

Weird Tales

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YOUTH

By HOWARD R. MARSH

MARTIN ZUCKER reversed the usual process. All heroes, it is well known, enjoy a kinetographic review of their entire past lives in that brief, fearful second when they stand on the threshold of the hereafter and bravely stare death out of countenance. Martin Zucker, on the contrary, watched the little movie of his past life as he came back into being, as he lingered in that anesthetized zone between coma and consciousness. But Martin Zucker was not a hero; perhaps that accounted for his reversion of the usual process.

This is what Zucker reviewed on his own little mental screen:

A youth, far distant, when he starved and suffered and played in the lumber settlement of Johnstown; a love episode with Hilda Juessing; three, four, five years of labor in the woods, felling trees, suffering with the cold, sweating and freezing at once, to earn money to marry Hilda; a single flash, the murder of Hilda and Lars Behr; then a numbness, mental and physical, which endured through months, years.

Gray days, monotonous days: they flickered by on the screen. Each was like the last; he began each day by dragging himself from his cell cot, dressing in the semi-darkness, marching step for step with the man ahead of him and the man behind, out past the tally-guard, into the chair factory. Then hours of wrapping soft paper pulp around frames to make "wick-er" furniture, reaching for the paper strips, wrapping, wrapping, reaching again and wrapping again. A brief respite for lunch—beans, coffee and bread and butter—and then back to the prison factory and the everlasting wrapping of chairs. At night, back to the dining hall with eight hundred

other gray-faced, lusterless men; a few moments to satisfy the animal desire of hunger; and then the black night in cell No. 656.

The nights were no more distinguishable than the days. Sometimes he had visions of Hilda, but he drove them away by pounding his fists against the steel bars until his knuckles were raw and bleeding and the ache of his hands occupied his mind.

To Martin Zucker there was no such thing as time. Day and night, night and day; work and eat, eat and sleep. That was all. From time to time the men who worked beside him told with elation of their approaching freedom. From time to time men left their benches and Zucker appreciated that they were going back to that dim figment, the world. He didn't envy them their freedom, for to him it meant nothing. Except food and sleep and work, nothing meant anything to Zucker. Least of all, time.

Then there was a sudden change. A doctor had talked to him, cross-examined him, asked a question which Zucker scarcely understood. But as he labored mentally over the doctor's words in his cell that night he began to understand. The doctor had promised him—Youth!

FROM that moment of realization the mental pictures became clearer. There was, the next day, the prison hospital; a white clinic room; a dozen avid doctors, and in the center one who fingered instruments with a certain gloating delight. He treasured a tiny, gelatin-filled bottle but did not treasure his words, the subtleties of the drama.

"This transplanting of glands," the paunchy surgeon explained, "is no longer an experimental operation.

Its results are now generally considered absolute. There is a rejuvenation of all body tissues and glands: in short, a return to youth. I foresee the time when man, at his choice, can enjoy the glow of youth far beyond his allotted time . . . I . . . I wonderful . . . I . . ."

Martin Zucker, still reviewing the film of his past life as he hesitated on the threshold of consciousness, couldn't remember all of the doctor's words. He recalled his desire that the doctor would cease talking, hurry with the wonderful operation. Then, more vividly, came back to him the doctor's description:

"This man, Zucker, sixty-nine years old, approaching senile decay, has agreed to submit to the transplanting of glands before the clinic. He is a prisoner in this institution, has been for years. Yet he is a particularly favorable patient for the operation. As far as I can determine, his family history is without pathological or psychological incident. His forebears were poor, sturdy woodsmen; he followed in their footsteps and has an unusually rugged physique. Except for the commission of a single crime, a crime of an emotional nature, his own life is without interesting features. He approaches the operation in an optimistic frame of mind, believing, as I do, that he will leave the hospital a young man, rejuvenated—that he will have another lifetime ahead of him, virile . . . Nurse, place the cone . . . The operation . . . pituitary region . . . careful suturing . . ."

Zucker recalled now how the doctor's words faded out in the sweet oblivion of ether.

And now the operation was over and Martin Zucker, on a bed in the hospital, was resting with half-closed eyes and reviewing all the events that had brought him there. He was not in great pain. True, there was nausea, there was aggravating dryness of his throat, which water could not re-

lieve. And there had been moments of terror as he came from under the influence of ether; moments in which he felt clutching through space; other moments in which he again beat Lars Behr to death with his fists, took the white throat of Hilda Juessing in his hands and strangled her.

But these terrors left him as his brain cleared. Suddenly he smiled.

Youth! He, Martin Zucker, sixty-nine years old, was a young man! Wonderful! No call now to review his past life; no, he would think only of the future.

He began to picture youth; he pictured it in many ways. At first the vision was only of physical strength and vigor, of freedom from fatigue and aches. Then it widened and included the woods—the woods in which he had worked in his prime. He was back there again, young and stalwart, sinking his two-bitted ax into the odorous wood of a Norway pine; he was scuffing through the snow, dragging a logging chain which few men could lift; he was in the bunkhouse, challenging all the jacks to a free-for-all.

Gradually that picture faded and another, even more brightly tinted, came. There was a woman in this picture. Of course Hilda was gone. But there were other fair-haired, physically attractive girls, such as Hilda had been. And they would love Martin Zucker—love him because he was young and powerful and virile. They would see him, smile at him, almost court him. . . Youth seeking youth, girls seeking Martin Zucker. . .

HE SMILED happily. He was smiling in a superior sort of way when the prison warden walked to his bedside and asked, "How are you feeling this morning, Zucker?"

Martin's smile was sufficient answer; he was much too happy for words.

"The doctor says the operation was entirely successful," the warden as-

sured him. "He says that you may have another thirty or forty years of comparative youth. Of course he is rabid on the subject. But at that I wouldn't be surprized if you outlived me here, and I'm only forty."

" . . . outlived me *here!*" The words stuck in Martin Zucker's mind. "Here." Just what did the warden mean? Certainly not the hospital, for the doctor had promised him that he would be disabled only a week or two.

But "here!" That certainly didn't mean the odorous pine woods of the north; it didn't mean the place where he would find the beautiful fair-haired successor to Hilda.

"Here!" Martin Zucker's face aged; a terrible thought brought the cold sweat to his brow. He groaned and turned his face to the wall. "Here!"

Ah! A long time "here!" For Martin Zucker, to whom time had meant nothing and to whom the future promised nothing, had suddenly been shown the pricelessness of time and the promise of the future.

The operation had done that. The operation had made him young, too. And the operation promised him . . .

Another life time in prison. For Martin Zucker was serving a life sentence.