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The Mad Surgeon

by
Wright Field

"Look at the doctor's eyes!"
I cried. "He is going to
murder me! He is going
crazy!"

THERE was nothing complicated or unusual about my case, Dr. Shelton assured me. It was merely the old story, now written daily into the pages of innumerable lives, that my appendix, never of any value to me, had suddenly become a menace to my life, and therefore, like any other obstruction to health and happiness, was due to be removed with promptness and dispatch. There had been several recurring periods of severe pain in the region of the offending organ, but it so far diminished that I was a little doubtful of the urgency of the case, and might have demurred to the point of blank refusal had I been under treatment of a stranger.

But I had every confidence in my physician, who had been the unfailing port of shelter in every storm of sickness that had assailed my family since my earliest recollections. He had carried me through measles and typhoid and diphtheria, saved my mother's life at least twice, and prevented my father from undergoing a serious operation, against the judgment of several other doctors, pulling him through in fine shape. So I believed

him when he said the operation was necessary, but that there was no danger, with the efficient and sanitary present-day methods and the well-equipped hospital at my disposal.

"You will probably emerge a younger man than you are," he said, smilingly, a remark that came back to me afterward. So I yielded to his superior judgment, as I had always done, placing myself wholly at his disposal. It meant only a small incision and ten or twelve days in bed, I comforted myself. So I found myself being trundled into an elevator and stretched upon a tall wheeled wagon, with a pretty, womanly nurse at my head.

In spite of my predicament, my eyes kept seeking her face. I had never really cared for any woman, though I was nearly thirty years old, and it struck me, as she smiled encouragingly down at me, that here was one in whom, on closer acquaintance, I could take a real interest. Her cap was as becoming as her smile, but it was a certain strong womanliness and dependableness in her countenance that elicited my admiration, rather than any perfection of outline

or coloring. I hoped it would be my good fortune to remain under her care while in the hospital, and I remember wondering, whimsically, if I wouldn't be the better off for remaining three weeks instead of the conventional ten days!

My father was with me, also, but when the elevator arrived at the door of the mysterious region known as the surgery, he was left outside, to his relief, I am quite sure.

I had never had occasion to take ether before. I felt a faint curiosity to know what the experience would be like, but this was speedily overcome by a livelier anxiety concerning the various uses of the glittering assortment of surgical tools quite frankly displayed on a glass table near the one upon which I was placed. I raised my head to examine them more closely, feeling a crawling sensation at the pit of my stomach as I wondered which particular instrument was going to sever the tissues of my own flesh within the next few minutes!

At that moment my pretty nurse withdrew, to be replaced by one of a very different type, swathed from head to foot in white. Dr. Shelton now entered the surgery, accompanied by a brother physician, both looking strangely inhuman, with their bare arms and shoulders, close-fitting white garments, and heads so bandaged in thin white cloths that little more than the eyes were visible Once or twice lately, I had noticed something odd about my doctor's eyes—he had those large, somewhat bulging, agate-colored orbs that can stare at you so effectively and persistently—and at this moment they gave me a sensation that I can only describe as fear, as he leaned over and gazed into mine for an endless moment.

His voice, when he remarked conventionally, but pleasantly, "Well, old man, how are you?" held an accent of sympathy that, for the first

time in my acquaintance with him, had what I fancied an insincere ring, as if his mind were not on them, and the strange look in his eyes held me again.

They seemed to gloat over my condition, over my helplessness, and as he rubbed his hands together in a characteristic way he had, I thought his fingers were twitching for the knife and itching to get about the business of dissecting me. I saw no reason why I should have this hallucination, if that was what it was, because I had not even yet smelled the ether, and I had loved and trusted Dr. Shelton for years.

But, as he turned away, and his brother surgeon attempted to force the white cone down over my face, gently but firmly, I tried with all my strength to push it aside and to cry out: "Look at the doctor's eyes! He is going to murder me! He is going crazy!"

I think I succeeded in muttering the words, muffled by the object that was shutting out my breath, and obscuring my vision, but if I did, no one heeded them, and the next moment I seemed to be floating in a great sea of white light, a nebula of tiny sparkling points, with a sweetish, sickening odor in my nostrils, and an overpowering necessity of swallowing while a voice somewhere at a great distance urged me to take deeper breaths—and yet, through it all, Dr. Shelton's great bulging agate orbs burning into my own, and growing larger and larger.

I KNEW nothing more for a space of time that might have been long or short—I had no means of measuring it. But presently I came to myself, at what was apparently the touch of a finger on my bare eye-ball. The cone seemed now to have been removed, and the whole room was quite clear to my vision—that is, so much of it as was in line with my eyes.

There was no one else in the surgery except the two doctors and the nurse with the hard, sharp features and granite lips, the spareness of her profile perhaps accentuated by the tight arrangement of bandages confining every strand of hair.

I tried to raise my head, to observe Dr. Shelton's movements—but found, to my horror, that I could not move a muscle, not even so little as was necessary for the flicker of an eyelid.

You can imagine my anguish of mind when he raised himself, a moment later, from the table whereon I had seen the instruments, with a gleaming scalpel in his hand; and bent over my bared abdomen, having for one terrible moment fixed his wide gray orbs on mine with nothing less than a triumphant, fiendish, gloating glare!

There could be no doubt of it: the man was mad—stark, staring mad. And I, one of his best friends, lay there inert, helpless, unable to speak or move, about to be murdered, perhaps dissected like a dog! Why did not one of the others see it? I tried to look at the nurse and the other doctor pleadingly, but they betrayed no answering gleam of intelligence—indeed, they merely glanced carelessly at me now and then during the horrors of the operation that followed, apparently having eyes only for the scientific side of the thing, regarding me as a *thing* upon which to wreak any experiment that entered their heads!

The pain that followed the use of the knife upon my flesh was sharp, yet it was negligible compared with my mental suffering, for I knew now that a madman in the guise of a reputable and responsible physician was taking my precious life into his hands as nonchalantly as he would eat his breakfast. That the others could look on so callously added to my horror. Would one of them notice if he

made a false move, in time to save my life? Or would he be so sly about it that they would not know it if he did? Or would they dare raise a hand against the judgment of a surgeon so skilful and well-known, even should they suspect that he was inclined to make some new experiment?

For I feared nothing so raw as his cutting me up before their eyes. There were a hundred ways in which so knowing and experienced a master of his craft might put an end to my life without arousing suspicion, unless the onlookers had some reason for watching him closely. The sly opening of some internal vein, the delicate—but here Dr. Shelton straightened up, having done whatever he would with my internals, tossing aside something with the muffled remark, "In another day it would have burst," and then came the painful process of sewing up the lips of the incision.

Although I could see and think with agonizing clearness, I seemed unable to comprehend the idea of Time—it was as if Time had no beginning, middle, nor end, like eternity itself. So I have no idea how long he was about the operation. But I felt a great relief when he straightened up at last, and announced, "It is done!" He came to my head, then, and stood looking down at me for a long time—an endless time.

The great, bulging, agate eyes stared into mine with such burning intensity that I wanted to scream aloud for relief. But I was, to all intents and purposes, dead, except the seeing, thinking, hurting part of me, and felt that, after all, movement is life, whatever we may prate of the soul, of the spiritual, intellectual, emotional sides of our natures. . . . The other doctor joined him, and pressed the tip of his finger cruelly against my unmoving eye-ball. "Entirely under still," he announced, and Dr. Shelton nodded, with apparent satisfaction.

“And now,” the latter’s clarion tones rang through my inner consciousness like the tolling bells of doom, “now for the *real* operation!”

MY GOD! At last it had come—the thing I had feared from the beginning! No doubt he had removed my appendix in the professionally correct manner, his cunning purpose held in temporary abeyance; but now he was certainly going to put his nefarious designs upon my helpless person into immediate execution!

What was it to be? Something intricate and scientific and doubly fiendish, having to do with the delicate mechanism of my inner organs?—or anything so crass and commonplace as cutting off an arm or a leg, or gouging out an eye? He looked capable of anything, as he stood there, leering down at me, and I gave myself up at once as irrevocably lost. . . .

My last hope lay in the possibility of the nurse or the other doctor suspecting the true state of affairs, and putting a stop to the thing before it went too far, but this chance grew more and more remote, as I recalled the proverbial shrewdness and cunning of the insane, and that Dr. Shelton might easily hoodwink them into believing that this second operation was also necessary to my full recovery.

But I was due to receive a severe shock in this direction, also. Dr. Shelton motioned slightly to the nurse, as she drew near, and nodding, she turned quietly toward a small, white-enameled cabinet with glass doors and shelves, on a revolving stand behind her. She drew from this, without hesitation, a small vial filled with a clear, rosy purple liquid, and passed it to him without a word, across my passive but bursting breast, wherein ten thousand little red-hot devils of fear and torment raged.

The doctor held the vial up to the light, so that the sparkling rose-col-

ored beams danced through it, and chuckled—a deep-throated, gloating, anticipatory chuckle!

“At last I have the chance to try you out, and to demonstrate beyond doubt your efficacy!” he chortled. Of course I could see the faces of the other occupants of the room only as they incidentally entered the limited circle of my vision, so that I could not immediately know what effect this statement, startling in its crude frankness, had upon his two auditors. But he went on in a confident tone, still caressing the fatal bottle, pregnant with so many possibilities of horror to me. Might it not be a slow and insidious poison he wished to experiment with—a thousand times more horrible than instant death?

“Of course, I have explained it all to you before, and we have tried it out on several animals, including man’s nearest prototype, the ape, in all of which it ran true to form. But this opportunity to try it on a human being is priceless. I have chosen this man because we are intimate friends, and I will therefore have the better chance to watch its hourly and daily effect. Once I have demonstrated the value and efficiency of this drug beyond doubt and cavil, my fame in the world of medical science is assured. . . . I have spent the best years of my life in perfecting the discovery, and have dreamed night and day of putting it to practical use for the benefit of man. . . . Many have I besought to lend themselves to the glorious task of demonstrating to mankind my theory, but all have selfishly refused. . . . I can not see why; there is something positively fascinating in the idea! Think of it, my friends! Perfect, sparkling, radiant health, undiminishing youth and energy—the halting, as it were, of Time itself for a stated number of years, and then—the end, suddenly, painlessly, with all opportunities of making one’s preparations beforehand!

“How many would be eager for it, or ought to be, once its value were demonstrated beyond doubt? The elderly actress, watching her health go and her charms fade and her audiences thin, while in her prime intellectually—by a few drops of this liquid rosy with promise, she can be granted ten more years of brilliant, vivacious youth, the only penalty being sure and sudden death at the end, a thing which, with the ordinary chances of life, might take her unawares at any moment, or come as the result of painful and lingering illness. The feeble, bald old man, in love with the beautiful young girl, for whom he would give his life—this potent elixir will give him five or ten years of youth and happiness. The invalid, dragging out a suffering existence in the wheel-chair, has but to have it injected into his heart to be granted a comparatively short but free and healthy life, with miraculous strength and vitality, and youth itself renewed with all its hopes and ambitions!

“I only wish”—his voice dropped a bit here, while his tone, hitherto triumphant, became a bit regretful—“that it were possible to make the lease of life longer; but so far, ten years must be considered the limit. No system will longer withstand the terrible strain put upon it—the energy and vigor which should last a healthy man three score and ten years, drained out, as it were, in a brief, concentrated period! In this case, I shall use just enough to limit the man’s life to five years from this date, because I am anxious to study the case at first hand, to learn if the end is as sudden and as painless as it is with the lower animals, and if it will fall as planned, exactly on the date five years hence. Five drops—five years!”

This was not the raving of a madman—unless the very coldness of the calculating scientist be madness! And

as the other doctor came into my line of vision, I saw him nod, gravely and understandingly, and he, too, had the light of the fanatic in his eyes! As for the granite-lipped nurse, she set about preparing me for this further operation as calmly and methodically as if I had been only going to have my tonsils removed.

THERE WAS no longer even a glimmer of hope; they were three monsters leagued together in a common cause, caring no more for me personally than they would have cared for a common street mongrel they were going to dissect, intent only upon demonstrating a cold theory.

I grew as icy as death, all my pain numbed under this terrible strain of danger and helplessness, and made a last vain struggle, wholly mental, to break my bonds and speak! I might as well have tried to move, with my bare hands, the Washington monument.

If only he would grant me ten years! Even that period looked short indeed to a man of thirty, just beginning to value life, and having had high hopes of reaching three score and ten. But five—five short winters, five sunny summers, and all would be over! And of what value to me would this wonderful elixir be, in any case? I was young enough, and usually in good health, and quite satisfied with life as it came to me. Yet this terrible creature granted me five years as ruthlessly as if he were planning to kill a beef after fattening it for a number of months. That I should be a martyr to science consoled me not at all, for I cared more for one red-blooded year of life than for all the dry-as-dust science in the world!

I was vividly aware when the edge of the scalpel touched my flesh. Yet the pain was not so terrible as I had expected, being sharp and quick. The awful sickening moment when my soul was ground to powder beneath

the wheels of agony, and I hoped that I was dying under the villain's hand, came when he reached in, with as little compunction as he would have suffered in pulling a beet, and lifted my palpitating heart from its bed!

He seemed to hold it in his hands for eons of time, and it beat and quivered and fluttered there, but in spite of my agony I observed the gesture with which he beckoned the nurse, and the hypodermic needle which she filled from the bottle and handed him.

Then came the sharp sting of the needle entering the heart itself, and for me the whole world swam in rose-color, with tens of thousands of flickering points dancing through it, like motes through a sunbeam. When my vision cleared again, all was apparently over, the bandages in place, and Dr. Shelton talking calmly to his confrere. "Five drops—five years, at this hour," was all I caught, before I drifted away into a deep, restful sleep.

IN THE course of time I recovered. I do not recall what cock-and-bull story Dr. Shelton put up to account for the scar on my breast, but I pretended to swallow his explanations, and even to thank him for his efforts in my behalf. I do not know what kept my hands from his throat during those first days when he bent over me with an expression of pretended sympathy, but I know I was only biding my time to get my revenge.

Meanwhile, I had but five years to live. I set about to get the most out of them. It never occurred to me to doubt that the unscrupulous fiend who had wrought my ruin was not right in every detail of his careful scheme. I fully expected health for the stated period, with sudden death at the end of it.

But I was hardly prepared for the complete rejuvenation, the abounding energy, the glow of ambition and op-

timism, which followed speedily on my complete recovery. So strong and vigorous and hopeful and happy was I, that even my natural hatred of Dr. Shelton and my morbid desire for revenge gradually subsided, until I hardly thought of it at all.

Not very long after the operation, I met a young woman with whom I fell in love with all the ardor of healthy, red-blooded young manhood. Alice had softly waving bronze hair, brown eyes with reddish lights in their depths, a bewitching, tantalizing dimple that came and went at the corner of her mouth on the slightest provocation, and a tiny round black spot just beneath her left eye, where the soft skin crinkled when she laughed. Our wooing was not "long a-doing," which is not to be wondered at when it is remembered that I had never before met a woman who interested me even temporarily; and we were married just one year from the date of the fatal operation, by a freak of fate, at the very same hour, 3 p. m.

It may have looked selfish in me to marry the girl I loved with the certainty of death ahead of me in such a short time, but I argued that the happiness of the intervening four years would be as much hers as mine, and that all must take such chances when they marry. Also, with my abundant health and unfading youth, I had an opportunity to add enough to my fortune to place her beyond the possible chance of want. I took out very heavy life insurance, being considered an excellent risk by the physician who examined me.

Dr. Shelton came and went at will, attending my wife's small ailments and watching his "case," as I supposed, but I was so happy in my married life that I had little thought to spare to him. And so the second and third and fourth years went by like a happy dream, and Alice presented me with a little son. . . .

There was only a moment of nightmare now and then, when something came up to remind me how short was to be my earthly span! And then something happened that opened my eyes to another complication in the plot; Dr. Shelton was becoming altogether too fond of my wife!

It was at this point in my life that the iron entered into my soul, and I began brooding and planning anew my vengeance on the man who had taken my life into his hands. . . .

The tenth of July came at last—the fatal day. I arose feeling as well as usual, but by noon I noticed my heart-beats growing a little slower, and also detected slight signs of fever. It was the first feeling of physical discomfort that I had experienced in five years, and I had not the slightest doubt that it betokened the end.

I spoke of it to Alice, asking her to telephone for Dr. Shelton, and on no account to enter my room after he came, nor until the following morning. I pressed tender kisses of farewell upon her wondering face, and having sent her away, I set about my preparations for murdering the doctor before my own end should come.

As he entered my room, a hypocritically professional smile on his lips and a scarcely-veiled triumph in his eyes, I seized him and gagged him—for my strength was still prodigious, in spite of my rapidly failing heart-beats. Then I bound him with leather straps to a bare table that I had dragged into the middle of the floor, having first coolly stripped his coat, shirt, and undershirt from his body. I produced a shining knife from his own bag (he had just come from the surgery) and flourished it meaningly before his horrified eyes.

“Do you remember what you did to me five years ago today, at 3 o'clock?” I asked, through closed teeth, my fingers writhing about the handle of the knife. “It is now my

turn. I have still an hour in which to wreak my vengeance, and it shall be to the full! I am going to cut your heart out, and leave it to a museum for natural freaks, for, although you still live, it has been petrified for five years!”

Another moment, and I would have plunged the shining blade into his bosom. But my own moment of dissolution was come. . . . a numbness seized me, my nerveless hand loosened its grip on the knife, that clattered to the floor, everything grew dark, my heart-throbs seemed to cease entirely, and I felt myself falling—falling, through endless blackness. My last conscious thought was a bitter, poignant reflection on the injustice of everything, of the vengeance cruelly torn from my grasp at the last moment.

I OPENED my eyes, to find the sun shining across a well-ordered hospital room, reflected from a vase of rose-colored flowers similar to those carried by the nurse who had accompanied my little wagon into the elevator, previous to the operation. And at my side, the same sun bringing out golden light in the waving bronze hair above her smooth forehead, the same nurse!

I gazed up at her for a time in puzzled silence. She had brown eyes with reddish lights in their depths, a bewitching, tantalizing dimple that came and went at the corner of her mouth on the slightest provocation, and a tiny round black spot just under her left eye, where the soft skin would crinkle when she laughed. . . . Alice, of course. . . but Alice was not a nurse. And she wouldn't have left the baby at home, anyway. Then my glance fell upon a calendar on the wall.

“Why,” I gasped, involuntarily, “that calendar still says 1925.”

"Precisely," smiled my nurse, her soft hand slipping from my wrist, as she snapped shut the little gold watch she had been studying. Then she added, teasingly, "How long did you suppose you had been under the anesthetic?"

"Five years," I answered, faintly and somewhat doubtfully. The dimple danced merrily at the corner of her mouth, as she smothered a peal of low, silvery laughter.

"You were under just a few minutes," she answered, "and I thought that quite long enough."

"Where is—Dr. Shelton?" I managed to ask, after another minute's study.

Her sweet face grew grave and concerned—just as I had seen it do a thousand times in the past four years (now fast receding with the things that were not) over the misfortunes of another.

"Poor old doctor! You were hardly under the ether when he collapsed. It seemed he has been overworking, and a serious fever is setting in. His colleague, young Dr. Strahorn, knew much about your case, and thought Dr. Shelton might not have been entirely responsible when he insisted on removing your appendix, without more serious symptoms having set in. So they did not operate, after all, but you are to remain here ten days for treatment, just the same."

I gasped. Now, my brain having cleared rapidly, I knew what it was I had seen in his eyes as I went under—merely the premonitory symptoms of the breakdown brought on by a too conscientious adherence to his duty. And I had tried to murder him . . . but no, had I? Where were the past five years, anyway?

I felt a sudden stinging sensation in the center of my breast. Misgivings again seized me.

"Alice," I asked, gravely, "are you sure there was *no* operation performed?"

"Of course I am," she answered.

Then a look of remembrance came into her eyes.

"Oh yes, I forgot. Dr. Strahorn thought it a good opportunity, while you were so sound asleep, to remove that large mole on your chest. You didn't mind, did you?"

I shook my head, and then lay quite still, studying her delicate profile.

"How did you know that my name is Alice?" she asked, suddenly.

"I do not know," I answered, truthfully.

And to this day I do not know. We were quite alone. I put out my hand feebly and touched hers, to attract her attention. She seemed to have forgotten me in the contemplation of some problem far removed.

"Alice," I asked, gravely, "will you marry me?"

"Certainly not," she answered, in a matter-of-fact tone, though perhaps the rose-colored flowers had thrown a brighter reflection on her cheeks. "You have known me less than half an hour."

"I have known and loved you for more than four years," I answered, earnestly. She looked at me in a shocked way, and opening the little gold watch, began counting my pulse again in a professional manner.

I TURNED my head on my pillow with a satisfied sigh, at the touch of her soft little hand, that had soothed my dreams a hundred times in the past, still real to me. Ah, well, of course she could not be expected to understand until I had a chance to explain! But I was sure of ten days, at any rate—which is quite long enough for the wooing of a man who has been thirty years about beginning it!