped weakly, if, perchance, he forgot. Then he twitched them up, reining them hard, trying to appear casual, indifferent. But his step would drop into its habitual short uncertainty, his shoulders slump down a bit, his eyes begin their covert roving, his whole figure expressing a desire to occupy as small a space as possible, as though his soul and body were squeezed in with a wish to be inconspicuous.

As he emerged from the doctor's office, his pale eyes shifted as he gazed at the moving throng on the street. Why couldn't it have been some one else? Here they were, all so gay, so unconscious of him and the shadow that hung over him. Unconscious! That was the word which had so terrified his mind for ten long years. And that was what the anesthetic meant—unconsciousness!

Donaldson threaded his way along and turned into a little side street until he came to his house. He let himself in with his key. The bare hall resounded dismally to his footsteps. The gaunt, shadowy room gave him only a chilly welcome. When Mrs. Saunders had kept house for him, it had been more cheerful. There was not that deathlike stillness when he came in. That had been sev-

eral years ago, and since then his fear had increased through long keeping, like some great, lank brute, gnawing in the darkness. It was a sly, suspicious fear that shunned companionship. He had lived for ten years all alone, except for Mrs. Saunders, the housekeeper, but finally even her presence had become too much, and he had sent her away.

He began stupidly preparing dinner. There was some ham, cheese, a half loaf of bread, and a few potatoes which he peeled, standing by the sink. There was also a small pie that one of the neighbors had sent him a few days ago. Kindly people they were, unable to understand Donaldson's solitary life, and who took pity on him and occasionally sent him little bits of pastry or jelly to freshen his meal.

Once, when he was sick with a cold, the husband had brought him over half a tumbler of whisky, but Donaldson had shuddered and held up his arms as if to ward off the other, crying, "None of that! Go away!—Let me alone!"

And the neighbor had withdrawn, attributing this strange behavior to the sickness. But no, Donaldson's fear of whisky was almost equal to that of the beastlike fear that dogged his footsteps or lurked in the shadows ahead of him.

Ever since that terrible, unforgettable night when he had drunk it for the first and last time, he had had a wild terror of it. Even the sight of it recalled more vividly the white, strained face of his wife as she fell to the floor, and the red mark of the fender across her temple. He remembered how he had gone away and brought Jack Dingler home with him a few hours later, and they had found her. The neighbors had been so sympathetic toward him in his calamity. Even the same neighbors that brought him the whisky and went home saying sorrowfully, "Poor Mr. Donaldson. He's never been quite himself since the missus was murdered. It seems to have turned his mind."

They were right. His mind was turned. John Donaldson knew what it was to be afraid. For ten terrible years, fear had skulked behind him. His composure and his self-reliance vanished. He had become a coward with the ever-present fear that in some way, by some word or action, he would reveal his secret. He had kept ever alert. Fear,

the driving power that would not let him slumber. He always kept his door bolted at night, and the room next to his empty, for fear that he might talk in his sleep.

That was his greatest dread, that sometime, in an unconscious state, he would talk. He learned to take the greatest precautions in regard to his personal safety. He never went on long journeys, nor took an unnecessary risk. And now—appendicitis!

ONE NIGHT, a week later, Donaldson woke up with a start, his body wet with perspiration. He had been dreaming a terrible dream. It seemed as though he saw the white face of his wife with the red mark across the temple, only she was standing up and looking at him with an unfamiliar, ghastly expression in her eyes, and behind her, looking over her shoulder, was a satyr's face, long and yellow.

Then this figure stepped out and came toward him, holding chains in its hands. Chains for him, Donaldson! He had had dreams like this before, varying slightly in detail sometimes, but always with the same terrible suggestion. And always he had waked up as he did now, wet and cold, with the same monstrous fear clutching him, pricking him like a thousand needles, drawing up his flesh, paralyzing him with a queer, uncanny thrill.

He wondered if he had talked in his sleep. Of course, there was no one to hear, still he wondered. It was something he could never know, an awful, threatening uncertainty that hung over him, that would always hang over him.

And those chains! He had a mental vision of himself in the penal stone quarries, chained to an iron ball.

He looked at his watch. It was later than he had thought—six o'clock. He got out of bed and dressed quickly. He knew from experience the only way to work off the stultifying effect of his dreams. It was physical action, to walk and walk until he tired himself out. Then his mind would be loosed from this crazy, nervous terror, and he would relapse into the steady, dogged fear from which he knew no respite.

He opened the door and stepped into the street. The morning sun was beginning to lighten the grey, deserted court. Some one across the way closed a win-

dow. Donaldson straightened up, tightening his lips. Even this early they might see him. He must appear casual, like a man of leisure out for a morning stroll.

But it was an effort, for an unreasoning fear possessed him. He wanted to run. Something behind him seemed to urge his footsteps faster. It seemed to him that his feet actually were going faster than the rest of his body, as though they obeyed the will of that something behind him, while he himself was really moving only at a moderate gait.

He had a detached sense of two entities. One was John Donaldson as he appeared to the world, a slender, inconspicuous man, walking somewhat timidly along the street, and the other was the coward, the terrified being, running from the thing that followed him; alert, cunning to outwit his pursuer. Once, from an irresistible impulse, he dodged into an alley-way. Then, suddenly ashamed and realizing, he came out again, walking boldly, his eyes fixed on a passing horse, trying to appear unconcerned.

Toward noon he returned, and, remembering he had had no breakfast and that there was nothing to eat in the house, stopped at the corner grocery store. The grocer was waiting on another customer when Donaldson came in, but he looked up and nodded.

"Be with you in a minute, Mr. Donaldson." And then, "Why, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

Donaldson had sat down suddenly on a flour-barrel, clutching his side, his face gone grey with pain. The grocer ran to get a glass of water.

"Here, better drink this! What's the matter? Can I help you?"

But Donaldson only shook his head over his knees, unable to speak. They got him home a little later, when the pain had eased a little, and sent a doctor in to see him. Donaldson did not want a doctor, but the grocer was frightened by his pale face and paid no attention to his protests.

The verdict was what Donaldson had anticipated, appendicitis and the necessity of an immediate operation. He heard it, lying on the bed, from a strange doctor, with a feeling, in spite of the pain in his side, that it must be another man under sentence. He could not take that anesthetic! The pain might kill him; then let him die! It would be better than those awful chains. For he knew that once unconscious, the truth would come out, that all the poison which had been maddening him for years would flow from his lips in self-

exposure, once he was placed under an anesthetic. How many times had he already related it in the stillness of the night? What of his secret could the walls of his room not tell? They must have heard it over and over.

The doctor repeated his statement and Donaldson nodded.

"Yes," he said mechanically. He must appease this man, lest a refusal make him too insistent. When the doctor was gone, he was safe again. He would get well. Everybody had these attacks; they meant nothing.

"I'll be back to see you tonight," said the doctor, as he prepared to leave.

"No," said Donaldson, "don't come. I'll be all right."

"I'll be here," answered the doctor, and went out.

Suddenly a great fatigue came over the sick man, an overwhelming drowsiness, a desire for sleep, one of the primal, insistent, compelling things that would not be denied.

When he awoke it was quite dark. He did not know the time. Lights shown in the houses across the street. The ticking of the clock was the only noise to be heard. The darkness of the room seemed palpable, as though it floated over and around him, breathing. Then the clock struck eight. Donaldson remembered. The doctor was coming back. He might return any minute. Only he must not! There were footsteps on the walk. It was he, and the door was unlocked! Donaldson rose and started toward it. He had forgotten his side. He was only conscious of a difficulty in moving, like in a nightmare, as though weights were dragging on his feet. The doctor was on the porch. Donaldson struggled. What was holding his feet?

"Don't come in," he gasped. "I'm all right!"

Then came the pain, like a sudden knife-blade, piercing him. He screamed, one awful, uncontrollable yell, and pitched forward.

THERE WAS A queer, unfamiliar smell, and stillness. Not the empty stillness of his own house, but the stillness of human beings and hushed movements.

Nausea possessed him. He opened his eyes for a moment and then closed them. He was in a white-walled room, darkened. Against the drawn blind he could feel the sunlight beating. A ray of it came in between the shade and the window-jamb and struck the opposite wall. It was broad day. Suddenly, quick and clear as an arrow released from a taut bow-string, Donaldson's mind leaped up into consciousness.

He was in a hospital, and it was over—the operation. It was the anesthetic which had nauseated him. What had he said? Had he betrayed himself? Yet here he was, lying quietly in this room. However, they couldn't take him away while he was sick.

They were waiting—waiting till he got well to put the chains on him! He knew it. That was why they were so quiet, not to make him suspicious. He would ask the nurse. She could tell him whether he had talked.

But the nurse was not there. She did not know he was awake. Well, he would wait and ask her. Maybe he hadn't talked. People didn't always. The sun streamed against the blind. Light, hope! It might be that he would see it again, free! That he would walk along the streets in the open day.

The door opened and the nurse entered. She came to his bedside. He would smile at her easily, indifferently. She would think his question a casual one.

"Nurse," he began. His voice sounded far away, weaker than it should have.

The nurse smiled. "How is my patient? Feeling better?"

"Nurse," he strove valiantly to make his voice strong, casual. He even smiled weakly. "Did I—er—talk under the ether?"

"No, not a word. Now rest quietly and I'll come back after a while." And she went out.

Donaldson sighed. He was still safe. She had told him so. She would not deceive a sick man. And yet—wouldn't she? He remembered reading somewhere that patients were always told they had not talked, lest the knowledge excite them and hinder their recovery.

That was why she had said it. They wanted him to get well, so they could put the chains on him. Hadn't she hesitated a bit before she answered? He had thought she looked at him a bit suspiciously. Now he was sure of it. And that was why. They didn't want him to know they knew. They wanted to be sure they'd get him.

Just then Donaldson's thoughts were interrupted by a noise on the street. Some vehicle clattering over the pavement and the sound of a bell. The door was standing slightly ajar. Two nurses were passing in the hall, and Donaldson's straining ear caught their voices:

"What is all the noise about?" asked one.

"I don't know," replied the other. "It sounds like a police patrol."

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THE ESCAPE

(Continued from page 104)

They were after him! What should he do? He threw back the bedclothes. His mind was working like lightning. They would never get him. He slipped to the floor. How he got to the door he never knew. Fear lends strength. He closed it and stumbled back across the floor, half-falling against the bed.

He knew what he was going to do. He pulled up the bed-clothes from the foot of the bed with feverish haste. The sheet—that was what he wanted! He ripped open the hem a few inches, turning it back so that he could get the raw edge of the material. Then he tore off a strip the whole length of the sheet. He laughed excitedly. They'd never get him!

By this time, the cut in his side had re-opened, but he did not notice it. He knew nothing but his one mad purpose. His senses seemed to have deserted him. It was as though he were in a dream. He felt as though his mind were standing off, directing his body to do these things, and as though he were putting a senseless and inanimate other half of him through certain prescribed motions.

He tied one end of the strip to one of the iron bed-posts, then he climbed into bed and lay down. He circled the

other end of the strip around his neck. The head of the bed was looped between the posts with scrolls of white iron-work. He lifted his knees and pushed with his feet till his head was through one of these openings, hanging down in the space between the bed and the corner of the room. His neck was now in a straight line between the bed-posts, bent backward, and as he breathed, he emitted from his lips little hoarse noises that seemed to struggle out protestingly from his strained throat. He knew that he could not strangle himself to death, for as soon as unconsciousness came, he would relax his hold. If he could tie the other end! That was sure and safe.

The blood rushed to his head. He pulled the knot tight, very tight, and gasped. He felt as though he were drowning. His temples throbbed, and his ears beat as though the waves were knocking against the inside of his head, now roaring, now singing with queer, unearthly hum. He relaxed his hand, and the noose slackened.

There! That was not so bad, but the blood rushed back from his brain, and the waves swirled around him now and made him fearfully dizzy. He felt like a little brig, tossed in the valley of a

tempestuous sea, beaten, dazed, apathetic.

He recovered somewhat. The police! They must be on their way up! The waves were calling. Their restless surging hammered upon his brain, dulling its sensibility. There was peace beneath those waves. Unchanging peace!

But he must hurry. A cloud rose before his eyes, grey and inviting. He seemed to forget. What was he going to do? Where was that peace? Peace, something he had not known for aeons, aching, endless aeons of time. Where was it? Ah, yes! Beneath the waves, those heaving, restless, insistent waves.

"I'm coming," he murmured thickly. His tongue seemed swollen. There was need of haste. He shook himself to clear his mind for the final effort. Then he pulled the noose tight with all his strength, and tied it quickly to the right-hand bedpost.

The waves seemed to open and he was going down. He saw a faint, opalescent light beneath him. There was something precious down there. It was peace.

"I'm coming," he muttered, struggling, his arms stretched out toward it. "I'm coming!"