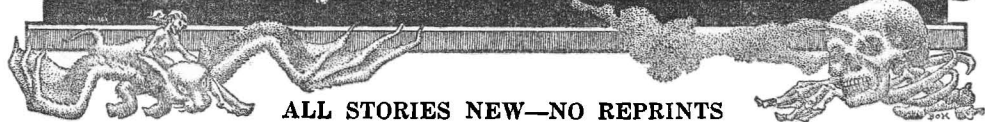


Weird Tales



MAY, 1942

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

"Maybe he's killed her! We've got to catch him!"



The Giant in a Test Tube

BY GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

*Just a rat . . . and yet it was their future fame, fortune and success;
and — IMMORTALITY!*

IT WAS just a rat they stared at, and yet it was their future, it was fame and fortune and renowned success and—immortality, too. It was just a rat

in the cage, but a *young* rat where an old one had been.

Young Dr. Joel Randall looked at Mary Worth, his laboratory assistant, and his

lean young face was transfigured "We've done it, Mary," he said incredulously. "Actually done it."

"We!" she snorted. Mary was the robust one, Mary was always solidly down to earth. "You did it, Joel. It was your brains and vision. All I did was fetch and carry."

"Do you see what it means?"

Mary did. Her sweet young face turned grave and awed as she studied the rat. Two days ago, the rodent had doddered and ached around the pen, his fur lacklustre and his whiskers drooping, rheumy-eyed, arthritic of joint, obviously a rat far gone with old age and disease. Then Joel Randall and Mary had treated the rodent. Injected the serums on which they had been working so long. Serums to wash incrustations out of the joints; serums to put new tone in muscles, to pep up the endocrine glands, to sweep fatigue poisons out of sinews; serums to turn the innards of bones into factories for red corpuscles again; serums to melt the decay of old age out of a body and catalyze the processes of virile youth into life again! Serums to turn time backward. Serums to show that old age is not necessary and inevitable but a disease which can be fought off—into the doddering old rat, Joel and Mary had injected their precious treatment. And now, the rodent was—*young*. Young again! His pelt glowed with good health; his eyes were bright and his whiskers rampant; and he snuffed and prowled with a vital, glowing energy.

"If only," Mary breathed, "if only it would work for a man as well as it's working on our animals."

Joel's keen blue eyes clouded.

That was the rub. You had to be careful. Human beings weren't guinea pigs. The serums were carefully balanced combinations of elements that might prove poisonous to a man. You could afford to make a mistake if your subject was a rat.

But not if your subject was a human being.

Joel said, "We'll experiment some more—then I'll try the serum on me."

"On me!" Mary blurted, with so much of sudden, protective vehemence that he laughed, and she crimsoned—and he drew her close and kissed her sweet lips.

"On neither of us, I'm afraid," he said softly. "We're young. We've got to have an *old* subject."

"Try and find one!"

"Something'll turn up," he said. But his voice wasn't confident. For a moment he was silent; then, absently, he kissed Mary's yellow hair, and mused aloud: "But if we could only prove in some dramatic way that would bring attention to us, that we're on the right track—I tell you, Mary, nothing as important as this work has been done since Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood! Something mankind has always hunted for. The Fountain of Youth—but not some magic hot springs or abracadabra to fee-fi-fum a man into youth again, but a real, honest-to-gosh scientific way to push back old age. Why, it's as important as the discovery of fire. Or the discovery of the wheel, or of printing. We'd be giving a reasonable measure of immortality to mankind. We'd be benefactors of mankind, like Prometheus, who brought fire to earth—"

"Don't sound so frustrated! Something's bound to turn up," Mary insisted, comfortingly.

SOMETHING did turn up.

Not right away. It was after the story of Dr. Joel Randall's discoveries had got into the newspapers; after reporters and feature writers had worn a smooth path to the door of his laboratory at the back of the university campus in Berkeley, that the thing happened. It was after the first great furor of his work had begun to die down, after wishful requests and ur-

gent demands that he *prove* his serums would work on human beings as well as rodents, that the opportunity knocked on Joel's door.

"My name is Hawes, Jeff Hawes," the man said as Mary ushered him into the laboratory.

Young Dr. Randall stared, taken aback. For the stranger was a startling, and disturbing figure. Dr. Randall was tall, but Jefferson Hawes towered six-feet-six inches, and his shoulders were broad in proportion. But for all his height and size, the man was sick and old, with something tragic in the stooped hunch of his great shoulders, in the deep lines of his gaunt face and the blurred and faded gray of his eyes. In his youth, the man obviously must have been a rugged giant. But that had been long ago.

"What can I do for you?" Dr. Randall asked.

"I've been reading in the papers about your work, and—"

"Yes?"

"I want you to try it on me, sir!"

Dr. Randall blinked; and young Mary caught her breath sharply.

"Sorry, Mr. Hawes. Until we've proved our work beyond chance of a slip-up—"

"But how can you prove it 'less'n you try it on a man?"

Dr. Randall's boyish face reddened, and he drew himself up in very dignified fashion.

"That is my problem, Mr. Hawes, and—"

"Listen to me! Don't turn me down without listening to me," the towering old man pleaded. "I know it's risky. But I'm willing to take the chance. Glad to! Because— Mind if I sit down; I'm tired."

Dr. Randall at once pushed a chair forward; though Mary, impulsively, lifted a hand to prevent. She couldn't put it into words, but deep in her mind were vague forebodings.

"Doc, I'm sixty years old," Jeff Hawes said, turning his wasted face toward the light so that the lines and sunken hollows of his cheeks were plain. "I've been a bed-ridden invalid nearly all my life. They called it a rheumatic fever, when I came down with it. They didn't really know *what* it was. Anyway, until a year ago, it wasted me, put me flat on my back without the strength to lift a hand. For most of my adult life, Doc!"

Young Dr. Randall's quick sympathies were plain on his candid face. Hawes had an advantage and pushed it.

"You see what I'm askin', Doc? I've missed out in life. I'll grab at any chance, no matter how desperate, to get back some of those years I spent in a hospital ward. I can't lose. I've got nothing, now. If your treatment doesn't work, even if it kills me, I'm no worse off than I am now. But if it *does* work—"

"Lord knows, you deserve a break."

"But, Joel," Mary put in, "think about it! Wait."

"I'm beggin' you, sir," Hawes pleaded. "I'll sign papers, do anything, to clear you of blame if anything—goes wrong. And think of what it'll mean to you if you can do for me just a tenth of what you've been able to do in your experiments!"

Fame, and fortune, and immortality—

"Mary, we can't refuse!" said Dr. Randall. "I'll do it. We've *got* to do it, Mary!"

ONCE decided upon it, characteristically Dr. Randall put all his youthful drive and ingenuity into the problem. Jeff Hawes would live in the laboratory building. Moreover, for sake of the gloomy, towering old man's self-respect, Dr. Randall gave Hawes a job as chore man; and went out of his way to make Hawes believe that his services were of value to the lab.

And he started giving Hawes the precious treatments.

It was not until the end of the week, after the treatments were already well under way, that Dr. Randall was stopped in front of the Berkeley Post Office by Police Sergeant Davies.

"Say, Doc. I hear that old Jeff Hawes is working for you?"

"Yes, he is."

"Well, I guess it's all right."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"You know he's an ex-convict? Yeah.

Killed an army paymaster, and a deputy-sheriff who tried to capture him. Forty years ago, that was. He was sent to the penitentiary for life. Last month, though, the governor pardoned him. You knew that?"

"Why, I hadn't heard the exact d-details," Dr. Randall stammered.

"Guess it's all right, so long as you know."

Young Dr. Randall walked on down the street in a daze.

Hawes had said he'd been an invalid most of his life.

Invalid, hell! A convict, imprisoned for double murder, that's what he'd been—

Dr. Randall was afraid that Mary's quick gaze would see his startled concern when he arrived at the lab. But she was herself so excited that she noticed nothing at all about him.

"Joel, come quick! You've got to see!"

His heart leaped into his throat. Had something happened, already? He blurted, "Where's Hawes?"

"In the back yard. Come along!"

He followed her into the laboratory, to the cage at the end of the long row, the cage inhabited by the rat which had reacted so successfully to their experiments.

"Look at him!" Mary breathed.

Dr. Randall looked, and his pulse raced and stuttered.

The rat was well. Very well. Furiously well. His fur was sleek and thick and shining, and his eyes bright with vigor.

"Why, he's—*bigger!*" Dr. Randall blurted.

"Much bigger, Joel."

The rat was prowling and snuffing and climbing about with an overflow of pent energy that rocked his cage—as if his body was distended with a power and vitality that almost crackled like sparks off his fur.

"Don't you see?" Mary prompted.

"He's growing?"

"Yes, Joel. But so *fast!*"

"He's telescoping time. Putting on months of growth inside of hours."

"And gaining strength and spirit with it!"

Young Dr. Randall's gaze lifted. He looked out into the backyard.

Old Jeff Hawes was just starting to split some kindling; setting a chunk of wood onto a eucalyptus stump used as a chopping block. Lifting a heavy axe with one hand, as if it were made of papier maché, he brought it down onto the chunk. The steel sheared through the chunk like a cleaver going through jello, sliced right on through and buried itself a foot deep in the chopping block. Hawes stared. He hefted on the axe handle to loosen the blade, and the hickory axe handle broke off as if it were a straw. Hawes stood there, pop-eyed, gawking at the handle in flabbergasted surprise.

And Dr. Randall groped a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped cold sweat from his forehead—

IT WAS Joel and Mary's custom, since they worked late in the lab, to have their dinner brought over from the college cafeteria. Old Jefferson Hawes ate with them usually.

Coming into the little room they used as a dining room that evening, Jeff Hawes bumped his head on the top of the doorway.

Frowning, he rubbed his forehead and stared at the door top.

"Funny. Never bumped that before," he rumbled.

Mary looked at Dr. Randall, and her lovely gray eyes held a poignant mixture of feelings—of pleasure in success, mingled with forebodings.

"How do you feel, Jeff?" Dr. Randall asked, more sharply than he intended.

"Never felt so well in my life, Doc!"

He looked well, too. His face, which had been so tragically seamed and pallid a few days before, had smoothened with firm flesh and turned ruddy with good health. Moreover Dr. Randall saw, with a shock that made his innards feel cold, that Hawes' stooped back had straightened. His iron-gray hair was now thicker and *darker*—

Hawes said, "I'll never be able to thank you enough for what you've done for me, Doc. I think you're one of the greatest men who ever lived. That you'd bother even for a minute to help out an old tramp like me— Well, it damn near makes me pray."

HIS deep voice was shaky with feeling. He meant it, every word; and young Dr. Randall blushed.

Hawes ate with relishing gusto; yet he managed to keep talking. He was brimming over with good spirits. It was a little hard for the others to bear; for the rumble of his deep voice filled the room with its vibration, and when he laughed—which he did often—the windows rattled as if the Navy were holding gunnery practice out at sea.

He talked to Mary as much as he did to Dr. Randall. It was obvious that he liked Mary. He kept jumping up to bring her a glass of water or another cup of coffee or more bread; and he kept passing the food to her, alert to her tiniest wish. Obviously he felt that he *owed* the world and all to Dr. Randall; and obviously he *thought* the world and all of Mary. But realizing this only deepened the shad-

owy misgivings in young Dr. Randall's mind.

As he cut into his steak, Hawes bore down on his knife as it encountered tough sinew. The blade went on through steak, and plate, and to the hilt in the wood of the table. Hawes stared in rueful consternation.

During the next few days, young Dr. Randall stared in an even more rueful consternation that continued to mount with the tragic relentlessness of a fever as Hawes went about his chores.

A window stuck in the lab. Mary asked Hawes to lift it. He gave it a little pull. It flew up so hard that every pane of glass in it shattered. Then again, Dr. Randall started down the driveway in his modest sedan, not noticing that a rear door was swinging open. Hawes pushed it lightly, to shut it. The door slammed shut so hard that the metal flanges folded back and the hinges snapped and the door shot right on through the car to hit the opposite door. And, again, Mary started crating some rats for shipment to another laboratory. She asked Hawes to hammer a nail through one slab of hard wood. He hit the nail once—and drove it, and the corner post of the crate, into the ground as if a piledriver had smacked it. Then again—students, waiting for the faculty tennis court in back of the lab to be vacated, were batting balls down the driveway. One offered his racket to Hawes. Hawes hit a ball lightly: that ball shot through the gut of a racket held up to return it, and hit the wooden backstop of the court and went right on through it like a projectile. Dr. Randall had once seen straws which a hurricane had driven like railroad spikes into a telephone pole. He looked at Hawes, and thought of that hurricane.

Hawes suffered agonies of self-blame after each such incident; he swore at himself for a clumsy oaf, and vowed he would be more careful.

That afternoon, Mary went shopping with him. He needed new clothes, for his old suits were now too small.

As they walked home up Telegraph Avenue, a big police dog rushed out of a yard, broken section of chain dangling from his collar. Somebody in the yard shouted.

The dog lunged at Mary. Old Jeff Hawes snatched her up, lifted her aside and kicked at the dog.

His foot caught the beast squarely. The kick lifted it off the ground and hurled it smashing through a billboard beside the walk. The body of the dog and shattered boards landed in the midst of a dozen boys playing ball on the lot behind the billboard, knocking a couple of them down. For an instant the group stood frozen, staring.

"You all right?" Hawes asked Mary hoarsely. "That dog might've bit you!"

He set her down. He strode onto the lot, and savagely kicked the dog's body halfway across the lot. The boys broke and fled.

When Mary told Dr. Randall about it, later, he rubbed his youthful jaw in frowning concern. He didn't say it to Mary, but to himself he thought, *Maybe I've made an awful mistake.*

After dinner, Dr. Randall returned to the laboratory to finish a piece of work he'd left undone.

A commotion among the rat cages brought him running to the back of the long room. He looked at the cage in which he kept the rat which his experiments had changed from an aged dodderer to a young rat brimming with fight and vigor.

The cage was empty. Wires of the side-wall had been chewed and twisted apart as if they had been made of spaghetti.

Shrill squealing made Dr. Randall lunge to the farther row of cages. He saw that cage after cage had been ripped open, and that a score of rats were stampeding across the floor. A half-dozen of them lay dead,

their throats ripped open. And one rat, larger than the others and glossier of fur, was pouncing like a cougar onto another victim. For an instant the young scientist stood frozen, utterly aghast.

Abruptly he snatched the window pole. The big rat saw him, but did not dart under the cages in flight. When he strode forward, the rat sprang toward him. Swiftly Dr. Randall brought the pole down and crushed the life out of the beast.

Mechanically Dr. Randall cleaned the place up. As he worked, his lean young face tightened with resolve.

"Jeff," Dr. Randall said in the lab next morning, "I've finished with your treatments. You'll have to leave, now."

A WEEK passed, then, and Dr. Randall and Mary heard nothing from Jeff Hawes. The old man had been reluctant to go.

But he thanked Dr. Randall, with heartfelt gratitude, for what Dr. Randall had already done for him. And he thanked Mary for being so friendly to an old dervish like himself.

But Jeff Hawes hadn't looked like an old man as he strode out of the laboratory; for his back was straight, his shoulders erect, and he carried his towering bulk with lithe and sinewy ease.

A week passed—and then Police Sergeant Davies spoke excitedly to Dr. Randall over the phone.

"Doc, you seen Jeff Hawes today?"

"No. Something wrong, Sergeant?"

"Listen, Hawes got a job at the ice plant in Alameda this morning. He was helping the men snake a box car down the track—and he leaned against it and shoved it so hard that it crashed into the next car before the foreman could get out from between them. Crushed the life out of him."

Dr. Randall gasped an oath.

"The men got kind of panicky, and one

of them swung at Hawes, and a fight started—"

"But, Sergeant, Hawes is a good man. He wouldn't intentionally hurt anybody!"

"Just the same, one of those men who tangled with him has a brain concussion, and another guy's chest is caved in. I'm tellin' you, Hawes is a danger to the community. We got to find 'im and lock 'im up. For keeps, this time. Where is he, Doc?"

"He's not here, Sergeant."

"If he shows up, call me."

Dr. Randall hung up — and his lean young face was so heartsick that Mary hurried toward him.

"What's wrong, Joel?"

He started to tell her, and shut up. For, crossing the yard, to the rear door of the lab, he saw the towering figure of old Jeff Hawes. For an instant, Dr. Randall sat taut, his mind racing. And then, with dazing suddenness, he hit Mary. Hit her on the point of the chin so hard that she slumped back against the laboratory table, senseless, and slipped to the floor.

And the next instant, Dr. Randall was bent over her, rubbing her hands, saying, "Mary! Are you hurt, Mary?"

"What happened?"

Dr. Randall looked up into old Jeff Hawes' staring face.

"Mary just came back from the bank, Jeff—I'd sent her to draw some money for me. A man followed her in here and slugged her and grabbed her purse. He must've seen her draw the money!" Dr. Randall straightened up. "Come on, Jeff! I saw him run down the driveway. Maybe he's killed her! We got to catch 'im!"

"I'll break his neck!" Hawes said.

And he was right behind Dr. Randall as the latter lunged out the doorway and sprinted up the drive.

"He went up the hill!"

Through the line of cars parked along the back street, and across the road toward

the old Greek Theatre the young doctor ran. Hawes kept right at his elbow. Up the concrete steps, then around the high fence toward the top of the hill they ran.

"See 'im?" Dr. Randall panted. "He dodged into the eucalyptus grove!"

He left the path and cut straight up the hill, jumping over a fallen tree, ramming through some brush. Hawes, gasping for breath, fell behind him a couple paces. Dr. Randall reached the wooden fence marking the edge of the campus, and flung himself over it. For an instant he halted, as Hawes laboriously climbed the fence.

"There he goes, Jeff! On the path round the hill!"

And Dr. Randall plunged on ahead. The slope was steep. He was gulping for breath, his mouth open, but he ran hard. Looking back over his shoulder, he called, "Come on, Jeff! We'll lose 'im!"

Old Jeff Hawes managed to spurt ahead and catch up with him; but he was breathing as if he were choking, in sobbing gasps, as if a hand were clutched tight about his throat; and his face was grayish, his eyes anguished.

"I c-can't—make it."

"You got to, Jeff! I'll need your help!"

Hawes stumbled and fell prone. At once he lurched to his feet. On up the steep slope after Dr. Randall he followed, his body bent forward so that his hands almost touched the grass. Dr. Randall's heart was thumping in his chest as if it would tear loose from his ribs, and darts of fire lanced his straining chest. But, in desperation, he increased his pace; and looking back, he yelled at Hawes, "Faster, Jeff! *Faster!*"

Hawes tried. He almost caught up with Dr. Randall—and then he fell. His great hands clawed at the grass, and he fought to his knees; but then, abruptly, he slumped onto his face. And his long arms, so terrible in their strength, slumped limp and inert on the grass.

After a moment, Dr. Randall bent over him; and regret and profoundest pity were mirrored on the young man's face.

Old Jeff Hawes was dead.

"IT WAS his heart," Dr. Randall explained to Mary, later. "It was an old heart, to begin with. When our serums made his body young and made him grow in size, his vital organs didn't grow with it. So often that's the case when an unbalance of the endocrine glands causes a young man to develop into a giant. The vital organs are pretty well kept in limits by heredity, and don't grow in proportion. So, when an extra strain was put upon Jeff's heart, it—failed. That's something we'll have to take into account in our work."

"Poor old fellow!"

"But it's better this way, Mary. There was nothing ahead for Jeff, but prison.

And as long as he lived, he was a serious danger to others."

She nodded soberly. Blinking, she turned her face away for a moment. Comfortingly he put his arm about her shoulders.

Mary felt of her chin, and said in reproach, "You're something of a danger to others, yourself. I bet you'll turn out to be a wife-beater."

"Maybe you better think twice about marrying me?"

"I have thought twice—I've thought four times, a dozen times, if I should marry you or not. And every time it comes out *yes!*"

He smiled. But his lean young face tightened as he glanced along the work benches of the crowded laboratory.

"And the sooner the better. We've got a lot of work to do!"