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W. T.—1

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"Medill allowed himself to settle into the coma of concentration."

Wife of the Dragon-Fly

By PAUL ERNST

An unusual weird-scientific story of a savant who used his will-power over insects to spy on his wife

AT THE sound of his wife's voice, Medill Corey turned back on the stairs. He turned reluctantly, angry that she had seen him going up to his workroom. He had hoped to get there unobserved.

"You're not going to work again today, are you?" Beatrice Corey repeated, as Medill reached the bottom step and stood staring at her.

She looked almost ill. Her face was paler, thinner than ever. Her eyes

were without luster in their wan hollows.

"Yes," said Medill, "I'm going up and work."

His pale cold eyes played over her face, feasting on the signs of her distress. His thin lips writhed a little with icy pleasure.

He had her guessing, all right. And the mystery of it was killing her by inches. Good! It served her right for daring to be attracted by another man.

"You know Doctor Voight said you should have a complete rest," Beatrice Corey murmured. "You mustn't concentrate so hard on these experiments—whatever they are."

"Don't you wish you knew what they were?" Medill mocked.

Beatrice cowered back from him. But with pity in her eyes she stared at the thin, brittle-looking man of forty she had married six years ago.

Medill's teeth showed behind his thin lips in a positive snarl. This frequent pity of hers—this mute statement of her eyes that he was a poor deluded creature who only hurt himself with his cold jealous rages—spurred him intolerably. He lashed out in an effort to hurt her even more.

"No, Doctor Voight," he quoted slowly and deliberately, "I married Medill in good faith. I'll carry on with him, no matter how hard it is."

"*Medill!*"

It was barely more than a whisper that left Beatrice's lips—a whisper of horror, of almost superstitious dread.

"You didn't know I'd heard you with your precious doctor in the summer house yesterday, did you?" said Medill.

"If you heard us," replied Beatrice, "you know you have nothing to be jealous of."

"No? You're in love with Doctor Voight, my precious wife! You may be

faithful to me physically, but mentally and spiritually you belong to the worthy doctor. Isn't that something to be jealous of?"

His wife ignored his words, and his tone. One large, fearful wonder took all her mind.

"How in God's name could you have heard us in the summer house?"

Medill laughed. The laugh was more chilling than an angry tirade would have been. His thin, dry hand tightened on the newel-post.

"Quite a problem, isn't it?" he said. "The summer house is set by itself in plain lawn. There is no shelter for an eavesdropper for fifty feet in all directions. Not even any trees around. And you and my fine doctor were whispering. Yet I heard every word. 'But you don't love Medill,' he had the insolence to say to you. 'You've gone through six years of hell with him. Leave him, and come to me.'"

"Have you some sort of telephone arrangement concealed in the summer house?" said Beatrice. She was a little more calm. But deep in her eyes remained the formless dread, the well-nigh superstitious terror, that had haunted them lately whenever they rested on her husband's bony face.

"No, my love," taunted Medill. "There is no dictaphone hidden there, or anything of that sort. But don't let me detain you. You are to meet the doctor at the gate in half an hour. I'll get to my work and leave you two alone in sweet privacy."

"*Medill!*" Beatrice caught his hand. "Whatever else you may believe—you must believe this: I mean to stick out this marriage contract as I took oath to do, and part of that is to care for your health. Doctor Voight has said you were headed for a nervous breakdown if you didn't stop your mysterious, secret experiment-

ing. Please, please don't go to your workroom——"

Medill roughly jerked his hand away.

"A lot you'd care if I dropped dead this minute!" he snarled. "Hypocrite! Go and meet your doctor at the gate. But remember this—wherever you are and no matter how low you pitch your voices, I can hear and see everything."

HE WENT back up the stairs; and Beatrice, after a pause, turned and walked toward the front door. Her fine face was stiff with fatigue and a nameless fear. Her unsteady gait was that of an old woman, though she was barely thirty.

At the top of the stairs, Medill peered back. He nodded grimly as he saw his wife going out onto the porch. Moving quickly on his long thin legs, he fairly scuttled to the back of the house where he had had a small bedroom padded for silence, equipped with an extra stout door, and made into a library-workroom.

Once inside this, he closed the heavy door and locked it. There were two big locks. He fastened them both with anxious caution: his wife feared and loathed all insects; he dared not risk her entering this room for this reason, as well as for others equally important.

In the room was a big table, a comfortable armchair, and, lining the walls, many bookcases. A smaller case was set by the table filled with books that were all little known, all on speculative aspects of psychology and physiology. One book was out of the case and lying on the table. This was titled *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles*. The author was Medill Corey.

But when Medill had seated himself before the table, his pale eyes glittering almost feverishly, he opened none of the books. Instead he unlocked the table drawer and took out a small box, with air-holes in it, which he handled with

great care. His breath sounded audibly in the quiet room as he opened the box. If its occupant had been harmed in any way, or had bruised its wings, an irritating delay would be caused while he caught something else to take its place.

However, the thing in the box was all right in spite of its confinement. It flew out like a flash of light—a big dragonfly, darting here and there in the room, hovering but to dart again, like a flying darning-needle on almost invisible wings.

A sigh of relief hissed from Medill's lips. He took his watch from his pocket and propped it on the table in front of him. Doctor Voight was to come at three o'clock. For weeks, since Medill's slowly failing health had first brought the doctor here—to meet and fall deeply in love with Beatrice—he had come at three in the afternoon, punctually. There was no reason to suppose he would be late or early today. So, at three, Medill wanted to be at the gate of his country estate to witness the meeting between them.

MEDILL waited till a quarter of three. He had learned from past experience that it took roughly ten minutes to make a transition. If he left this room at five minutes of three it would be about right.

He prepared for the change with an involuntary shudder. No one knew better than he himself the peril he faced. A few minutes delay in re-entering the mortal shell he had learned to leave, would be fatal. Irreparable coagulation of the stilled blood-stream would set in. . . .

Tensely staring at the dragon-fly, which was at the moment beating its wings against the window-pane, Medill allowed himself to settle into the coma of concentration that accompanied his every experiments. Like a stone image he sat before the table, eyes glazed and vacant, all

his power of mind and will centered on his chest—the left side of his chest, for he was willing his heart to stop.

Beat, beat, beat, beat.

His pulse was rapid, as it always was at first. The tensity of effort required, the enormity of the thing he was about to do, always set his heart to racing a hundred to the minute—at first. That pace would change gradually till it reached an incredibly slow count—until finally there was no count at all.

Beat, beat, beat.

Slower, and again slower.

When your heart stops, you die. All science tells you that. And the first time Medill had succeeded in his experiment of stopping his own heart he would have died, too—only, by the grace of heaven, there had chanced to be a beetle in the room—an ordinary, blundering June-bug that had bumbled into the place before the screens had been put up for full summer. That had saved his life, or, rather, his living intelligence. And it had also shown him, by pure accident, the transitional power that could—*must*, indeed—accompany his achievement of temporary death. The living intelligence, spark of life, soul stuff, whatever you want to call it, must have a house of flesh or it perished.

Beat, beat.

Very slow, now. Thirty or so to the minute. But in the final stages it would be much slower yet. So slow, so very slow, just before the end, that thousands could be counted between beats. Medill had given a lot of thought to that. He had decided that in addition to the actual slowing of the heart, time itself must race faster for small forms of life than for humans. It would have to: otherwise insects could not live out their full span in a few hours.

Beat. . . .

A knife could have been jabbed into

Medill's flesh without his feeling it. His eyes remained wide open, unblinking. He was absolutely still. Even the throbbing of his pulse at wrist and throat could no longer be seen.

Beat. . . .

The dragon-fly left the window-pane as though at last convinced it could not fly through the glass. It flew toward the table. But it flew reluctantly, now and then darting away from the stone-like figure of the man as if jerking against the pull of an invisible thread.

Finally, after many hoverings in mid-air, the iridescent thing lit on the table. To be exact, it lit on the book, *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles*. Then, in a steady short flight, it darted to the paling mask that was Medill's face. It hovered over the sagging head, and at length settled down on the finely wrinkled skin over the right temple.

Beat. . . .

That was the last. Medill's heart was definitely stilled. No pulse, no respiration, no movement. He was dead—a pallid, slowly chilling corpse seated bolt upright in the chair before the work table.

ON WINGS so swiftly moving that they could scarcely be seen, the dragon-fly flashed from the forehead of the corpse to the door. Under this there was a crack about half an inch high; and down the hall there was a partly opened window, with a hole in its screen.

With its thousands of eyes giving a peculiar luster and depth to every object they perceived, it lit on the floor near the threshold and wobbled on ungainly legs to the crack under the door. The edge of the rug was a four-foot wall. The dragon-fly clambered clumsily down it. Winged things are very helpless on their feet. But this creature was less awkward, at that, than the grasshopper that had left this room yesterday.

Once under the door and out in the hall, the dragon-fly flashed like a streak of light to the window and out the hole in the screen. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! With infinite patience and skill, Medill Corey had experimented with blood corpuscles and living body cells till he had ascertained the longest period over which the dead body could be left by its directing soul. He had found that the safe limit was approximately ten minutes. If the dragon-fly was not back on the dead man's right temple within ten minutes . . .

A tremor ran through the dragon-fly's wings. This must be the last transition. Each one brought with it a terrible danger that the body might not be re-tenanted before the time-limit was up. Each one worked terrific hardship on a body already damaged by a dozen little deaths.

To die, and release the soul for escape into another living shell! That was sublime! But to use the somber discovery for the purpose of tricking a wife was monumental stupidity. Medill knew that; he admitted it even while he did it. After today some safer way must be found of breaking the spirit that had always maddened his egomania.

But now—hurry! Out to the gate, to spy on the meeting between Doctor Voight and Beatrice. Then her patient endurance could be further bruised by more quoting of what they had said and done when they thought they were alone. The most exquisite and refined torture, it was!

The wings of the dragon-fly were a mere blur as it hurtled through the summer afternoon.

Medill's house was set on more than an acre of land, mainly lawn. The gate was fifty yards from the house, and near it were no trees or shrubs of any kind—no shelter for eavesdroppers. The two would feel safe there.

The dragon-fly reached the gate on glittering wings just as Doctor Voight's old touring-car paused in the road outside. Beatrice was already there, waiting. She was leaning wearily against one of the gate-posts, her face pale and worn, her eyes closed.

DOCTOR VOIGHT, a slender but strong-looking man with an iron-gray mustache and Vandyke beard, got from his car and stepped quickly to her side. He caught her right hand silently in his.

The dragon-fly, which had been hovering not far from Beatrice's head in the motionless way such insects have, darted forward with a whining of wings. Beatrice had not even opened her eyes at the hand-clasp, which indicated an infuriating communion of mind and spirit between her and the doctor.

"Darling," Doctor Voight said in a low tone, his eyes expressing infinite tenderness and sympathy.

At the word, Beatrice Corey opened her eyes quickly.

"Ssh! You mustn't say things like that. You must say nothing you would not want my husband to hear, because he hears everything we say."

Doctor Voight glanced around out of keen gray eyes.

"Nonsense, my dear. How could anybody be near enough to hear us in this spot?" His thin, strong fingers clasped hers more tightly. "You are letting your nerves run away with you."

"Am I? What would you say if I told you Medill had overheard us yesterday in the summer house?"

The doctor stared. "I would say it was impossible."

"Nevertheless, he did hear us." Beatrice leaned more wearily yet against the post. "A moment ago he mocked me by repeating, word for word, some of our talk together."

"The sneak! The contemptible spy! He has wired the summer house——" He broke off to wave his hand abstractedly at a large dragon-fly that had dashed erratically at his eyes.

"But he didn't," said Beatrice. "He swore there was nothing like that concealed there. And I believe him."

"Then, how——" muttered the doctor.

The dragon-fly had flown away from his face and was shimmering up and down in the golden air.

"Beatrice," said Voight, "you've got to get away from here. Medill Corey is a great man in the world of science, but in the world of human relations he is a monster. I have known his kind before: strong of will, but so narrow that they can't stand to have another strong will near them. Your will is strong, darling, but it will break before many days. I can see the break coming."

Beatrice sighed, and trembled a little.

"Pack your things and come with me," begged the doctor. "You can stay with my sister till a divorce is arranged. . . . What's wrong?"

"That thing!" exclaimed Beatrice. "That dragon-fly! It almost brushed my face."

The doctor smashed at the thing with his hat, but it retreated to a safe distance.

"That is only one example of the wrong Corey is doing you," he declared quietly. "With your phobia against insects, you should never be made to live in a country house. Your place is in town. Corey knows that—and only keeps you here to torture you."

White-faced but resolute, Beatrice shook her head.

"I am going to stay with him. I married him for better or worse, and I meant the words."

"I admire your loyalty, but I think

you're being unwise. You love me, don't you?"

"I—I can't——"

"Say it! You know you do. Give me the comfort of letting me hear you say it!"

Beatrice closed her eyes again. The dragon-fly darted very near, and hovered on almost invisible wings like a tiny, flying dagger.

"I love you," Beatrice whispered at last, with a sob in her voice. "There! But I must never say it again. I must never even think it again——"

THE dragon-fly darted in the direction of the distant house, paused to look backward out of its bulging eyes at the two by the gate, then went on.

"I love you."

The wings of the dragon-fly beat the air with a shrill, angry whine as it sped toward the hall window where was the hole in the screen.

"I love you."

So she had got to the point of admitting in words that she loved the man. She had said it! She, wife of a scientist brilliant beyond the comprehension of a dozen Doctor Voights! She would suffer for that.

The many-faceted eyes of the dragon-fly brought out marvelous hues of red and blue in the grass and foliage which showed only uniform green to human eyes, but it did not see them. And it did not see other, less peaceful things. . . .

Only pure reflex action, residing in the needle-like body apart from all intelligence, saved the dragon-fly. It made the shimmering creature stop as if it had hit a stone wall—just as a great feathered lightning-bolt swooped with snapping beak at the spot where the dragon-fly would have been in another instant of sustained flight. A sparrow!

The dragon-fly darted toward the tree

set at the rear of the Corey house. After it came the monster, wheeling as it wheeled, doubling back and from side to side as it did.

Fear, such as no human ever has occasion to know, gave added speed to the dragon-fly's wings. Insects live in a world of unspeakable nightmare. But in that world were few terrors more fearful than birds.

One last desperate rush the dragon-fly made. Then it folded its wings and dropped like a bullet to the lower branch of the tree, where it clung quaking to the under side of a leaf. The sparrow, huge as a Martin bomber, winged gigantically overhead for awhile, but finally flew away.

The next move of the dragon-fly was made more in frenzied haste than in wisdom. Hurry! Hurry! The time limit must be nearly up when it must light on the forehead of the corpse!

It dropped from the leaf, flashed into streaking flight—and plunged straight into a maze of sticky cables that looked to be made of rainbow-colored, flexible glass. A spider-web!

The dragon-fly had fled in terror before. The emotion that now set its wings to vibrating in a shrill whine of futile power went beyond anything for which there are words.

Hurry! Hurry! Another few minutes and it would be too late! It *must* get back to the pallid, chilling body in the work-room! And here it was tangled in this web of death stretching from twig to twig in the lower branch!

The keening of the dragon-fly's wings rose in pitch. But still its legs were held by the broken lengths of web. And now the wings themselves caught and smeared, clinging helplessly to the cables, sticking impotently to each other.

Abruptly, when every instinct and fiber shrieked for further struggle, the dragon-

fly went moveless, feigning death. There was a way in which the study might yet be re-entered in time. It involved something undreamed of before—but there was a possibility. . . .

So the dragon-fly hung like a dead thing, wings and legs tangled and smeared, a broken travesty of the flashing bit of life it had been a moment before. And after a few seconds the web trembled a bit, though there was no breeze to shake its supporting branches.

A tremor ran through the iridescent wings. A short distance away was a great, hairy thing with deadly eyes and powerful, hairy legs. A nightmare thing—the spider that had engineered this web.

The web trembled yet more as the bloated body was sent closer on crooked legs toward its enmeshed prey. And the dragon-fly could only hang there and stare, with a myriad magnifying lenses, at the horror approaching it.

The spider reached the dragon-fly and crouched beside it for an instant as if gloating over its helplessness. Then, with incredible swiftness, it pounced.

The dragon-fly felt terrific pain—felt death. But even in that flashing instant it felt, too, terrific triumph. For the spider, in taking life, was losing existence! Death, it seemed, could release the soul in another body whether the death were accidental or deliberately willed by a stopped heart!

THE hairy, revolting body of the spider was propelled by its crooked, powerful legs down the tree trunk and through the towering jungle of the lawn to the wall of the house. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Perhaps even now it was too late. But by a last burst of speed the study might be reached in time.

At the white wall of the house the spider paused. Great white expanse stretch-

ing up to heaven before the dull but vicious eyes . . . distance too great to make windows even visible, let alone identifiable . . . how in the name of heaven could the hall window, with the priceless hole in the screen, be found?

The spider started clambering up the wall at random, each clapboard presenting a gigantic problem in navigation, each fluttering web of other spiders a trap to be meticulously avoided. Any further delay would assuredly be fatal. A fight with another spider, no matter how brief, would definitely kill the last trace of a hope already slim.

Speed! Speed!

Here was a window, partly opened. And the screen. . . .

The spider scuttled back and forth over the screen, back and forth and up and down. There was no hole. This was not the window.

But through the screen the staring eyes of the spider saw something that froze it stone-still for an instant. A wide table, with an armchair set before it. A dead man in the chair. Beyond, a door broken from its hinges; and a man and woman hurrying toward the corpse.

The spider's legs blurred with the rapidity of their action. The hairy body left the surface of the screen and darted along its upper edge. At one end the frame was warped away from the window-sash a little. A very little!

No true spider would have forced itself through such a narrow crack. But this one did, crushing body and legs, almost scraping one eye out, but eventually landing heavily on the inside of the window-sill. From there the spider dropped to the floor and scuttled painfully on trailing legs to the armchair.

"He's dead," Doctor Voight was saying, as he leaned over the stark body. "Your slavery is ended, Beatrice."

"Dead?" whispered the woman. "Dead! Oh, thank God!"

The task of hoisting its heavy body up the chair-leg and up along the sleeve of the dead man seemed surely beyond the power of the shattered spider. But at the woman's words a shiver seemed to go through it; and the trailing legs began tortuously lifting its bulk.

Dead, eh? And Beatrice thanked God for it! Well, Doctor Voight would have the surprise of his professional life in a moment! For the spider was up on the chair-arm now, still unnoticed; and the immense disk of the watch, propped on the desk, was visible. Only twelve minutes had passed since the dragon-fly had left the room. It had seemed far longer than that.

Only twelve minutes! The corpse could still almost certainly come to life. Once let the hairy, bloated body come to rest on the dead forehead and Beatrice would see how much God was to be thanked!

THE spider climbed the dead man's coat-sleeve. It went faster now. Much faster. The rough fabric offered swifter footing than the smooth chair-leg.

"It must have been heart failure," the doctor was saying. "His heart and circulatory system were in bad shape—though I'm ashamed to say I couldn't find exactly what was wrong. His trouble baffled diagnosis."

The spider raced over the dead man's shoulder. The wide white strip of the starched collar, and the gray expanse of the dead cheek, loomed just above it.

"Anyhow, he's dead," Doctor Voight went on. "And you are at last going to live a sane, healthy life. A happy one, too, I hope—with me?"

"So happy!" murmured Beatrice. "So very happy! I should be sorry . . . for this." She nodded toward the corpse.

"But I can't be—not and be honest. You don't know a tenth of the things he did to me. I was afraid to let you know, afraid you would kill him."

The spider skinned up the dead gray cheek.

Making love literally over a dead man! Mouthing sweet nothings with death in the room! Let them look out when the dead man came to life! Beatrice especially. She'd wish she had never been born! There were ways, without ever a hand being touched to them, of making persons into stark lunatics in a few months. The author of *Will to Power over the Involuntary Muscles* knew such ways.

The spider raced down into the hollowed eyesocket, up again, and around the tangle of the eyelashes.

"We'll travel awhile till you forget this house of cruelty and tragedy," the doctor said. "And then we'll come back to normality and work. Unless you'd rather we moved to some other town?"

"No, your practise is here."

The spider skirted around the bushy eyebrow sprouting from the clammy skin. The goal was only a few inches away. Thank God he's dead, eh? She'd be praying God for her own death soon!

"You do love me, Beatrice?" said the doctor, his fine eyes looking deep into hers.

"With all my heart. . . . Oh—look—smash it!"

The spider reached the chill forehead just as Doctor Voight, smiling a little at Beatrice's fear, brushed it off.

It plopped on the table top. In an instant it was scurrying frantically back toward the dead body.

"Kill it! Kill it!" beseeched Beatrice. "Loathsome, hairy thing!"

Doctor Voight raised the book, *Will to Power*, and poised it above the toiling spider.

And the spider stopped!

Yes, yes, yes! Kill it! For once again death could release the spirit that otherwise could return to its human shell only by actual contact with the right temple. When that book came crashing down, the dead would live again!

But Doctor Voight, with a laugh, tossed the book aside.

"It would make a mess on the table top," he said.

He slid a piece of paper under the spider, carried it to the window, raised the screen and dropped it carelessly out.

In the jungle of the lawn, the pulped and broken spider stared dully up at the white expanse of the house wall, which seemed to stretch to heaven. Impossible to scale that wall again. Impossible. . . .

The spider twitched spasmodically, and lay still.

