

The Supernumerary Corpse

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It is not remorse that maddens me, that drives me to the penning of this more than indiscreet narrative, in the hope of finding a temporary distraction. I have felt no remorse for a crime to which justice itself impelled me. It is the damnable mystery, beyond all human reason or solution, upon which I have stumbled in the doing of this simple deed, in the mere execution of the justice whereof I speak-it is this that has brought me near insanity.

My motives in the killing of Jasper Trilt, though imperative, were far from extraordinary. He had wronged me enough, in the course of a twelve years' acquaintance, to warrant his death twice over. He had robbed me of the painfully garnered fruits of a lifetime of labor and research, had stolen, with lying promises, the chemical formulae that would have made me a wealthy man. Foolishly, I had trusted him, believing that he would share with me the profits of my precious knowledge-from which he was to acquire riches and renown. Poor and un-known, I could do nothing for my own redress.

Often I marvel at the long forbearance which I displayed toward Trilt. Something (was it the thought of ultimate revenge?) led me to ignore his betrayals, to dissemble my knowledge of his baseness. I continued to use the laboratory which he had equipped for me. I went on accepting the miserable pittance which he paid me for my toil. I made new discoveries-and I allowed him to cheat me of the usufruct.

Moreover, there was Norma Gresham, whom I had always loved in my halting, inarticulate fashion, and who had seemed to like me well enough before Trilt began to pay her his dashing and gallant addresses. She had speedily forgotten the timid, poverty-stricken chemist, and had married Trilt. This, too, I pretended to ignore, but I could not forget.

As you see, my grievances were such as have actuated many others in the seeking of vengeance: they were in no sense unusual; and like everything else about the affair, they served by their very commonplaceness to throw into monstrous relief the abnormal and inexplicable outcome.

I cannot remember when it was that I first conceived the idea of killing my betrayer. It has been so long an integral part of my mental equipment, that I seem to have nurtured it from all pre-eternity. But the full maturing, the perfection of my murderous plans, is a thing of quite recent date.

For years, apart from my usual work, I have been experimenting with poisons. I delved in the remote arcana and by-ways of toxicology, I learned all that chemistry could tell me on the

subject-and more. This branch of my research was wholly unknown to Trilt; and I did not intend that he should profit by anything that I had discovered or devised in the course of my investigations. In fact, my aims were quite different, in regard to him.

From the beginning, I had in mind certain peculiar requisites, which no poison familiar to science could fulfil. It was after endless groping and many failures that I succeeded in formulating a compound of rare toxic agents which would have the desired effect on the human system.

It was necessary, for my own security, that the poison should leave no trace, and should imitate closely the effects of some well-known malady, thus precluding even the chance of medical suspicion. Also, the victim must not die too quickly and mercifully. I devised a compound which, if taken internally, would be completely absorbed by the nervous system within an hour and would thereafter be undetectable through analysis. It would cause an immediate paralysis, and would present all the outward effects of a sudden and lethal stroke of apoplexy. However, the afflicted person—though seemingly insensible—would retain consciousness and would not die till the final absorption of the poison. Though utterly powerless to speak or move, he would still be able to hear and see, to understand-and suffer.

Even after I had perfected this agent, and had satisfied myself of its efficacy, I delayed the crowning trial. It was not through fear or compunction that I waited: rather, it was because I desired to prolong the delicious joys of anticipation, the feeling of power it gave me to know that I could sentence my betrayer to his doom and could execute the sentence at will.

It was after many months—it was less than a fortnight ago—that I decided to withhold my vengeance no longer. I planned it all very carefully, with complete forethought; and I left no loophole for mischance or accident. There would be nothing, not even the most tenuous thread, that could ever lead any one to suspect me.

To arouse the cupidity of Trilt, and to insure his profound interest, I went to him and hinted that I was on the brink of a great discovery. I did not specify its nature, saying that I should reveal it all at the proper time, when success had been achieved. I did not invite him to visit the laboratory. Cunningly, by oblique hints, I stimulated his curiosity; and I knew that he would come. Perhaps my caution was excessive; but it must not even seem that I had prearranged the visit that would terminate in his seizure and death. I could, perhaps, have found opportunity to administer the poison in his own home, where I was still a fairly frequent caller. But I wished him to die in my presence and in the laboratory that had been the scene of my long, defrauded toils.

I knew, by a sort of prescience, the very evening when he would come, greedy to unearth my

new secret. I prepared the draft that contained the poison—a chemist's glass of water colored with a little grenadine—and set it aside in readiness among my tubes and bottles. Then I waited.

The laboratory—an old and shabby mansion, converted by Trilt to this purpose—lay in a well-wooded outskirts of the town, at no great distance from my employer's luxurious home. Trilt was a gourmand; and I knew that he would not arrive till well after the dinner hour. Therefore I looked for him about nine o'clock. He must indeed have been eager to filch my supposed new formula; for, half an hour before the expected time, I heard his heavy, insolent knock on the door of the rear room in which I was waiting amid my chemical apparatus.

He came in, gross and odious, with the purple overfeeding upon his puffy jowls. He wore an azure blue tie and a suit of pepper-and-salt—a close-fitting suit that merely emphasized the repulsive bulkiness of his figure.

“Well, Margrave, what is it now?” he asked. “Have you finished the experiments you were hinting about so mysteriously? I hope you've really done something to earn your pay, this time.”

“I have made a tremendous discovery,” I told him, “nothing less than the elixir of the alchemists—the draft of eternal life and energy.”

He was palpably startled, and gave me a sharp, incredulous stare.

“You are lying,” he said, “or fooling yourself. Everyone knows, and has known since the Dark Ages, that the thing is a scientific impossibility.”

“Others may lie,” I said sardonically, “but it remains to be seen whether or not I have lied. That graduated glass which you see on the table is filled with the elixir.”

He stared at the vessel which I had indicated.

“It looks like grenadine,” he remarked, with a certain perspicacity. “There is a superficial likeness—the color is the same. . . . But the stuff means immortality for any one who dares to drink it—also it means inexhaustible capacity for pleasure, a freedom from all satiety or weariness. It is everlasting life and joy.”

He listened greedily. “Have you tried it yourself?”

“Yes, I have experimented with it,” I countered.

He gave me a somewhat contemptuous and doubtful glance. "Well, you do look rather animated tonight-at least, more so than usual-and no so much like a mackerel that's gotten soured on life. The stuff hasn't killed you, at any rate. So I think I'll try it myself. It ought to be a pretty good commercial proposition, if it only does a tenth of what you say it will. We'll call it Trilt's Elixir"

"Yes," said I, slowly, echoing him: "Trilt's Elixir."

He reached for the glass and raised it to his lips.

"You guarantee the result?" he asked.

"The result will be all that one could desire," I promised, looking him full in the eyes, and smiling with an irony which he could not perceive.

He drained the glass at a gulp. Instantly, as I had calculated, the poison took effect. He staggered as if he had received a sudden, crushing blow, the empty vessel fell from his fingers with a crash, his heavy legs collapsed beneath him, he fell on the laboratory floor between the laden benches and tables, and lay without stirring again. His face was flushed and congested, his breathing stertorous, as in the malady whose effects I had chosen to simulate. His eyes were open-horribly open and glaring; but there was not even the least flicker of their lids.

Coolly, but with a wild exultation in my heart, I gathered up the fragments of the broken glass and dropped them into the small heating-stove that stood at the room's end. Then, returning to the fallen and helpless man, I allowed myself the luxury of gloating over the dark, unutterable terror which I read in his paralytic gaze. Knowing that he could still hear and comprehend, I told him what I had done and listed the unforgotten wrongs which he thought I had accepted so supinely.

Then, as an added torture, I emphasized the undetectable nature of the poison, and I taunted him for his own folly in drinking the supposed elixir. All too quickly did the hour pass-the hour which I had allowed for the full absorption of the poison and the victim's death. The breathing of Trilt grew slower and fainter, his pulse faltered and became inaudible; and at last he lay dead. But the terror still appeared to dwell, dark and stagnant and nameless, in his ever-open eyes.

Now, as was part of my carefully laid plan, I went to the laboratory telephone. I intended to make two calls-one, to tell Norma, Trilt's wife, of his sudden and fatal seizure while visiting me-and the other, to summon a doctor.

For some indefinable reason, I called Norma first-and the outcome of our conversation was

so bewildering, so utterly staggering, that I did not put in the second call.

Norma answered the telephone herself, as I had expected. Before I could frame the few short words that would inform her of Trilt's death, she cried out in a shaken, tremulous voice:

"I was just going to call you, Felton. Jasper died a few minutes ago, from an apoplectic stroke. It's all so terrible, and I am stunned by the shock. He came into the house about an hour ago, and dropped at my feet without saying a word... I thought he had gone to see you- but he could hardly have done that and gotten back so quickly. Come at once, Felton."

The dumbfoundment which I felt was inexpressible. I think I must have stammered a little as I answered her:

"Are you sure- quite sure that it's Jasper?"

"Of course, it's incredible. But he is lying here on the library sofa-bed. I called a doctor when he was stricken; and the doctor is still here. But there is nothing more to be done."

It was impossible then for me to tell her, as I had intended- that Trilt had come to the laboratory- that his dead body was lying near me in the rear room at that moment. Indeed, I doubted my own senses, doubted my very brain, as I hung up the telephone. Either I, or Norma was the victim of some strange and unaccountable delusion.

Half expecting that the gross cadaver would have vanished like an apparition, I turned from the telephone- and saw it, supine and heavy, with stiffening limbs and features. I went over, I stooped above it and dug my fingers roughly into the flabby flesh to make sure that it was real- that Trilt's visit and the administering of the poison had not been a mere hallucination. It was Trilt himself who lay before me; no one could mistake the obese body, the sybaritic face and lips, even with the chill of death descending upon them. The corpse I had touched was all too solid and substantial.

It must be Norma, then, who was demented or dreaming, or who had made some incredible mistake. I should go to the house at once and learn the true explanation. There would be time enough afterward to do my own explaining.

There was no likelihood that any one would enter the laboratory in my absence. Indeed, there were few visitors at any time. With one backward look at the body, to assure myself anew of its materiality, I went out into the moonless evening and started toward my employer's residence.

I have no clear recollection of the short walk among shadowy trees and bushes and along

the poorly litten streets with their scattered houses. My thoughts, as well as the external world, were a night-bound maze of baffling unreality and dubiety.

Into this mare I was plunged to an irremeable depth on my arrival. Norma, pale and stunned rather than grief-stricken (for I think she had long ceased to love Trilt), was at the door to meet me.

“I can’t get over the suddenness of it,” she said at once. “He seemed all right at dinnertime, and ate heartily, as usual. Afterward he went out, saying that he would walk as far as the laboratory and look in on you.”

“He must have felt ill, and started back after he had gone halfway. I didn’t even hear him come in. I can’t understand how he entered the house so quietly. I was sitting in the library, reading, when I happened to look up, just in time to see him cross the room and fall senseless at my feet. He never spoke or moved after that.”

I could say nothing as she led me to the library. I do not know what I had expected to find; but certainly no sane man, no modern scientist and chemist, could have dreamed of what I saw—the body of Jasper Trilt, reposing still and stiff and cadaverous on the sofa: the same corpse, to all outward seeming, which I had left behind me in the laboratory!

The doctor, Trilt’s family physician, whom Norma had summoned was about to leave. He greeted me with a slight nod and a cursory, incurious glance.

“There’s nothing whatever to be done,” he said, “it’s all over.”

“But-it doesn’t seem possible,” I stammered. “Is it really Jasper Trilt—isn’t there some mistake?”

The doctor did not seem to hear my question. With reeling senses doubting my own existence, I went over to the sofa and examined the body, touching it several times to make sure—if assurance were possible—of its substantiality. The puffy, purplish features, the open, glaring eyes with the glacial terror, the suit of pepper-and-salt, the azure blue tie—all were identical with those I had seen and touched a few minutes previous, in another place. I could no longer doubt the materiality of the second corpse—I could not deny that the thing before me, to all intents and purposes, was Jasper Trilt. But in the very confirmation of its incredible identity, there lay the inception of a doubt that was infinitely hideous....

A week has gone by since then—a week of unslumbering nightmare, of all-prevailing, ineluctable horror.

Going back to the laboratory, I found the corpse of Jasper Trilt on the floor, where he had

fallen. Feverishly, I applied to it all possible tests: it was solid, clammy, gross, material, like the other. I dragged it into a dusty, little-used storeroom, among cobwebby cartons and boxes and bottles, and covered it with sacking.

For reasons that must be more than obvious, I dared not tell any one of its existence. No one, save myself, has ever seen it. No one-not even Norma-suspects the unimaginable truth....

Later, I attended the funeral of Trilt, I saw him in his coffin, and as one of the pall-bearers I helped to carry the coffin and lower it into the grave. I can swear that it was tenanted by an actual body. And on the faces of the morticians and my fellow pall-bearers there was no shadow of doubt or misgiving as to the identity and reality of the corpse. But afterward, returning home, I lifted the sacking in the store-room, and found that the thing beneath-cadaver or ka, doppelganger or phantom, whatever it was-had not disappeared or undergone the least change.

Madness took me then for awhile, and I knew not what I did. Recovering my senses in a measure, I poured gallon after gallon of corrosive acids into a great tub; and in the tub I placed the thing that had been Jasper Trilt, or which bore the semblance of Trilt. But neither the clothing nor the body was affected in any degree by the mordant acid. And since then, the thing has shown no sign of normal decay, but remains eternally and inexplicably the same. Some night, before long, I shall bury it in the woods behind the laboratory; and the earth will receive Trilt for the second time. After that my crime will be doubly undetectable-if I have really committed a crime, and have not dreamed it all or become the victim of some hallucinative brain-disease.

I have no explanation for what has happened, nor do I believe that any such can be afforded by the laws of a sane universe. But-is there any proof that the universe itself is sane, or subject to rational laws?

Perhaps there are inconceivable lunacies in chemistry itself, and drugs whose action is a breach of all physical logic. The poison that I administered to Trilt was an unknown quantity, apart from its deadliness, and I cannot be wholly sure of its properties, of its possible effect on the atoms of the human body-and the atoms of the soul. Indeed, I can be sure of nothing, except that I too, like the laws of matter, must go altogether mad in a little while.

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