

STRANGE STORIES FROM A MAGIC PEN

By
H. G. Wells

UNDER THE KNIFE

"WHAT if I die under it?" The thought recurred again and again as I walked home from Haddon's.

It was a purely personal question. I was spared the deep anxieties of a married man, and I knew there were none of my intimate friends but would not let death trouble me chiefly on account of the duty of rearing a child. I was not married, and perhaps a little unburdened, as I turned the matter over to myself, how few could possibly be so free of the conventional requirements of life. I had been a time in my own life when I had grieved bitterly at the loss of a friend; but I had not known that afternoon the personal side of my imagination was so free. I could not pity myself, or feel sorry for my friends, nor conceive of them as grieving for me.

Years before, in my hot youth, I had known a sudden loss of blood, and then an age of death. I had learned now that my affections, as well as my passions had drained away, leaving scarce anything but a tranquil resignation and the deepest dread of self pity. It had been before the old ambitions, and ambitions, and all the complex interplay of a man had reassured themselves. It occurred to me that the meaning of this numbness might be a gradual slipping of the pleasure-pain guidance of a normal man. It has been said that I have it as thoroughly as any man can be proved in this world, the higher emotions, the moral sense, even the subtle tenderness of love are excluded from the elemental desire, and wars of the simple mind, there are no harness in life. Mental freedom goes, and with it, as death overtakes, as our possibility of action, and the complex growth of a man's intellect, and the interplay inspires our lives with it. Leaving what?

It had brought back to me the memory of a first collision with life. I found that I was not the best of the best. I had been a time in my own life when I had grieved bitterly at the loss of a friend; but I had not known that afternoon the personal side of my imagination was so free. I could not pity myself, or feel sorry for my friends, nor conceive of them as grieving for me.

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"Awake!" cried a voice; and I determined I would not rise to such horrors. "Awake!" They would not let me alone. "Wake up!" said an angry voice. A cockney angel! The man who sells the tickets was shaking me, demanding my penny. I paid my penny, pocketed my ticket, yawned, stretched my legs, and feeling now rather less torpid, got up and walked on toward Langham Place. I speedily lost myself again in a shifting maze of thoughts about death. Going across Marylebone Road into that crescent at the end of Langham Place, I had the narrowest escape from the shaft of a cab, and went on my way with a palpitating heart and a bruised shoulder. It struck me it would have been curious if my meditations on my death on the morrow had led to my death that day.

continently the dust of the path and the mold under the grass became insistent. I had never before thought of Regent's Park as a cemetery, but now, through the trees, stretching as far as eye could see, I beheld a flat plain of writhing graves and heeling tombstones. There seemed to be some trouble, the rising dead appeared to stifle as they struggled upward, they bled in their struggles, the red flesh was tattered away from the white bones.

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I struggled. Then I felt motionless, and a great silence, a monstrous silence, and an impenetrable blackness, came upon me.

There must have been an interval of absolute unconsciousness, seconds or minutes. Then, with a chilly, unemotional clearness, I perceived that I was not yet dead. I was still in my body; but all the multitudinous sensations that come sweeping from it to make up the background of consciousness had gone, leaving me free of it all. No, not free of it all; for as yet something still held me to the poor stark flesh upon the bed, held me, yet not so closely that I did not feel myself external to it, independent of it, straining away from it. I do not think I saw, I do not think I heard; but I perceived all that was going on, and it was as if I both heard and saw.

Haddon was bending over me, Mowbray behind me; the scalpel—it



was a large scalpel—was cutting my flesh at the side under the flying ribs. It was interesting to see myself cut like cheese, without a pang, without even a qualm. The interest was much of a quality with that one might feel in a game of chess between strangers. Haddon's face was firm, and his hand steady; but I was surprised to perceive (how I know now) that he was feeling the gravest doubt as to his own wisdom in the conduct of the operation.

Mowbray's thoughts, too, I could see. He was thinking that Haddon's manner showed too much of the specialist. I saw my liver exposed. I was puzzled at my own condition. I did not feel that I was dead, but I was different in some way from my living self. The gray depression that had weighed on me for a year or more, and colored all my thoughts, was gone. I perceived and thought without any emotional tint at all. I wondered if every one perceived things in this way under chloroform, and forgot it again when he came out of it. It would be inconvenient to look into some heads and not forget it.

Although I did not think that I was dead, I still perceived, quite clearly, that I was soon to die. This brought me back to the consideration of Haddon's proceedings. I looked into his mind, and saw that he was afraid of cutting a branch of the portal vein. . . . And he was growing more and more nervous in his work. It was as if a little picture of a cut vein grew brighter, and struggled to oust from his brain another picture of a cut falling short of the mark. He was afraid; his dread of cutting too little was battling with his dread of cutting too far.

Then, suddenly, like an escape of water from under a lock gate, a great uprush of horrible realization set all his thoughts swirling, and simultaneously I perceived that the vein was cut. He started back with a hoarse exclamation, and I saw the brown-purple blood gather in a swift bead and run trickling. He was horrified. He pitched the red-stained scalpel on to the octagonal table; and instantly both doctors flung themselves upon me, making hasty and ill-conceived efforts to remedy the disaster.

"Lee," said Mowbray, gasping. But I knew that I was killed, though my body still slung to me.

I will not describe their belated endeavors to save me, though I perceived every detail. My perceptions were sharper and swifter than they had ever been in life; my thoughts rushed through my mind with incredible swiftness, but with perfect defini-

tion. In a moment it would all be over, and I should be free.

I knew I was immortal, but what would happen I did not know. Should I drift off presently, like a puff of smoke from a gun, in some kind of half-material body, an attenuated version of my material self? Should I find myself suddenly among the innumerable hosts of the dead, and know the world about me for the phantasmagoria it had always seemed? Should I drift to some spiritual seance, and there make foolish, incomprehensible attempts to affect a purblind medium? It was a state of unemotional curiosity, of colorless expectation.

And then I realized a growing stress upon me, a feeling as though some huge human magnet was drawing me upward out of my body. The stress grew and grew. I seemed an atom, for which monstrous forces were fighting. For one brief, terrible moment sensation came back to me. That feeling of falling headlong which comes in nightmares, that feeling a thousand times intensified, that and a black horror swept across my thoughts in a torrent.

Then the two doctors, the naked body with its cut side, the little room, swept away from under me, and vanished, as a speck of foam vanishes down an eddy.



"I perceived that it was the planet Saturn rushing toward me." I was in midair. Far below was the West End of London, receding rapidly for I seemed to be flying swiftly upward—and, as it receded, passing westward like a panorama. I could see through the faint haze of smoke the immovable roofs chimneys set, the narrow roadways stippled with people and conveyances, the little specks of squares and the church steeples like thorns sticking out of the fabric. But it spun away as the earth rotated on its axis, and in a few seconds (as it seemed) I was over the scattered clumps of town about Falmouth, the little Thames a thread of blue to the south, and the Chiltern Hills and the North Downs coming up like the rim of a basin, far away and faint with haze. Up I rushed. And at first I had not the faintest conception what this headlong upward rush could mean.

Every moment the circle of scenery beneath me grew wider and wider, and the details of town and field, of hill and valley, got more and more hazy and pale and indistinct, a luminous gray was mingled more and more with the blue of the hills and the green of the open meadows; and a little patch of cloud, low and far to the west, shone ever more dazzlingly white. Above, as the veil of atmosphere between myself and outer space grew thinner, the sky, which had been a fair spring-time blue at first, grew deeper and richer in color, passing steadily through the intervening shades, until presently it was as dark as the blue sky of midnight, and presently as black as the blackness of a frosty starlight, and at last as black as no blackness I had ever beheld.

And first one star, and then many, and at last an innumerable host, broke out upon the sky: more stars than any one has ever seen from the face of the earth. For the blueness of the sky is the light of the sun and stars sifted and spread abroad blindingly; there is diffused light even in the darkest skies of winter, and we do not see their light by day because of the dazzling irradiation of the sun.

But now I saw things—I know not how; assuredly with no mortal eyes—and that defect of bedazzlement blinded me no longer. The sun was incredibly strange and wonderful. The

body of it was a disk of blinding white light; not yellowish as it seems to those who live upon the earth, but livid white, all streaked with scarlet streaks, and rimmed about with a fringe of writhing tongues of red half-material body, an attenuated version of my material self? Should I find myself suddenly among the innumerable hosts of the dead, and know the world about me for the phantasmagoria it had always seemed? Should I drift to some spiritual seance, and there make foolish, incomprehensible attempts to affect a purblind medium? It was a state of unemotional curiosity, of colorless expectation.

When my attention came back to the earth again, I saw that it had fallen very far away from me. Field and town were long since indistinguishable, and all the varied lines of the country were merging into a uniform bright gray, broken only by the brilliant white of the clouds that lay scattered in flocculent masses over Ireland and the west of England. For now I could see the outlines of the north of France and Ireland, and all this island of Britain, save where Scotland passed over the horizon to the north, or where the coast was blurred or obliterated by cloud. The sea was a dull gray, and darker than the land; and the whole panorama was rotating slowly toward the east.

All this had happened so swiftly that, until I was some thousand miles or so from the earth I had no thought for myself. But now I perceived I had neither hands nor feet, parts nor



organs, and that I felt neither alarm nor pain. All about me, I perceived that the vacuum (for I had already let the air behind) was cold beyond the imagination of man, but it troubled me not. The sun's rays shot through the void, powerless to light or heat until they should strike on matter in their course. I saw things with a serene self-forgetfulness, even as if I were God. And down below there, rushing away from me—countless miles in a second—where a little dark spot on the gray conical position of London, two doctors were struggling to restore life to the poor backed and outworn shell I had abandoned. I felt then such release, such serenity, as I can compare to no earthly delight; I have never known it.

It was only after I had perceived all these things that the meaning of that headlong rush of the earth grew into comprehension. Yet it was so simple, so obvious, that I was amazed at my never anticipating the thing that was happening to me. I had suddenly been cut adrift from matter.

I was not leaving the earth; the earth was leaving me, and not only the earth but the whole solar system was streaming past. And about me in space, invisible to me, scattered in the wake of the earth upon its journey, there must be an innumerable multitude of souls, stripped like myself of the material, stripped like myself of the passions of the individual and the generous emotions of the gregarious brute, naked intelligences, things of newborn wonder and thought, marveling at the strange release that had suddenly come on them!

As I receded faster and faster from

the strange white sun in the black heavens, and from the broad and shining earth upon which my being had begun, I seemed to grow, in some incredible manner, vast; vast as regards this world I had left, vast as regards the moments and periods of a human life.

Very soon I saw the full circle of the earth, slightly gibbous, like the moon when she nears her full, but very great; and the silvery shape of America was now in the noonday blaze, wherein (as it seemed) little England had been basking but a few minutes ago. At first the earth was large, and shone in the heavens, filling a great part of them; but every moment she grew smaller and more distant. As she shrank, the broad moon in its third quarter crept into view over the rim of her disc.

I looked for the constellations. Only that part of Aries directly behind the sun and the Lion which the earth covered were hidden. I recognized the tortuous, tattered band of the Milky Way, with Vega very bright between sun and earth; and Sirius and Orion shone splendid against the impenetrable blackness in the opposite quarter of the heavens. The Polar star was overhead, and the Great Bear hung over the circle of the earth. And away beneath and beyond the shining coronet of the sun were strange groupings of stars I had never seen in my life; notably a dagger-shaped group that I knew for the Southern Cross.

Presently, when I looked again, the little earth seemed no longer to be the sun, and it dwindled and turned, as it seemed to me, and through the long waiting haze grew imperceptibly more distinct. And then about the hand appeared an irregular cloud of the faintest, palest brown. I felt a passionate impatience; but the things grew brighter so slowly that they scarce seemed to change. What was unfolding itself? What was this strange red-dish dawn in the interminable night of space?

The cloud's shape was grotesque. It seemed to be looped along its lower side into four projecting masses, swam motionless in vacancy, and without a trace of terror or astonishment, watched the speck of cosmic dust we call the world fall away from me.

Presently it dawned upon me that my sense of duration had changed; that my mind was moving not faster, but infinitely slower; that between each separate impression there was an unperceived of many days. The moon spun once round the earth as I noted this; as though I watched it through vast periods of time. On the forefinger of Mars in his orbit, moreover it glittered a ring, and the universe appeared as if the time between thought, from which I had come was but a hand and thought grew steadily greater, until at last a thousand years were but a moment in my perception. I groped for the likeness of a black rod.

At first the constellations had shone motionless against the black background of infinite space; but presently it seemed as though the group of marvelling and fearing and waiting stars about Hercules and the Scorpion was contracting, while Orion seemed as though nothing could follow and Aldebaran and their neighbors were scattering apart. Flashing suddenly out of the darkness, there came a flying multitude of particles of rock, its import. Was the whole universe glittering like dust specks in a sun-belt, or a refracting speck upon some beam and encompassed in a faintly greater being? Were our worlds but luminous haze.

They swirled all about me and vanished again in a twinkling far behind. And then I saw that a bright spot of light, that shone a little to one side of my path, was growing very rapidly larger, and perceived that it was the planet Saturn rushing toward me. Larger and larger it grew, swallowing up the heavens behind it, and fading every moment a fresh multitude of stars. I perceived its flattened whirling body, its disc-like belt, and seven of its little satellites. It grew and grew, till it towered enormous, and then I plunged into a streaming multitude of ablazing stones and dancing dust particles and gas eddies, and saw for a moment the mighty triple belt like three coronets of arches of moonlight above me, its shadow black on the fading tumult below.

These things happened in one instant of the time it takes to tell of them. The planet went by like a flash of lightning, for a few seconds it blotted out the sun, and there and then became a mere black, dwindling, winged patch against the light. The earth, the mother mote of my being, I could no longer see.

Broader and wider and deeper and I saw the circle shining white grew the starless space, the vacant and bright, and the rod black and beyond, into which I was being drawn. At last a quarter of the distinct and clear, and the circle was heaven's black and black, and the face of the clock, and the rod whole headlong rush of stellar unit—the rail of my bed. Haddon was verse closed in behind me like a veil standing at the foot, against the rail of light that is gathered together. It with a small pair of scissors on his drove away from me like a monstrous lack-o'-lantern driven by the wind. I had come out into the wilderness of space. Even the vacant blackness grew broader; until the hosts of the stars seemed only like a swarm of fiery specks hurrying away from me, inconceivably remote, and the darkness, the nothingness and emptiness, was about me on every side. Soon the little universe of matter, the cage of points in which I had

begun to be, was dwindling, now to a whirling disc of luminous glittering light. In a little while it would shrink to a point, and at last would vanish altogether.

Suddenly feeling came back to me; feeling in the shape of overwhelming terror—such a dread of those dark vastitudes as no words can describe, a passionate resurgence of sympathy and social desire. Were there other souls, invisible to me as I to them, about me in the blackness? or was indeed, even as I felt, alone? I had passed out of being into something that was neither being nor not-being? The covering of the body, the covering of matter had been torn from me, and the hallucinations of companionship and security. Everything was black and silent. I had ceased to be. I was nothing. There was nothing, save only that infinitesimal dot of light that dwindled in the gulf. I strained myself to hear and see, and for a while there was naught but infinite silence, intolerable darkness, horror, and despair.

Then I saw that about the spot of light into which the whole world of matter had shrunk, there was a faint glow. And in a hand on either side of that the darkness was not absolute. I watched it for ages, as it seemed to me, and through the long waiting haze grew imperceptibly more distinct. And then about the hand appeared an irregular cloud of the faintest, palest brown. I felt a passionate impatience; but the things grew brighter so slowly that they scarce seemed to change. What was unfolding itself? What was this strange red-dish dawn in the interminable night of space?

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