

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XIII

NUMBER 3

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 18, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

*NOTE*—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.  
FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Copyright, 1929, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

## Contents for March, 1929

- Cover Design..... C. C. Senf  
*Illustrating a scene in "The People of Pan"*
- The People of Pan..... Henry S. Whitehead 292  
*Under the surface of a West Indian island Canevin found a strange people who worshiped Pan—then the catastrophe*
- The City of Iron Cubes (Part 1)..... H. F. Arnold 306  
*A two-part weird-scientific serial story by the author of "The Night Wire"—strange invaders from space land in Peru*
- The Immortal Hand..... Arlton Eadie 325  
*A ghost-story of Shakespeare and Stratford-on-Avon—three tourists make a startling discovery*
- Visions in Smoke..... Rufus W. Landon 332  
*Verse*
- The Deserted Garden..... August W. Derleth 333  
*He investigated the mysterious death of his predecessor—and himself fell a victim to an elemental spirit*

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

- The Rat**.....**S. Fowler Wright** 337  
*The surgeon experimented on a blind rat, then committed a strange murder—a story by the author of "The Deluge"*
- The Sea Horror**.....**Edmond Hamilton** 351  
*In their cities in the ocean depths the slug-people launched their war against the civilization of man*
- The Hounds of Tindalos**.....**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 373  
*A tale of unutterable horror—of a pursuit by loathsome entities through the ages and through the dimensions*
- Ballade of Wandering Ghosts**.....**Hanna Baird Campbell** 382  
*Verse*
- The Vengeance of the Dead (Conclusion)**.....**Eli Colter** 383  
*A two-part serial story of a strange monstrosity whose ghastly depredations terrified the guests at Waggener Wilds*
- The Celadon Vase**.....**John Murray Reynolds** 397  
*The alchemist devised an ingenious trap in which to catch his lady and test her faithfulness*
- Folks Used to Believe:**
- May Dew**.....**Alvin F. Harlow** 403  
    *One of the strange superstitions of our ancestors*
- Left by the Tide**.....**Edward E. Schiff** 404  
    *A bizarre tale of the sea—the story of a gruesome struggle with a monstrosity out of the deeps*
- Weird Story Reprint:**
- The Phantom Farmhouse**.....**Seabury Quinn** 406  
    *A reprint from Weird Tales of six years ago—a werewolf story of unusual pathos and beauty*
- Sonnets of the Midnight Hours:**
- 12. A Vision of the Future**.....**Donald Wandrei** 420  
    *Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin*
- The Eyrie**..... 421  
    *A chat with the readers*

---

For Advertising Rates in WEIRD TALES Apply Direct to

**WEIRD TALES**

Western Advertising Office:  
**YOUNG & WARD, Mgrs.**  
360 N. Michigan Ave.  
Chicago, Ill.  
Phone, Central 6269

Eastern Advertising Office:  
**GEORGE W. STEARNS, Mgr.**  
Flatiron Building  
New York, N. Y.  
Phone, Algonquin 8328

# The RAT <sup>By</sup> S. Fowler Wright



"He looked at it again at midday, and called his wife to observe it."

**D**R. MERSON looked at the dying rat, and decided that, should he delay his experiment longer, it would be dead before morning.

He had nursed it now for nearly six months, and it had been very old and blind and feeble when he had bought it.

He had told Briggs that he would give him £5 for the oldest rat in Belsham, and the rat-catcher had earned his money.

It had surprized him, when he had first approached the subject, to realize how difficult it would be to find an animal that was really old and feeble. He had to observe that nature does not encourage the prolongation of pain and weariness: when health goes, life very quickly follows.

But he knew that, in the course of their age-long warfare with the human race, the rats had arrived at some social organization, and had adopted

W. T.—2

some of our practises, and in particular, that when a disease of blindness (to which they are very liable) attacks them, they may be nursed and fed by members of their family, so that life is prolonged to an age which would otherwise be impossible.

So he had asked for an aged rat, and had watched its vitality recede, till now it was too weak to crawl toward the tempting food that was offered. . . . It was so dull with age that it did not flinch when the needle pricked it.

2

**T**HE next morning it was not dead. It lay sleeping; old, and blind, and decrepit. It was not pleasant to look at, but it may have been less feeble than the night before—and the food had been eaten.

Dr. Merson, observing this, became aware that his heart was beating fast, with a sudden excitement, of which

337

he had not supposed himself to be capable.

When he looked at it again at mid-day, and observed that it was feebly attending to a neglected toilet, he did a thing which was less wise than his usual custom, calling his wife to observe it.

Mrs. Merson disliked his experiments; and his own habit of professional reticence disinclined him from speech which had no immediate purpose. But this was a discovery of such momentous consequence that he was impelled to share it.

"You mean that no one need ever die?" she asked incredulously. She was not greatly impressed, even if she took it with any seriousness. She was a healthy young woman, utterly without imagination, and the cook had given notice an hour ago.

"Yes, it might mean that—or nearly—unless by accident. . . . You see," he continued, to an auditor who scarcely heard him. "it isn't really new. We've known for a long time that youth would continue if the cells of which the body is built could have the right stimuli, but it's been difficult to find what they are. Some of the lower forms of life never die, as it is. The old ones break apart, and each part acquires a new impulse of growth from the shock of that division. But in the higher animals there is a change in the substance or activities of the cells as the years pass, the nature of which has been difficult to ascertain, though its results have been evident. . . ."

He stopped, as he became aware that Mrs. Merson had ceased to listen. She regarded the sleeping rat with disfavor.

"I shouldn't think anything wants to live when it's that old," she said, with decision. She had the impatience of healthy youth for all signs of decrepitude. They seemed stupid.

She heard the voice of the butcher at the back door, and her mind re-

verted to matters of greater urgency. She went back to the kitchen.

## 3

**T**HE rat improved very slowly. Its appetite increased. It moved more briskly. It gained weight. It gave more attention to its toilet. It became wilder, and more alert to the sounds around it. Finally, its sight returned.

The process was not rapid, but continuous. At the end of three months from when it had received the injection (which had not been repeated), it showed the bodily activity and physique of a young rat.

Dr. Merson did not mention it again to his wife, nor did he seek another confidant. He became thoughtful, and, at times, appeared to be suffering from acute depression. His patients complained, and his practise suffered.

The fact is that he was beginning to fear the consequences of his discovery.

At first, it had seemed simple—and stupendous. He was about to benefit his race as no man had done before him. Had he not found a way by which death itself was defeated? He saw that it would change the whole face of the earth. Old age would become an obscene tradition. Disease would be powerless to overcome the new vitality which he had discovered. Men would no longer die as their minds approached the threshold of wisdom.

He thought of his own patients. There was Mrs. Corner, who would be dead of tuberculosis within a year, unless he should use his new power for her rescue—Minnie Corner, with three young children, fighting her hopeless battle, always "a little better today" when he called to watch the slow, relentless progress of a disease that he could not conquer. He would be very glad to give her health. Having it in his power, it was a clear and simple duty, as her doctor, to do it. But (so far as he could suppose) he

would do more than that. He would give her an approximation to immortality. Not absolute immortality. Her body would still be liable to be damaged or destroyed by violence. Certainly, it would have no power to survive the planet on which it lived. It would be liable to drowning, or suffocation. But it would no longer be in subjection to the treachery of time. Fed, and guarded from violence, it would not age nor decay. There was something odd in imagining Minnie Corner immortal. But there was nothing repellent. He supposed it would mean treating her children in the same way. They would be annoyed if they observed themselves growing old and feeble, while their mother remained young. It would confuse the relationship. Neither would she thank him for such a tableau. He knew Mrs. Corner well enough to realize that there would be no rest for him till he had conferred the same boon upon her household that he should give to her. Well, why not?

About two of the children there would be no difficulty. But he disliked Peter. He disliked Peter intensely. He could not endure the thought of an immortal Peter. It wasn't the clubfoot, though it did seem a pity that it should become an abiding feature of a world grown static: it was certain qualities of meanness and cruelty which the boy had shown from infancy, which his mother had lamented, but which she had been powerless to influence.

According to the law of nature which now prevailed, Peter would grow old, and in due course he would die, and his unpleasant characteristics would perish with him. He might have children, but these children would be different from himself, whether better or worse, and, in due course, they would have still different children, the race repeating itself with an unending variety.

Somehow, this seemed a better prospect than that of an enduring Peter.

Yet he could not imagine an arrangement being smoothly made by which Peter would be consigned to an exceptional mortality. However carefully his moral and physical inferiorities, and the importance of his early elimination, might be explained to him, Dr. Merson felt sure that he would resent it furiously. He imagined a violent assault upon his own person by an adult and desperate Peter to whom he was refusing the boon of immortality. Even a murderous assault. . . .

His mind was diverted to observe that murder would become a more serious crime than it now is—the risk of being murdered a more dreadful possibility. Indeed, all physical risks would be taken at an almost infinitely greater price, and — presumably — with a corresponding reluctance.

It was a relief to abandon these speculations to the task of lancing a boil on the neck of the landlord of the *Spotted Cow*.

## 4

THE weeks went on, and the rat continued, and even increased its youthful vigor. Its eyes were bright. Its coat was smooth and glossy. Its movements were lithe and swift. It was fierce, and watchful for a chance of biting. Once its teeth met in the sleeve of Dr. Merson's coat, and the incident led him to wonder whether its new vitality could be communicated by the medium of a bite. He was aware that the thought gave him a sensation of a peril escaped, and he realized that he was already regarding his discovery with apprehension rather than pleasure. Certainly, he had no wish to have its benefits thrust upon him before he had deliberated more fully on their ultimate consequences.

Also, the rat was disconcertingly watchful for a chance of escaping

from its confinement. Once it actually got its head through the closing door, and it needed a sharp blow to induce it to abandon the hope of freedom. Dr. Merson had an actual nightmare as the result of imagining that if had escaped, and that his invention was destroyed or forgotten, so that the world would pass at last to the dominion of a continually increasing army of immortal rats.

## 5

**A**FTER that incident, Dr. Merson became more careful to lock the door of the laboratory in which the rat was confined, and to keep the key in his pocket. Considering the possibilities which might follow should it be accidentally let loose, he realized how little he yet knew of the nature of his discovery. He could not even say whether the vitality it conferred would be passed on to succeeding generations. He imagined some prolific and noxious insect inoculated to immortality, and still exercising a blind fecundity. It might become uncontrollable, and destroy everything before it. That would be a weird ending to created life on this abortive planet, which must already be a joke to all surrounding intelligences.

Yet the idea was more than remotely possible. He imagined his discovery made public, and its advantages become the common property of mankind, and then some super-criminal threatening his race with the results of such an inoculation of some hostile vermin, unless they should do his pleasure eternally.

Day by day his mind renewed its efforts to probe the consequences of his discovery, and retired bewildered, as it encountered some new problem, or some obvious result which he had not previously contemplated.

He saw that the human race would become static. Not in brain, perhaps; but, at least, in body. That alone must make profound differences, produce profound cleavages. The ugly

and deformed must remain so to all eternity, perhaps with an increased vitality: but vitality would not alter structure.

There might be an agitation to eliminate the obviously unfit in brain or body, and to replace them with healthier children. But who would decide? Would those who were judged inferior be content to be sacrificed? He imagined fierce and ruthless wars of extermination. Suppose, again, that the white races should attempt to confine his discovery to their own use. He imagined the black and yellow races attacking them with a mad ferocity, to force the priceless secret from them. Would the white race yield, or would they risk their potentially immortal bodies in such a conflict? If they should yield, would not the latent animosities of race and race still remain, to break out into wars which, under such conditions, must result in servitude or extermination?

He saw that, in the absence of widespread war, the world would soon reach a maximum population, and that children must cease . . . or, perhaps, an occasional child might be permitted to replace an accidental death . . . or a large number of children to replace the wastage of war. Would the race remain capable of these occasional fertilities? Or would it arrive at a position at which its numbers would be reduced (however slowly) by occasional misadventures, and these reductions would be irreplaceable?

Or if children should remain a potential possibility, would not the desire for them become at times irresistible with at least many of the unoccupied women? Might they not welcome a war which would throw upon them the duty of replacement?

He was roused from these visions by the consciousness that he was at Mrs. Empsey's bedside.

It was some years since Mrs. Empsey had walked across her bedroom

floor. Her daughter, Ada, waited on her without complaint, and earned a little money by sewing and taking care of the neighbors' children. It was many years since Joe Horton had asked for any rent for the cottage. They had a few shillings weekly from the parish. So they lived.

Dr. Merson had not sent in a bill for ten years past. He never thought of doing so. He had fought as hard for Mrs. Empsey's life as for that of his wealthiest patient. It was all in the day's work.

But he had not been able to cure her. Indeed, he had not hoped to do so. Even now, he was not certain that her damaged interior could be reconstructed, though he could give her a new vitality. But he hoped, even for that. Anyway, she would be about again, and Ada could marry the booking-clerk at Belsham station, who had courted her long enough. They were both over thirty. Here was one of the first places to which his discovery would bring a joy almost beyond imagination. Mrs. Empsey had always clung to life with a desperate cowardice. But even here he would do nothing—would say nothing—too hastily. The whole prospect was so stupendous.

He checked himself in writing a prescription which would have placed his patient beyond the power of any drug to revive her. . . . That was another thought. . . . The power of poisons would continue. . . . If the certainty of death were removed, would the dread of such contingencies be increased until life would become an intolerable care to avoid them? Only experience could resolve that problem.

## 6

**O**UT of much confusion, a thought came in the end, clearly born out of chaos. If he were right that his discovery could give perpetual youth to mankind, it could only mean that a limited number of people would live

long, where, otherwise, a larger number of people would have lived for a shorter time. Putting aside all theories of a future life, all the speculations or dogmatisms of religion, its only result could be to make the single life longer, and the individual lives less numerous. Finally, therefore, it could only be advantageous if it resulted in higher and happier conditions of life than those which were prevailing around him. It would abolish children. It would abolish age. It would make youth perpetual. Youth was the desire of all men. Those who were young desired to retain it. Those who were old would give anything they had to recover it. So much was clear—if he were only sure. Aiming to abolish age, might it not be found—and perhaps too late—that it was youth that had left the world?

By all outward evidences, the rat had regained its youth. Why should he doubt that it was the perpetuity of youth which he would offer to a grateful world? Perhaps he vexed himself because his own mind was too small to understand the greatness of his own discovery.

Yet, could youth be perpetual? Youth was not only of the body, it was of the spirit. He did not know . . . As a doctor, he was predisposed to consider the physical as dominant. But the freshness of youth—?

He considered another possibility. Perhaps age would come, though more gradually, as the spirit tired. Then the body might be periodically inoculated to a new youth, as he had done to the rat, with all the joy of a returning springtime. "If youth but knew!" How many men had wasted youth, and longed for its return in vain, when they had gained the experience which would have valued it more highly, and used it differently! To unite the experience of age with youth's vitality! . . . and then he saw his delusion . . . the joy of

youth is not of experience, but of inexperience. It is because the adventure is new: the path untrodden.

He considered himself. He did not feel old. He was forty-three. He knew that he must appear old to the young people around him. If he were unmarried, and should he ask a young girl to share his life, she might make it a jest to her companions.

But he had a good constitution, and he had lived temperately. His body was still strong and vigorous. Yet he had not the outlook of youth. He realized that his youth would not return, though twenty years should be taken from the age of his body.

With a sudden clarity he realized that, to regain his youth, it was not so much a new body which would be needed; that which he had would serve his purpose well enough, could it only throw off the appearances of thinning hair and growing corpulence, which disguised it from the youth around it; it was a new youth of the soul, an intervening Lethe, which would be needed. . . . He had made no discovery in that direction. Physically, youth might continue, but, as the millenniums passed—even the centuries . . .

## 7

**H**E MADE efforts to regain the standpoint of his own youth, that he might explore its differences. He became absent-minded in reminiscence. . . . He used to write poetry then. He had not done anything quite so foolish for many years. All the same, he had done it rather well. The only weak point was that the poems were usually left unfinished. It was so much easier to get the first lines. The memories of youth moved him to the old impulse. With a sudden keen recovery of emotion he remembered his first meeting with Molly . . . the picnic under the trees . . . the first shy kiss on her shoulder. . . . That was before he had gone to college. . . . He had al-

ways been loyal to her, and she to him. . . . He was not of the shallower sort of those that change lightly. . . . He loved her now as he had loved her then—but oh! the world between. . . .

I can not stand where once I stood. It takes a life to learn  
That none may steer his course to shear the trail of light astern.

That was well expressed. He would have written those lines down twenty years ago. He would have intended to make them into a complete poem. But he knew better now. He knew that they would never be finished. He knew so much—about himself, and others. He even knew his own weaknesses.

That was the trouble. The inexperience of youth was something which could never be recovered, and the experience of age was no substitute. He realized that to abolish age is to abolish youth also.

Seeing this, his mind startled itself with a further possibility—might it be equally true to say that to abolish death would be to abolish life? In a moment's vision he saw life and death in a conflict from which each wins recurrent victory: he saw them interdependent, and this strife as the condition on which they both existed. . . .

## 8

**H**E IMAGINED his discovery applied to the vegetable world; an oak tree in perpetual vigor. . . . Would there be no place left for fruit-time and harvest? For the young growths of spring? There was the question of food—corn must still be grown for food, and mown down in due season—or perhaps there might be developed roots of a continuing vigor? But the question of food was not merely a human one. All life grew by feeding upon the life around it.

This was fundamental. It had an aspect of cruel rapacity, seeming in-



consistent with the idea of a beneficent God. Yet if there be mortality at all, there can be no better end to the outworn or defeated body than to support the vigor of a new life. . . . His mind stooped, bewildered once again before the stupendous nature of the change which his discovery must bring to the earth's economy.

Perhaps the question was too great for one man to face. Would it not be well to announce his discovery, and for some small committee of selected men to consider whether it should be used? . . . But he knew that there would be no such question in the minds of men. They might doubt its advantages for other men, for alien races, for animal or vegetable creations, but for themselves there would be no doubt at all.

It was true that he might withhold the discovery itself, and merely announce that he possessed it, but even that announcement (if it were believed) might rouse an excitement that he could not estimate. . . . He imagined himself mobbed, beaten, even tortured, till he should consent to reveal it to a frantic world. . . .

Pacing the laboratory restlessly, distracted with such thoughts as these, afraid to meet the reproaches of his wife, who could not understand why he was changed and aging so rapidly, so that he had acquired a habit of remaining there till it should be time to go out on his daily round, he regarded the rat, now running up the bars of his cage in a restless and tireless activity, with sudden hatred. He would kill the loathsome thing, and forget the horror he had discovered. Perhaps he might enjoy life once again. . . .

He looked at his watch, and was startled to see that it was half an hour after the usual time at which he set out on his daily round—and he had a consultation with Sir William Brett at 10:30. He went out hurriedly.

SCHOOL was just commencing that morning when Peter Corner left it. He owed his freedom to his ability to take unscrupulous advantage of the caprice of circumstance, and the credulity of his fellows. His two sisters had colds, and his mother had kept them at home. Had he reported to his schoolmistress that his mother suspected measles he would have incurred the risk of ultimate retribution, which he was always adroit to avoid. Instead of that, he made the remark to Jessie Phipson, who could be relied upon to report it promptly. Challenged on the point, he strenuously denied the truth of the suggestion. His mother had never said so. He had told Jessie that they had not got measles *nor* scarlet fever. The mistress did not know what to believe, and sent him home till she could obtain more reliable information. He had expected that.

His expression was almost good-tempered as he dragged his clubfoot toward Dr. Merson's surgery. His sisters usually called for his mother's medicine, but as they had not come to school today the duty fell to him. He did not like going there. He hated Dr. Merson. He hated his eyes, which seemed to see through him without effort, and then to look elsewhere, as though he were not worth seeing. But he had to go today, and he had a hopeful idea this morning. He did not expect to get the medicine before noon. He knew that the doctor was not at home during the mornings. But he could not be blamed for calling on his way home.

He found the surgery door unlocked, as it was sometimes left when Dr. Merson was absent. He had expected that. He knew when and whether most of the doors in Belsham were locked or open. He did not often make use of this knowledge. His physical deformity, and the practical

difficulties of secreting or disposing of illicit gains, had withheld him from active dishonesties. But in his waking dreams (for he had them, as much as more attractive children) he was most often a cat burglar of superhuman audacities.

Had he rung the surgery bell, the maid would have come, or the doctor's wife, but he turned the handle without haste or hesitation, and stood quietly inside, in an attitude of respectful waiting, till he was reassured by the surrounding silence. Then he passed through to the passage. He could not move very quietly, but a sound of crockery in the distant kitchen reassured him, and—beyond his hopes—the key was in the door on the other side of the passage.

Dr. Merson did not often experiment with living animals, but it was generally known that he held a vivisection certificate. It was the dream of Peter's life to enter that room, and view the horrors which he vaguely imagined to be concealed behind the frosted glass that could be seen sideways from the road, if you forced your face sufficiently far between the palings.

Now the door was not even locked, though the key was in it. Peter opened it quietly, entered, and closed it behind him.

## 10

**D**R. MERSON had not gone far when he was vexed by a doubt as to whether he had locked the door. He was almost sure that he had—yes, he was quite sure—but he felt vaguely uneasy. He felt for the key in its usual pocket, but it was not there. He felt in his other pockets, with the same result. He must have left it in the door. He felt sure now that he had turned the key, but not removed it. That was what had made his mind uneasy. Really, it didn't matter. No one of his household would enter the room under such circumstances. Cer-

tainly Molly wouldn't. She hated the room, and never entered it except to seek him. More certainly still, the maid would not venture. She would not enter to dust it. Not that he wanted her to. Women are a curse where a man works. But he knew her feeling. It was, in fact, her talk in the village which was mainly responsible for the fact that Peter Corner was now inside it. But Dr. Merson didn't know that. He only thought that if the women of his household found the door locked and the key outside they would know that he couldn't be in, and would be unlikely to enter. But was he sure he had locked it?

Probably he wouldn't have turned back, being so late already, had he not discovered, to his added annoyance, that he had left behind some clinical notes which he should require at the consultation for which he was late already.

He went back hastily. On the way, he made a resolution that he would kill the rat that night, and destroy the serum he had invented. He perceived, with a sudden clarity, that the world's Creator might understand His job better than a local practitioner in Belsham village.

The relief that the decision gave him confirmed its wisdom. He was in better spirits than he had been for many weeks as he passed through the surgery, and crossed the passage to the room beyond.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir William Brett waited for over half an hour at the house of the patient for the benefit of whose health, and relief of whose pocket, the consultation had been arranged. Then he rang up Dr. Merson's house for an explanation. He received a reply (after some delay) that the doctor had been seized with a sudden indisposition, and greatly regretted that the appointment must be deferred until the following day.

11.

THE inquest on the body of Peter Corner had been twice adjourned by a coroner who had known Dr. Merson sufficiently well to regard it as incredible that he should have committed a crime so strange and so inexplicable. He hoped that the doctor might be found, and that his voluntary return would furnish some satisfactory explanation. But the police had not been retarded by any similar hesitation. Within twenty-four hours of the doctor's disappearance the dismembered body of Peter Corner had been discovered, and the facts that the doctor could not be found, and that he had drawn nearly four hundred pounds (practically the whole of his available balance) from his bank in Treasury notes on the previous day, had enabled them to obtain a warrant for his arrest without difficulty.

But the warrant had not been executed.

Dr. Merson had walked to the station quite openly. He had chatted with casual acquaintances on the platform. He had even got into a compartment containing others who knew him. He had traveled to London, saying that he was in search of certain surgical instruments which he required to renew, and had disappeared absolutely.

It was agreed that he had been in particularly good spirits. Indeed—and this was one of the minor mysteries of the case—there had been a noticeable change in his demeanor from the morning when Peter had been seen to enter the door of his surgery. Everyone had noticed the change. It was as though a load of fear or trouble had been suddenly lifted from him.

Mrs. Merson—who had insisted on giving evidence, in spite of the coroner's warning—had confirmed this. She had entered the witness box to urge her conviction, against the weight of overwhelming evidence, that

he had not murdered Peter at all, and to assert that he had himself been living in dread of some mysterious enemy, who must be responsible both for the fate of Peter, and for her husband's disappearance.

Her evidence, given with the convincing simplicity of an unimaginative mind, had impressed its hearers with her sincerity, and increased the sympathy with which she was regarded, but it could not shake the weight of evidence which placed the crime upon the shoulders of the absent doctor.

It was admitted by the police that the doctor could not have known that Peter would be released from school on the fatal morning, but their theory was that he had met the boy by chance in the street, and had recognized an unexpected opportunity for the commission of a crime which had been designed within his mind previously. He had told the boy to go to the surgery, and await his return. He had followed immediately, by a different route, entering the surgery unobserved, and promptly disposed of his unsuspecting victim. His household admitted that they had not known that he was at home till the telephone enquiry from Sir William Brett had caused them to seek him, and he had then replied through a half-opened door, that he was unwell, and the appointment must be deferred to the following day.

He had callously proceeded to the dissection of his victim's body, and it was only when the police had traced the missing boy to his own door, and the enquiries had become too close and pointed for his comfort, that he had decided that it would be best to bolt, without delaying for the added risk of attempting the destruction or removal of the dismembered corpse.

Such was the theory of the police, and while it failed to offer the explanation of any adequate motive for a deed so ghastly, and a risk so great, and while there was nothing in the

doctor's previous record to support the suggestion of criminality at once so gross and so reckless, yet it had the advantage of meeting the admitted facts more plausibly than appeared otherwise possible, and even those who were least willing to believe that the doctor could have been guilty of such a murder were unable to put forward any reasonable supposition which could explain the presence of the boy's remains on his premises, and his subsequent flight and silence.

## 12

IT WAS NOW two months since Dr. Merson had alighted at Paddington, and been seen to make a leisurely descent of the stairs to the Underground station which adjoins that terminus. Doubtless, the police would continue their enquiries, and the public would continue to keep them occupied with abortive "clues", but the coroner could see no reason for adjourning the inquest further, nor means of avoiding the obvious verdict which the jury would be expected to render. It would place him under the painful necessity of issuing a warrant against an old friend, of whose guilt his own mind was not easily convinced, but that would be of no practical importance, in view of the magistrate's warrant, on which the police were already acting. (The time had not arrived at which this duplication of procedure was reformed in practice).

He had no further evidence to bring forward, except that of Sir Lionel Tipshift, the Home Office expert, who had conducted the post-mortem on the dismembered body, and would give his opinion upon the cause of death with the air of Olympic impartiality on which the police had relied so often for the hanging of suspected persons.

The coroner's court was small, and crowded. It was a rainy day, and the atmosphere within it was one of

depression, and of damp umbrellas. The room was plainly furnished with a table for the legal profession, an armchair for the coroner, a partitioned corner for the jury, and some benches for the use of the waiting witnesses, and the general public. It was clean, and its windows were wide and high. Yet it had an aspect of invincible grime, as though it were washed incessantly and vainly to remove an ingrained dirt, against which no physical assault could be directed successfully.

Mrs. Merson sat on the front bench, looking grave, but not acutely miserable. Her husband's cousin, Mr. Reginald Merson, sat beside her. This gentleman, of whose existence she had not known previously, had arrived from the Argentine about six weeks after Dr. Merson had disappeared. He had made a casual call upon a cousin whom he had not seen for over twenty years, and finding himself in the midst of circumstances so strange and tragic, and having time at his disposal, he had offered such help as he could give to his cousin's wife by remaining until the inquest should be over. He had declined her invitation to reside in the house, preferring to take a room at the *Spotted Cow*, but this discretion had not prevented some unkindly gossip, which had attributed Mrs. Merson's equanimity to the very opportune companionship which he was able to offer.

On this point gossip was not entirely wrong, but the emotions of the doctor's wife, being beyond her own analysis, were not likely to be understood by the observations of strangers. She had not wavered in her loyalty to her absent husband, nor had her affection lessened. She held a matter-of-course opinion that he had not murdered anyone; she was quite sure that he was not dead; and she was equally sure that he would return at his own time, and deal with the situation with his usual efficiency. The whole trouble was the work of some

enmity, as to the nature of which, as was natural in the case of one who was destitute of normal imagination, her imaginations were very wild indeed.

Mr. Reginald Merson attracted and sometimes bewildered her by a likeness, not so much to her husband as she had last seen him, as to that which he had been at the time of their engagement, and during the first years of her married life. His voice, though stronger in tone, was curiously similar: his hair, though abundant, whereas her husband had become partially bald, was of the same color and quality—or, perhaps, very slightly darker. His features were alike, except for the short hair on the upper lip, and even that was a reminder of how her husband once had worn it. He was slow and guarded in speech, but, even so, he would let fall remarks at times which showed a puzzling familiarity with the past events of the household.

She did not disguise from herself that his presence gave her confidence, though there was mystery even in that, for he never spoke with any conviction of the doctor's innocence, nor suggested that he might return and vindicate his reputation, and any plans he might casually indicate for her future appeared to assume that the doctor's disappearance was to be accepted as final.

Inspector Clawson, who was in charge of the case, had not overlooked the strangeness of the arrival of this young man, and his curiosity had been increased when he had failed to trace the name of Merson on the passenger lists of any recently arriving liners. He did not see how Mr. Reginald Merson could be associated with the crime, in the absence of any evidence that he had been in the neighborhood when it was committed, but he felt that he was a source from which valuable information might be obtained, that he might very probably be aware of the place in which the

doctor was hiding, and might very possibly be induced to speak, if the penalties which are incurred by an accessory after the fact were judiciously indicated.

He had him watched, and discovered nothing. He appeared to have no acquaintances, except Mrs. Merson. He wrote no letters. He received none. The inspector decided to interview him.

Mr. Reginald received him genially. He alluded to the murder at once, and condoned with him on his failure to make any arrest. The position seemed to amuse him. The inspector could not see the joke, and did not like the tone he adopted. He asserted, with a confidence that he did not feel, that he expected that an arrest would soon be made. "Scotland Yard," he lied with the boldness of exasperation, "always gets its man in the end."

Mr. Reginald suggested humorously that he might himself be the doctor in disguise. Would the inspector like to arrest him? The inspector would have liked to do so very well, had a sufficient pretext arisen. He had already considered the possibility which was now suggested in an obvious mockery. The appearance of this mysterious cousin, at such a time, and of so vague an origin, would have attracted the notice of the dullest detective of fiction, and Inspector Clawson was a very capable officer.

But his judgment was too sound to lead him into an error so obvious. He knew how much may be done by disguise, and he knew its limitations. He had never seen Dr. Merson, but he had examined some recent photographs. He knew his age. He had discussed his appearance with local members of the force, who had seen him daily.

Between the suddenly disappearing doctor and the suddenly arriving cousin there were more than the usual cousinly resemblances. But the differences were beyond the possibilities of disguise or explanation. A bald

man can not disguise himself with a thick crop of natural hair. A man of a growing rotundity can not disguise himself in a few weeks by the production of a slim and obviously youthful figure. A man of forty-five can not disguise himself into an appearance of half his age which will deceive the hostile eyes of a detective who is standing two feet away in the open street, when the morning is sunny.

Inspector Clawson only remarked that it was a fine day.

## 13

THAT was yesterday. In the coroner's court this morning the inspector's eyes were still drawn in the same direction. He was not greatly interested in the evidence of Sir Lionel Tipshift. For one reason, he knew what it was to be, and for another, he had no respect for the expert witness. He is useful to impress juries, but the police and lawyers knew that another can always be procured to contradict him. Sir Lionel Tipshift was a tame expert, regularly hired by the Crown. The nature of his evidence could be relied upon as certainly as that a prosecuting counsel would not point out the probable innocence of the prisoner against whom his brief was drawn.

So the inspector's attention wandered when Sir Lionel, with a manner suggesting that he was slightly bored by his own infallibility, gave the result of his post-mortem examination.

The body, he assured the court, had been disjointed after death—probably several hours later—by someone with considerable knowledge of anatomy. The internal organs had been preserved, and (with some technical qualifications) were healthy. There was no trace of poison. There were marks of violence upon the body, including certain bruises on the legs,

which must have been caused before death, by some blunt instrument. (That was correct. They had been inflicted by Bunny Simpson's foot in the school playground on the afternoon before Peter's existence had abruptly terminated.)

The listeners were hypnotized by the coldly decisive voice to the belief that additional and important evidence had been given. The coroner only, being accustomed to analyze evidence, was conscious that nothing had been added to that which was already known, or could have been reasonably deduced from admitted circumstances, and he was about to address a final word to the jury, when Mr. Reginald Merson rose, and asked, in a deferential but self-possessed manner, if, as the nearest male relative of the absent doctor, whose reputation was so much concerned, the unfortunate death having taken place on his premises, he might ask Sir Lionel Tipshift a few questions upon the evidence he had given.

The coroner hesitated. A coroner's enquiry is somewhat less formal than are the proceedings in the criminal courts. Possibly the fact that not all coroners belong to the legal profession (many are doctors) may have produced a less rigid etiquette for preventing oral intercourse of any kind except through the medium of a paid lawyer. But it is not usual for a witness to be examined in such a manner. He was about to say that he would himself put any enquiry which he might approve, if Mr. Merson would let him know what was in his mind, when that gentleman, taking his pause of hesitation for consent, addressed a question to Sir Lionel Tipshift which was sufficiently unexpected to cause him to remain silent to await the answer.

“Can you tell me if any other body was discovered in the laboratory, besides that of Peter Corner?”

Sir Lionel, who had already moved

some paces from the witness stand, turned back, as he answered with a dry precision:

"There were no other human remains. Dr. Merson appears to have been engaged in the dissection of a recently killed rat, on the last occasion on which he occupied the laboratory."

"Does not the fact that he could have been so occupied, at such a time, with the boy's body upon his hands, suggest that there must have been some connection between the two?" Mr. Reginald asked, but the coroner interposed before Sir Lionel could answer.

"If you have any information which may be of assistance to this enquiry, Mr. Merson, I must ask you to take the oath, and offer your evidence in the usual way; it can not be given in the form of suggestions to another witness."

Mr. Merson did not appear either disconcerted or annoyed by this rebuke. He answered easily. He apologized for his ignorance of the correct procedure. He regretted that he was not in a position to accept the coroner's offer. It had only occurred to him—and he submitted the suggestion with diffidence—that the doctor might have suddenly returned, having remembered, after starting out, that he had not locked the room in accordance with his usual practise, and found the boy trespassing within it. Suppose that the rat had been inoculated with some new and dreadful disease, and the boy had interfered with it, and been bitten, so that he would be certain to contract it, and would not only die himself, but might give it to others, would it not become a natural thing—even a duty, however unlawful—to take *any* steps, at whatever personal risk, to prevent such consequences?

The court listened in a tense silence to this unexpected theory, but Sir Lionel, though he had not been addressed, gave a reply which disposed

of its probability, the coroner silently allowing his interposition, with the respect which was usually accorded to his name and title.

"The rat was not diseased. It was a remarkably fine specimen. Indeed, it was the finest and healthiest that I have ever seen. There were remarkable signs of vitality in every organ."

"Then, if it were so exceptional in its physical development, might it not have sprung at the boy's throat, when he opened the door of its cage—which would be about at the same level—and inflicted a serious, or even a fatal wound?"

Sir Lionel, who was seldom disinclined to the sound of his own voice, was about to answer, but his opinion on this point will never be known, for this time the coroner interposed too quickly.

"I don't think, Mr. Merson, that anything can be gained by pursuing hypothetical improbabilities. Such explanations, if put forward at all, should have come from Dr. Merson himself, or from some regularly appointed advocate on his behalf. I am not aware that you have any claim to represent him at all, beyond that of an alleged relationship, and even that has not been sworn to. Dr. Merson is absent. He went away voluntarily, leaving the body of this unhappy boy on his premises, at a time when he knew that enquiries were turning in his direction. I am afraid that the jury will draw their own conclusions."

He paused a moment, and then commenced a brief and lucid charge to the jury, from which a verdict of wilful murder against the absent doctor might be confidently expected.

Mr. Reginald Merson turned to the woman beside him, and said something in a low voice, on which she smiled, and rose with him. Evidently they did not propose to wait to hear the verdict given. The ease and confidence of his own demeanor appeared to have infected his companion, and

she passed out somewhat briskly and buoyantly, as one who leaves an unpleasant incident with finality.

As they went down the steps which led to the street, Inspector Clawson touched Mr. Merson's arm, and he turned politely.

"I should just like to ask," said the inspector, "how you came to know that the boy opened the cage."

Mr. Merson appeared amused. "I dreamt it on Monday night, Inspector. I'm rather good at dreams," he added pleasantly.

The inspector's hand was in his pocket. His fingers closed upon the warrant which he was carrying. If only he had the courage to make the arrest to which his instinct urged him! It might make—or break—him. He became aware that Mr. Merson was speaking to him again, and in a voice of banter.

"It's no good, Inspector. You won't get a word more. The voluntary statement's played out. . . . It's no use worrying," he said kindly; "you'd better go home, and forget it."

The inspector felt that the advice was sound, though he did not like it. He thought of his wife and children, and of the comfortable pension which awaits the later years of frequently promoted officers who do not make mistakes which arouse adverse newspaper comment. He turned sadly away.

DR. MERSON walked home very happily, beside a wife who did not know him. He was very fond of Molly. He wondered (as he had done before) if the time had come to show her the birthmark on his left arm. He wondered whether it would be expedient to use the hypodermic syringe in his right-hand pocket, which would restore her youth, and give her the vitality which he was already experiencing. He liked her very well as she was, but he did not doubt that he should like her quite as well if she were looking twenty years younger. But he was not quite clear as to the pretext on which he should make the injection. Not quite clear, either, that it would be morally defensible to do it without explaining its results beforehand. He felt that to convince her of the actual truth would not be the easiest of mental enterprises. But he felt also that, if she should be led to share his experiences, she would admit his identity more readily than would be otherwise probable.

Still, there was no hurry. There might even be advantages in delay. He imagined Inspector Clawson studying the metamorphosis of the wife of the missing doctor. It would be amusing. It could hardly be dangerous. Still, it was a needless risk. There was no hurry.

Yes—he would come in to tea.

