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# Weird Tales

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Third Interne

By IDWAL JONES

*'A brief tale of a surgical horror in the Arctic wastes of northern Russia*

**D**OCTOR ALEXIS GARSHIN poured himself a glass of wine, sank deep into his leathern arm-chair, and watched the hearth-flames through the haze of an excellent cigar. Outside, the wind howled morosely like a thief. A blizzard had come up from the tundra, and it was plastering the windows with gobbets of snow. Certainly, Yarmolinsk Prison, near the Arctic line, was the most desolate the little Government inspector had yet visited. A man could very well go mad in the solitude. But its chief, Doctor Melchior Pashev, found it a heaven: nobody to trouble him, all the time he wanted to carry on his researches in biology, a fair salary, and little to do; for the prison and its hospital rarely held more than a dozen souls, beyond the staff of five. Garshin, a neurologist himself, admired him greatly.

Pashev had just gone out, to visit a dying trapper up the river a way, excusing himself for leaving his guest so hastily, but he would return in an hour, and dinner would keep. A bleak night, and Garshin shuddered at the idea of facing that howling wind, with snow in his teeth. Himself, he rather loved comfort. But a restful hour would do him good, and there was nobody afoot in this wing of the prison.

The door opened. A young man entered—a pallid, tousle-haired young man, with the burning eyes of a fanatic. A theological student, Garshin thought.

"Good evening, sir," said Garshin.

"Doctor Pashev has gone out for an hour."

"He is gone for ever," said the young man, closing the door. "He is never coming back."

"Indeed?" queried Garshin. "I might even say, you surprize me."

"Now is my opportunity to give word to humanity, to the outside world, from which I have been a prisoner for two years," began the young man, drawing up a chair and fixing his eyes on Garshin. "Listen to me:

**I** AM the third interne. There were two, and the woman, Katerina Ivanovna. We came here from the University of Astrakhan, where a small band of us had devoted ourselves to the study of the brain and the nervous system. Our God was the great Pavlov, promulgator of the theory of the conditioned reflex. He received us once, and we stayed with him a month. Then we left, because we had discovered a far greater scientific man than he—Doctor Melchior Pashev, the brilliant worker in neurology.

"You probably know nothing about him, for you must be an engineer. I can see that, because your face is not hard. Sir, with all due respect to you, you are an infant in learning compared to Pashev. He is as aloof as an icy summit of the Alps; he dwells in the realm of pure brain; human beings are nothing to him but matter to dissect. He would immolate his own mother on the altar of science. But he is a master. Pavlov, Ein-

stein, Metchnikoff—not one of these is worthy to latch his shoes or fetch in his shaving-water.

"We read at Astrakhan his report on the spinal accessory nerve, proving that it not only controls the motor fibers of the larynx but some of the fibers of the heart as well. This is only a trifle in the vast researches of the man, who became at once the most renowned thinker in the world.

"Pavlov's experiments on dogs were child's play, sir. Pashev began where Pavlov left off, and went to an astronomical height beyond him. He cut off the head of a mastiff, and kept it alive, functioning beautifully, for three years. It barked, drank water, blinked its eyes with affection, and showed all the normal reactions of a canine, save that it had no body.

"Our enthusiasm when we read of this knew no bounds. It made us delirious with admiration. Here was a genius on the track of the larger synthesis, who would crack open the last secrets of life, make himself the mightiest genius that ever was born. We would go to him and beg him to take us on as his apprentices. The two friends, Benno and Nicolai Suvorin, my fiancée, who was Katerina Ivanovna, and myself.

"So we pooled our funds, borrowed money right and left and came here to Yarmolinsk, half starved, weary and more dead than alive, and he took us in. An epidemic of bubonic plague had decimated the province, all the nurses and internes in this hospital had died, and so had Doctor Plotkin, Pashev's assistant. He died right in the chair you are sitting in. Don't start, sir. It all happened three years ago.

"We began working. We tended the sick, swept the wards, buried the dead, did all the menial work that came to

hand; and at night studied in the dissecting-room, working with the great man himself. It was Katerina Ivanovna, with whom I was in love, and I who worked out with him the theory, first proposed by the learned Bengali, Professor Gobind Lal, that the ganglia send out their own impulses.

"I know I am obscure, sir, but you will never know how indefatigably we toiled, like slaves, devotedly, eager to serve the man we idolized, feeling rewarded enough that he tolerated us about him.

"But Katerina was devoted to me, also. We had our plans. After two years we were to go to Moscow and start up in practise as specialists on the brain. Renown and fortune would be ours. I would be professor at Moscow University, Katerina my assistant, and we would care for nothing but each other, our science and music. Katerina was a fine pianist, and kept her skill fresh, practising an hour a day before she went to her routine in the ward, which was as early as five in the morning.

"We mastered that dog's head. Pashev had now gone beyond that, and was having success in keeping alive the head of a chimpanzee. His device was most ingenious. The head was mounted on a glass base. The facial, auditory, oculomotor nerves—all the nerves of the head were given stimuli and nourishment by a fine series of magnetic networks, terminating in a cell-box. The circulatory system was kept going by a delicate motor and pump. And to crown all, there was Pashev's masterpiece, a chain of ganglia, made of rubber and platinum, which took the place of the spinal cord.

"That chimpanzee's head roared, opened its mouth, blinked at the light, winced at a mirror flash or the prick of a pin. It was as alive as mine. Nicolai and Benno, bereft of all interest in life

save this tremendous achievement, worshipped Pashev more than ever. They bowed to him, shrinking in awe. It went far beyond idolatry.

"One day they came to him and pleaded. 'You cannot find out by the head of an anthropoid ape what the conscious brain is doing. If it were a man's head, it could talk back to you. Think of the service such a head would do for pure science!'

" 'Well?' said Pashev.

" 'We offer ourselves to you for experimentation.'

**T**HEY meant it. Even Pashev was moved, touched almost to tears of joy at the offer. He tried to dissuade them, spoke to them for nearly five minutes. But they were insistent. They had no relatives, no ties of any kind, no love for anything but science. So Pashev agreed. The decapitation was done in the operating-room. The heads were immediately removed to glass bases, the severed edges cauterized, and the wires and arterial tubes and ganglia fibers, already prepared, were attached.

"Where was I? Sir, I fell ill of a brain fever and was confined for three weeks. The horror of it was too much for me. That was my way of escape, swooning to the floor when I learned Pashev had agreed to do this favor for Nicolai and Benno, my friends.

"I recovered, but it was weeks and weeks before I was myself, and I had fears that I should go mad. Insanity has long been a matter of interest to me, sir. But, as I said, my health and mental poise returned, with reason unshaken.

"What hurt me was the horror, the contempt with which Katerina now viewed me. She regarded me as a renegade to science, a coward, a pitiful wretch, unfit to love. It was another

blow to me, but you never know the depth of a woman's forgiveness, and in time she loved me again.

"So we had rather a happy life, sometimes radiantly happy, especially when of a winter evening—the nights are long here at Yarmolinsk, sir—she would play on the piano for us, a little Schubert or a folk-song of our Astrakhan land. Pashev had a vulnerable spot in his armor: he was susceptible to the charms of music, and he would listen to Katerina play or sing, listen to her by the hour, elbows on his knee, his eyes fixed on her lovely face. I believe, sir, that all scientific men should cultivate one of the arts, else their imagination becomes atrophied. Darwin, to the end of his days, never ceased to regret that he had lost all taste for poetry. I have always admired Einstein for his devotion to the violin. And Professor Gobind Lal for his delight in painting little water-colors.

"I sometimes imagined the two were in love—merely a fancy of mine, but it shadowed my spirits often, though it went as swiftly as it came. Pashev, my idol, was beyond such weakness, and Katerina was loyal to me.

"It was my task to minister to the two heads, to see that the pumps and the cells were functioning as they should. You, as an engineer, sir, will appreciate the importance of my task. It was Pashev who made all the notes, who conversed with Nicolai and Benno, holding to their barely-moving lips a microphone attached to a device strapped to his ears. They spoke of how they felt, what their reactions were to heat and cold, to the prick of a pin, the flash of a mirror. They spoke only of matters of laboratory interest; for them the rest of the world did not exist. Were they happy, you ask? I presume so. They were like souls that had attained Nirvana, beyond good and

evil, beyond all feeling save response to sensory stimuli by eye, ear and the nerves of the skin.

"'They never did have much imagination,' Pashev said once, coldly, as if disappointed. 'A woman, now—ah, what help one could get out of a woman!'

"Katerina spoke at once. With the light of a fanatical devotion for an ideal in her eyes she spoke to Pashev, offering herself; nay, insisting that he decapitate her and add one more chapter to his great work on the sensory reactions of the head *sans corpus*. I froze with horror, then went mad again. I can still see the pity on the face of the doctor, the joy and pride of the master whose pupil has come up to his highest expectations.

"For weeks I was ill, lost to the world, and when I returned, feeble, to my work, Katerina was gone. Her body was gone, but her head was on the heavy glass shelf, alongside that of Nicolai.

"You look horror-stricken, sir, and I can well understand how you feel. Light your cigar. See, your hand is shaking. Perhaps you now get an inkling of the hell I have lived through, and the bitter disillusion of my life when I found that my idol was a fiend, a demon out of the bottomless pit.

"Every night I say good-bye to the heads of the only human beings I ever loved. Why did my heart turn against Pashev? Ah, I must tell you. But don't stare at me so, your frighten me. I was in the laboratory alone one night, going through with a candle, when I heard a voice. It was Katerina's.

"'Coward!' she was saying. 'Coward! Here we all are but you. Ah, what a fool you were, and blind! I loved only Doctor Pashev. He seduced me the very night I came.'

"I fled past them with the candle, gibbering, my head turned so I shouldn't

see the pity in the eyes of Nicolai and Benno, who knew the truth all along. And upstairs I wondered what they were saying to each other in the darkness. I heard them laugh! A laugh of contempt!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"MY DEAR friend, here I am!" In the doorway stood Doctor Pashev, tall, benevolent and smiling, his fur coat whitened with snow.

"I am happy to tell you the trapper will pull through, after all."

The pallid young man had risen, then fell to the floor in a convulsion. It was an attack, Garshin observed, of hysteropilepsy, an interesting case. Pashev stooped at once and carried the victim out of the room. When he returned, the Government inspector said to him, firmly:

"Doctor Pashev, you must allow me to go into your laboratory for a minute."

"Certainly. There is the door, to the left."

Garshin entered and moved to the heavy glass mantelpiece. It held nothing but three skulls, which he lifted curiously. He could find no tubes nor wires nor any attachment. They were old, dust-covered, marked with ink, as if they had been kept there for years and years. He left the laboratory, thoughtful. The tale was naught but a figment of the imagination.

"I suppose," said Pashev, lighting a cigarette, "that poor fellow has been telling you some weird story about heads and some woman he loved, eh?"

"Yes. He had me on edge for an hour. I don't think I was ever so frightened in my life. Reminded me I had nerves, after all."

"He tells the story well," said Pashev, sadly, "because he has told it often—to everyone who comes here. It is rather pitiful. He came here three years ago

with two youths, friends of his, and a young woman that he loved, to assist me during that distressful outbreak of the plague. The three died inside of a week. The shock to him was permanent. But he is harmless, and quite a help to me in the laboratory."

A servant entered with a large tray.

"Ah, here comes our belated dinner," said Pashev. "Let us sit down. There's nothing like a sledge-ride to give a fillip to one's appetite. Pigeons and claret! We do ourselves well, here. Your health, my dear friend!"