

The Professor's Experiment

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– Neil Hogan

The Professor's Experiment

By Adelaide Primrose

We are but creatures of a moment,
Come from dark oblivion, from deep night;
And forth, we go into the endless years
To dwell in sadness, or in God's glad light.

The Professor was renowned in the world of science. He had contributed many valuable articles on his pet theories to the journals of note in various parts of the world, and had succeeded in demonstrating the soundness of his principal contentions in world-famed Universities and laboratories.

Many remarkable discoveries had had their origin in his fertile brain, and whether the long nights of patient study had worn away the once powerful mind or not, or whether it was the mere eccentricity which is said to invariably accompany the divine spark of genius, to ordinary everyday folk he was summed up in the one word "Mad," because science had become part and parcel of his existence to such an extent that everything connected with his own actions and with his household arrangements was regulated on a strictly scientific basis, and instant dismissal was the invariable penalty if a domestic transgressed one of the laws laid down with Spartan rigidity.

He was a picturesque man in appearance, tall and gaunt, with a massive forehead and deep-set searching eyes, which gleamed beneath a pail' of bushy grey eyebrows. A fringe of silvery hair peeped out from underneath his black velvet skullcap, his nose was aquiline, and his determined mouth and chin were destitute of any hirsute adornment, such being condemned for hygienic reasons.

Kind acts—acts of genuine charity—had often been performed by him, but only on condition that his name should never be

mentioned in connection with them. So the world misunderstood him, as it misunderstands hundreds of others, and called him parsimonious—a fact which troubled him little when his devotion to science yielded him all the pleasure and delight he needed.

For years a theory had been shaping itself in the Professor's brain—a theory so strange that it had at first startled him, but which he determined to put to the test. So night after night he pondered and thought, and at last set to work on a strange mechanical arrangement worked by the aid of an electrical dynamo which he had constructed.

His servants were forbidden to enter his laboratory lest the delicate arrangement of wires might be tampered with, and the labour of so many days and nights irrevocably ruined.

He was like a parent doting over a cherished child; and as he wished his invention to come as a surprise to the scientific world, he told no one of his plans.

His friends noticed with dismay his increasing absent-mindedness and wondered if this mental aberration was really the sign of loss of his fine intellectual forces. They discussed his case amongst themselves, and in an apparently careless tone advised him to give himself the rest he needed after so many years of close application, and they were surprised when his eyes looked away dreamily as he smiled and said "Soon—not yet, not yet. There is work to be finished before I could think of resting. It is better to wear out than rust out, though there is little fear of my doing either."

But the revelation was close at hand, and a young physician in whom he took a great interest was the first to receive the Professor's confidence. The latter's face was lit up with feverish excitement when the doctor called to see him one evening.

"You have wondered with the others" he said, "why I have seemed so absent-minded of late—why I have been apparently

dreaming instead of working. It is the dreamers in some cases who are the workers, for the mental machinery is working while physically one may appear inert. Antonin Mercie, the sculptor, would never have been able to hew one line of his glorious creations had he not spent the first years of his academical career in thinking out what was in himself, in observing the beet that he saw around him, instead of slavishly copying models, as his fellow-students were doing. For a long time my mind has been working on a theory which I have laid down in a machine which I have nearly completed. The whole world will be startled at my discovery, for its power will hold sway over life and death themselves—those two great factors which have hitherto puzzled humanity.

The physician started in amazement. Could it be true that this strange man, with his gift of analysis, his years of study, had fathomed the depths of this problem, which Plato had given up in despair, had groped through the darkness of uncertainty to the infinite—held in his hands the fate of multitudes?

Was it a madman's scheme, the chimera of a strange hallucination?

"I will show you the instrument," the Professor continued, "and give you a slight description of its working."

And he drew the doctor into his laboratory and showed him the cherished work, and how death, which had hitherto been considered mightier than life, might at last be conquered.

"I have nearly finished it," he said, "and have kept my invention a secret so that I might work on undisturbed. Each little detail has been carefully worked out, and the electric plates and coils are a most complex and delicate arrangement. Electricity is the fundamental basis of life, which becomes extinct when it is exhausted; therefore I claim it may be restored, and that a heart that has ceased to beat can be made normal again through the agency of my invention—death shall yield to life."

"And when will you test its power?" asked the doctor eagerly.

"Let me see. I have only that tubing to arrange. This is Tuesday evening. On Thursday morning punctually at 10 o'clock I shall be glad of your services, for I require your co-operation and your promise of secrecy prior to the demonstration before the University. I will ask you to supply the unfortunate patient who has baffled your medical skill, and in an hour's time—perhaps less—you will perceive signs of returning life. A daily course of the treatment will, of course, be necessary for a short time in order to restore full health and vigour."

The doctor declared himself to be honoured at being privileged profession ally to receive the Professor's confidence, and declared he would keep the appointment and supply to the moment the requirements.

Chapter II

Wednesday passed. To the doctor it seemed that the time would never pass quickly enough. At length Thursday morning arrived, and his motor bowled gaily over the road that led to the Professor's house. At a distance behind lumbered a cart. When it arrived the Professor ordered the men to carry the box into a large room, lit by a skylight from above, and a large window, which faced the south; both were open, for it was an unwritten law in the Professor's household that a window should never be closed. Screens were arranged to keep out the rain in winter. Fires were prohibited on account of their destruction of oxygen.

In the centre of the room, so placed that the light fell full upon it, was the table surrounded by its network of wires and steel plates. Upon this the Professor and doctor lifted the poor wreck of humanity—one of the vast army of unemployed who had tried for work unsuccessfully, and had at length succumbed to exposure and want of food—a portion of the flotsam and jetsam that daily floats on the tide of human life and is the deepest heart break to those self-sacrificing ones who try to save, to uplift, and

bring solace and comfort with so many crying odds against their efforts.

On the previous day the unfortunate man had been brought to the hospital suffering from exhaustion and pneumonia, and with a sigh of relief his spirit had passed out of the world which had given him none of her luxury and kindness from the moment he had opened his eyes in a miserable overcrowded household.

Pushed aside by a jostling world,
Wanted not in the sunlit way,
Crowded, out from the best of life,
Toiling onwards from day to day;
Toiling on and never a word—
Of love, or kindness, or sympathy,
But God will surely requite the years
And peace will follow the toil and tears.

The emaciated features were calm and peaceful, with the marks of toil and care erased by the hand of Death's loving angel—a life which, given equal chances with others, might have been capable of so much. Standing there and watching the Professor adjusting the wires and steel plates in position, the doctor vaguely wondered if this human being would be glad that life had been returned to him—was it right to bring a soul back to a place of suffering when perchance it was enjoying peace and rest in the City of Light. And yet, for the benefit of humanity, could not some atonement be made for all the hardships and privations of bygone years. Henceforth life might be made easy for him. The morality of the problem seemed right in that direction, for was it not the bounden duty of medical science to prolong existence, to exert every effort, to keep the flickering spark alight, and to bring it back—aye, to bring it back!

His meditation was abruptly interrupted by the Professor, who required his assistance in adjusting the mechanism and the electric points around the region of the man's heart. At last all the arrangements were complete, the electric current was started, and

almost breathlessly the two men watched, while the whirr-whirr, like the drone of a bee, was the only sound audible.

Far away across the distant hills floated a cloud—a cloud so small that it was no bigger than a man's hand; it cast a shadow that was but a mere speck as it drifted over the vineyards, but gradually it grew in size, and came closer and closer, and far off a dark ridge of nimbus clouds followed in its wake.

Closer and closer it came—silently and softly, like some graceful bird pursuing its easy flight; closer and closer, and from afar there came a faint rumble of thunder, so faint that the two men were tod absorbed in their observations to hear it. At length a shadow fell across the skylight, which the Professor apparently did not notice. The doctor, however, looked up in surprise and saw the herald of the approaching storm; but the Professor arrested his attention by an exclamation of excitement,

"See, the eyelids are beginning to quiver, the electricity is doing its work;" and again, they watched with breathless interest.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of lightning, which made the doctor jump back in alarm and ask if it would not be wiser to postpone the experiment, as it seemed dangerous to continue in the face of the coming storm.

The Professor shook his head imperatively and waved his hand in the direction of a room leading off the one they were occupying. "Go in there if you are afraid," he said testily. "I am used to playing with the elements. It would be impossible to leave the man like this. See, there is another tremor of the eyelids."

There was a moment of hesitation on the part of the medico; science urged him to remain, prudence bade him retreat. Another blinding flash of lightning, however, decided him, and he

drew back quickly into the doorway of the room behind him. Not an instant too soon; there was a crash, and he was hurled backwards through the open door. A great fork of lightning had shot through the unclosed window. It struck the Professor where he stood and shattered the mechanism into a thousand fragments.

So had ended the Professor's experiment, and Death had once more proved his supremacy over Life. The inventor, charred and lifeless, had fallen across the ruins of the work which had involved so much skill and intellectual energy.

Save for a few deep scars where the flying steel had struck him, the physician was uninjured, and when he recovered consciousness from his heavy fall, viewed the two battered wrecks with awe and consternation, vaguely wondering if it was a sign from the King Invisible that, when once the soul has parted from the clay, no man shall dare probe the secrets of the infinite and seek to bring it back.

The End

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