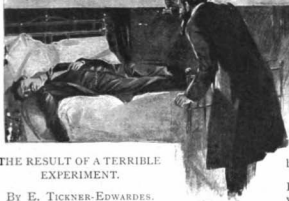


## THE MAN WHO MEDDLED WITH ETERNITY



THE RESULT OF A TERRIBLE  
EXPERIMENT.

BY E. TICKNER-EDWARDES.

### I.

"BUTE WALTON? The very luckiest beggar on the face of the earth!"

The speaker was a tall, bronzed man, and the words were uttered so vehemently that everyone at Sir James Banyard's end of the table turned to him in surprise.

Dinner was over; the ladies were gone; and the talk, as usual at Sir James' cosy little medico-scientific *réunions*, had drifted into two main channels. The broad-shouldered stranger had attached himself to the little knot of men clustered round Professor Starkie's chair, and had sat quietly puffing at his cigar and listening intently to the renowned physiologist until Walton's name had caught his ear. And then he had turned suddenly towards Sir James' circle, forgetting for the moment all about the doctrine of transmigration of souls, on which the professor had been holding forth so brilliantly.

"Bute Walton?" the stranger repeated, more calmly and collected now that he observed all eyes turned upon him. "I knew him once. He comes from Bedford, and his wife as well. I knew her, too, intimately, long before she was Mrs. Walton."

"Then, Gallier, you are the man with the key!" cried Sir James. "You will be able to tell us all about the lady. Clinthorpe here was saying she was the most beautiful woman he ever beheld in his life."

The quick blood rose under the bronze of Gallier's face as he looked towards Clin-

thorpe. Then he turned abruptly away, the flush burning deeper and deeper under his swarthy skin, and spoke almost below his breath.

"Yes, she *is* beautiful; or was, I should say, for it is a good ten years since I saw her last. You know, Sir James, I have been all over the world since then, and so out of the world. And I had no idea, until I overheard your talk just now, that Bute Walton was anything more than the obscure country practitioner he used to be in the days I knew him. So he has come to town, and blossomed out into a famous consultant, has he? What is his subject, by the bye?"

Clinthorpe had kept his grey, glittering eyes steadily upon the speaker. He now laughed in his slow, mirthless way.

"You don't seem to know much about our new celebrity, Dr. Gallier," he said. "And yet you called him just now the luckiest beggar on the face of the earth! Perhaps you had him in your mind only as the fortunate possessor of the fair lady?"

No one could have been more astounded than was little Clinthorpe when he found himself suddenly seized by the collar with a grasp that sent his gold *pince-nez* clattering off among the decanters on the table. In a moment everyone was round the pair. But before a hand could be raised to separate them Gallier had released his hold, and had fallen back, confused and ashamed of his precipitate conduct.

Sir James Banyard, much distressed at such a *contretemps* in his house, stood wholly at a loss between them, when Gallier did the only thing possible.

"I am sorry," he said. "I must ask Mr. Clinthorpe's pardon, and yours, too, Sir James. I have lived so long among savages that I see I have forgotten that I was ever born and bred a gentleman."

Mr. Clinthorpe, I am very sorry. Perhaps if you allow me to withdraw from the house at once, Sir James, it will——"

Clinthorpe came forward, seeing what all expected of him.

"Not at all! not at all!" he said, holding out his hand to Gallier with a kind of sulky gaiety. "The funniest thing in the world! You must have mistaken me for one of your Gold Coast blackamoors. Quite a new experience, I assure you."

The professor's voice sounded from the other end of the table, where he had again taken his seat close to his own special Tantalus.

"As I was saying, my dear Polson, we have not only the authority of the great Lessing in support of this wonderful theory of the passing of a soul of a man after death into some other man's body. It has been held by advanced thinkers of every age from time immemorial. Pythagoras believed in it. It was part of the faith of the Manichæans. We can trace its influence century by century throughout all the East. And, for myself, recent researches and experiments have convinced me that if only we knew a little more about the mysterious connection between Soul and Body, it would be perfectly possible to—— What, already, Sir James! Well, well, I suppose we must not neglect the ladies."

When Gallier left the hospitable house in Curzon Street, he did not go direct to his hotel. Instead, he turned into Grosvenor Crescent, and stood for a long while in the quiet, moonlit night, looking up at the windows of a great mansion there. For the first time, perhaps, during many years of his past busy life he had allowed his thoughts to drift far away from nigger-doctoring and gold-prospecting in the West African swamps he knew so well. He was thinking only of a little country hospital he once held sway over in distant Bedfordshire; thinking of the cosy matron's quarters there, and contrasting them with the great blank house before him.

"Lettie Carrol, Lettie Carrol!" he was musing to himself, for he had never borne to think of her as Lettie Walton. "How long ago it all seems since you and I were splitting bandages together and talking nonsense. But you never understood how things were going with me—never! And now all that is ten years ago. Years! It seems ages and ages.

"Well, it could not have been his money," he went on, after a while. "He was poor enough in those days. She must have loved him, and loved him well. For if she had ever thought of money——" Something very like a sob burst uncontrollably from Stephen Gallier's lips. "Ah! It is the old fever! The old mad unrest! Will it never leave me? Will there never be a day when I can forget? What a cursed fool I was to come back after all these years!"

He was striding away furiously from the house when a smart carriage came humming by him, and drew to a sudden halt in his rear. He turned and saw that it had stopped at the Waltons'. With his heart thumping in his temples he walked rapidly towards it. The footman was already down, opening the carriage door, and a lady had descended. Gallier quickened his pace, and as he passed in the glare from the carriage-lamps his eyes came full upon those of Lettie Walton! He saw her start—saw her look of recognition. Breathlessly he hurried on; then turned, and knew that she stood looking after him, in all her old proud beauty, only heightened by the years that were gone. He came slowly back to her.

"Lettie, Lettie!" he cried. "Do you remember me? And after all these years!"

The lady made a quick involuntary step to meet him. Then he saw her glance fall; she turned abruptly—as he thought, disdainfully—away. The next moment she had entered the house, and the door had shut behind her. Stephen Gallier was alone again with his old year-worn misery, alone with his aching, breaking heart.

## II.

"DR. GALLIER," said Professor Starkie, as he took a long, searching, wondering look at his burly visitor, "do you fully realise what it is you propose to me? Have you well reflected on all the consequences to yourself if my theory on this matter should prove to be an erroneous one?"

Stephen Gallier met the beetling glance as steadily as he had done throughout the long interview. His face had gradually lost colour, but his voice rang as deep and firm as ever.

"I perfectly comprehend the dangers and the chances, sir," he replied. "And I offer myself for the experiment, entirely foreseeing what failure may mean to me. At the worst it is only death, and that I

have rubbed shoulders with too often to care for at this time."

The professor got up from his chair. His face had become as bloodless now as that of his visitor. Slowly he walked away down the long laboratory to the window at its furthest end, and stood looking out into the darkness of the hospital square. For a minute or two there was silence but for the soft lashing of the sleet on the panes. Then Gallier heard his step returning—quickly, heavily, all the doubt and hesitation gone from it. He came up to his visitor.

"We will try it!

Yes! we will try it!" he cried, a strange exultation thrilling his voice and flashing in his deep-set eyes. "You are a hero, Gallier, and in a higher, nobler cause than ever yet fell to the lot of man. There is no red bonfire of war crackling round the path of your noble self-sacrifice. It is for the love of science alone—"

Gallier stopped him for very shame.

"Tell me what is to be done," he said, hurriedly, his glance lowered and turned away. "What

process, what preparation is necessary? Say what I am to do, and I will do it."

Professor Starkie unlocked a safe, and took from it a small steel cylinder, such as is used by chemists for the storage of compressed gas. Holding it and guarding it as though it were of priceless value, he confronted his visitor, and began to speak

in a voice still plainly overwrought by excitement.

"Now, Dr. Gallier, listen to me. I was a very young man when the possibility of this ancient theory having a solid basis of truth first dawned on me. Yet, until a very short time ago, all the research of a long lifetime had carried me little more than one step on the way. This much only

I had fully ascertained: I had proved to myself, over and



"HE FOUND HIMSELF SUDDENLY SEIZED BY THE COLLAR."

over again, that the soul was not so fast a prisoner within the body as scientists had hitherto believed.

By gradually weakening the tissues, I found it possible to draw away from my physical self. In these experiments I stood for a brief period by the side of my own body, feeling myself separate from it, but unable to move from its vicinity. Yet I never got further than that, and I always found it impossible to sustain the condition for more than a very short time, because the means at my disposal for reducing and refining the bodily vigour had been hitherto very deficient and temporary in their character.

"But now, Gallier," continued the professor, "all this is changed. You come in the nick of time, for I have lately made a great forward step. I have discovered a new medium; as I believe, a new element; and it is this which makes possible the experiment we are going to undertake to-night. From the common air I have succeeded in isolating a gas which has a most remarkable action upon the whole body, when taken pure into the lungs. Now, understand that all my experiments with it have been made hitherto upon animals, and for a very good reason. I have found that its peculiar action, once set up, cannot be arrested by any means I have been able to discover. The process is invariably the same. Once the gas is inhaled, all the bodily forces begin to subside. Slowly, but inevitably, the muscles lose their power of contraction; the tissues visibly collapse; the heart runs down, until it is impossible to say from the pulse whether life exists or not. In fact, for hours before death actually takes place, the subject must be in exactly that state of debility, that extreme attenuation of bodily life, in which, as I believe, the soul is no longer fettered to the body, but is free at last to voyage abroad and seek some new living earthly tenement."

Gallier had risen to his feet, his bright, bloodshot eyes fixed upon the rugged, enthusiastic face before him. He now held up a quick hand for silence.

"Tell me this one thing, professor. Would the man have the power to choose the living body into which his soul is to enter?"

"Dr. Gallier, I know nothing—*nothing*. Yet why should it not be so? My theory is that there would be a fight for the citadel; then the strongest would win, and—*Stop!*"

With a cry that had a strange, triumphant gladness in it, Gallier had made a sudden movement toward the cylinder. But the professor held it from him.

"Stop! Man, you are not mad? We must have no dead bodies unaccounted for here! Dead men are stubborn facts, even in a hospital laboratory; and all the scientific explanations in the world would not save Professor Starkie, F.R.S., from the hangman. No; there is much to be thought of before the experiment can be commenced. Now listen to me!"

With smouldering impatience Gallier heard the volley of minute instructions

through to an end. Ten minutes later he was in a hansom at the hospital gate, the fateful cylinder in his pocket, and the professor leaning his head in with one last warning word:

"Remember! It must be of your own free will; or not at all. You can draw back now. But the step once taken, there is no recall—none. Do you fully understand?"

He was answered by a laugh, so hard and sudden and reckless that he drew back in grim amazement. A hand was stretched out to him: as he grasped it he noted how hot and dry it was.

"Good-bye, professor. Until our next merry meeting! If it is in the flesh, I will not forget the countersign; and if it all turns out a myth, why then we must console one another through the planchette! Au revoir! Auf wieder sehen!"

At the Hôtel — Gallier mounted straight to his room. He looked at his watch: it was nearing eight o'clock. Sitting down at the table, he wrote a short, hurried note; sealed and addressed it. Then, ringing the bell, he handed it to the waiter who came to his summons.

"I am feeling extremely unwell," he said. "Take this letter as fast as you can to Dr. Bute Walton in Grosvenor Crescent, and tell him to come as quickly as possible."

Gallier waited until the door had closed upon his messenger. Then, taking Professor Starkie's cylinder from his overcoat pocket, he turned the stop-cock gently on. The gas rushed screaming into the elastic store chamber. With trembling fingers Gallier set the mouthpiece to his lips, letting the sweet, faint current fill his lungs again and again. When it was quite exhausted he walked to the window, and threw the cylinder far out into the dense, dark shrubbery of the garden below.

Then, already faint and weak and giddy, he staggered towards his bed, and lay quietly down upon it, to await the coming of the man he envied of all others in the world.

### III.

DEEP, blinding night, and a sense of falling, falling, through the limitless darkness. Then as swift an upward flight, meteor-like, through the black void again; far above into a world that seemed to be ringing with a thousand voices, and flashing with a thousand contending fires. Then down once more, yet slower now, and slower:

until his feet seemed to touch firm ground ; until the voices were lost in the distance ; until all the lights were dwindled and gone, all save one that now burned steadily near him.

Conscious only of this one unchanging thing in the giddy swirl of his surroundings, Stephen Gallier fixed his eyes upon it, watching it until its familiar shape grew clear upon his mind. It was the flame of a candle. Slowly his vision cleared, his brain grew calmer. He saw that the light stood upon a table ; that he himself was no

There upon the quilt lay his own form, the form of Stephen Gallier ; shrunken, perished to a shadow of its former strength, yet still plainly recognisable.

And then, like a thunder clap, the whole truth burst upon him. Professor Starkie's theory had proved the right one : the great experiment had succeeded !

Shaking like an aspen, yet with a fierce joy already beginning to stir within him, Gallier crossed to his travelling valise. He drew out



"SHE STOOD  
LOOKING AFTER  
HIM IN ALL  
HER OLD PROUD  
BEAUTY."

longer prone upon his bed, but sitting by it. Looking down he became conscious of a startling change about his person. The clothes he wore were strange to him. He caught sight of his hands. His hands ! White, strong, yet delicate—they could not be his ! Yet he controlled them. He felt the weight of a gold watch in one : with the other he held fast to something—something that stretched out from the bedside.

Cold, clammy—it was a dead hand !

With a cry he threw it from him ; staggered to his feet ; turned ; and chanced upon the mirror. Again the cry broke from his lips ! Not his own blue eyes, and sunburnt face, and greying hair ; but another face—one that he had not seen for ten long years—looked out upon him ! Bute Walton's ! Pale and calm and studious—there was only one face like that ! Wildly he turned again, and looked upon the bed,

a brandy flask, and, getting it to his pallid lips, drank deeply from it. The spirit ran through his veins like fire, and lashed up his fallen courage. He strode again to the mirror, again he looked at the dreadful thing upon the bed. Then at last the events of the foregoing hour came flooding back into his brain. The long wait as he lay upon the couch, his life ebbing away, his heart failing, the cold of death creeping up his limbs. Then the arrival of his former friend ; his own soul's leap tiger-like upon him ; the conflict as they seemed to fall grappling together through the

outer darkness—he lived through it all once more as he stood gazing by turns upon his own shrunken body and at his new image in the glass.

And now one thought alone took definite and immediate shape. The old drab, lonesome life, the old helpless, hungering years of sorrow, were ended. At last the barrier



"HE THREW THE CYLINDER FAR OUT INTO THE DARK SHRUBBERY."

between him and the woman he worshipped was swept away. He was free to go to her now as swiftly as his feet could take him. Her love was his: his strong arms would soon be round her, his kisses thick as rain upon her lips. She would be his for all time now, his only; and neither life nor death should ever part them more.

The pale face, looking out upon him from the mirror, flushed scarlet at the thought: the dark eyes lit up with a sombre, gleaming fire. For a moment Stephen Gallier stood and met his own gaze, laughing softly to himself the while. Then, with a sudden impetuous haste to be gone, he turned, and laid a heavy hand upon the bell-rope.

"You have called me too late," he said, as quietly as he was able, when answer came to his summons. "The gentleman is dead; how, it is impossible to say at present. Ask the manager to step up. And you had better send word round to the nearest police station at once."

The scared waiter disappeared. The room began to fill with eager faces. As in a dream Gallier made the necessary depositions: as in a dream he went down the long staircase, and found himself at last outside in the dripping winter's night. Bute Walton's carriage stood close by. The coachman leaned from his box for instructions.

"Home!"

Home! The word was continually on his trembling lips as the vehicle flashed through the lighted streets. Home! The heart of Stephen Gallier was going home at last to the woman whose name had been seared upon it so many long years. But now she was his by right: he had risked soul and body in one great cast, and had won her. In his mounting eagerness he threw the window down, and called to the driver to hasten; stood up, straining his eyes into the bright-fretted darkness ahead; listened now to the throbbing of his own heart, now to the song of the whip lash as it fell upon the scampering greys.

At last the carriage drew out of the Piccadilly crush, and turned into the humming silence of the crescent. Gallier was out before the wheels had ceased to revolve. A moment more, and the gate of his new-found Paradise had closed behind him.

"Is your mistress still up?"

He put the question to the servant as carelessly as possible, but he knew his burning face and deep-drawn breath could not go unmarked. The man broke off in an irrepressible gape of surprise, and hastened to make answer. His mistress had just gone to her room. Without another word

Gallier hurried on, and up the broad, crimson-carpeted stairway.

He had not dared to show his ignorance of the house. He must find the way unaided. Door after door he passed, listening intently outside one, softly opening another. Only darkness in this room—darkness and the rattle of the sleet upon the panes. In this one a dim rosy light, with a supper table spread for two. Then at last a door close-curtained. He pulled the drapery gently aside, softly turned the handle. A bright glow of fire-light within—and silence again. Silence? There was a sound there, suppressed, yet strangely audible—a sound of passionate weeping.

With his heart threshing wildly within him, Gallier pushed the door noiselessly back. He saw a woman sitting by a table, her face buried in her arms, her shoulders heaving up and down with the grief that was racking her.

"Lettie!" What sorrow could be hers here in this great luxurious house, with all that wealth, refinement, could bring her?

The exclamation, stifled as it was, reached her ears, rousing her in a moment to her feet. Silently she stood, trying to hide the tears upon her cheek, trying to bring a smile of welcome for him into her glance. But it was in vain: the tears flowed more abundantly than ever. At last she turned away; sank again into her seat; gave herself up wholly to the grief that would not be denied.

"No, don't speak to me, Bute! Leave me alone for a little while. I

did not know you had returned. I—I——"

He had sprung forward, love, joy, infinite passion ringing in his voice, as he tried to comfort her. But at his first touch she rose again, beating him wildly off with both hands.

"No, Bute, it will not do. I cannot bear it any longer. I cannot bear to hear



"DON'T SPEAK TO ME, BUTE," SHE SAID."

your loving words; you so brave and kind and trusting. An end must soon come to all this wickedness and deceit; and why not now, why not tonight? Bute, I must speak—sooner or later you must know—O God in Heaven, help me! help me to tell him!"

She was down again now, her face

hidden in her hands. Without changing her posture or ceasing to rock herself to and fro, she went rapidly on—

"Bute, listen and judge me. I wronged you when I married you, for I loved another. Oh, Bute, you cannot tell how hard I tried to overcome my love for him, but it has always mastered me. And now chance has brought us together again after so

Her words died away, whelmed in her pitiful sobbing.

The man she thought to be her husband stood before her, white as death itself; his hands raised bickering to his eyes, as though to ward off some noxious, blinding light. As she ceased his grip descended, fastening on her wrist like a vice. He screamed the words into her ear:

"Who was this man? Tell me his name! Not——"

"Yes, Stephen Gallier."

She was at his feet now; clasping them with both hands; kissing them; humbling herself to him. Silently he drew away from her, away from the room. Blindly, not knowing whither his feet led him, he passed into the upper regions of the house. He felt himself choking. Air! Air! Tottering to a window, he threw it open.

"There is no recall—none." The words of the professor dinned in Stephen Gallier's ears as he leaned sightlessly out into the chilly air. No recall—none! But yesterday the thing he most coveted in all the world, this woman's love, was his; and he did not know it. But he had meddled with Eternity, and the Great Machine had caught him up and annihilated him. Now love and life and honour, his very soul even, were all alike lost to him; lost by his own act.

"STEPHEN GALLIER LEAPED UPON THE WINDOW-SILL AND HURLED HIMSELF INTO THE NIGHT."

many years. Only last night I met him face to face. And now, Bute, I cannot, dare not eat your bread, and bear your kisses, knowing that I love this man. You must let me go away, and live my life out in some distant hiding-place far away from this great temptation. It is the only thing to be done."

The cloud rift closed above: a great darkness was suddenly upon everything. It was as if the ultimate Gate of Hope were even then shutting against him. With a last despairing cry, he leaped upon the window-sill, and hurled himself out into the night.

