

The TALKING BRAIN

By M.H. Haste



He lived near to madness with his grisly guest. . . . the placid waxen features must have been worst of all—with their staring, indifferent eyes behind which his victim and his judge spoke out in endless alternate prayer and insective—out fooling, hiding hell.

The Beginning of a Strange Story—A Friendless Scientist

THE death of the student Vinton, and Professor Murtha's suicide following, brought the University a good deal of unwelcome prominence. In fact, the newspapers demanded investigation; and President Archer asked me to prepare a statement of the facts for general publication, because I know them better than anyone now living.

Circumstances forced me into the very heart of the affair. I am glad of the opportunity to explain it, for my own name was rather unpleasantly mentioned on recent front pages. I worked with Murtha for months; perhaps I helped him somewhat in developing the remarkable instruments which tempted him to crime; I introduced him to Vinton; I was with him the night of his death, and heard his confession; and for the validity of his notes I am his sole witness to science. It is said that I was his only friend.

This last is not quite true. Murtha had no friends—he was not a man who could or would undertake the ordinary human relations. Up to his last days he was self-sufficient—impersonal—official—unbendingly scientific. The first evening I met him an incident occurred which illustrates very well why he was rather outside the general fellowship of the faculty.

We were introduced at the club by Jedney, Murtha's department head. "Here's a new chap we're extra proud to have in the psychology department," he said, and then with a twinkle, "Look out for him, Harvey, for he's dabbling with your specialty and he'll show up all of us old boys if we don't hustle." He went on to say the usual amiable things about my electrical work and the more recent X-ray research with crystals. Then he moved away leaving us together.

I made conversation, since Professor

Murtha seemed inclined to leave me the duty and I studied him. He was ill-at-ease. There was clearly no humor there, for he made no attempt to respond to Jedney's joviality. He was of medium height, with rather an academic face beneath red hair, and his speech was clipped and formal. He dressed with almost conspicuous quietness. A typical assistant professor, you might judge from the description—and yet somehow the man was set off from the rest of us as an arrow is distinguished in a rack of walking sticks. It was not poise or strength, it was rather a kind of fierce concentration on some hidden purpose. It was the most noticeable thing about him.

Testing the Psychological Reactions Unknown to the Subject of the Experiment

WE talked of trivialities, and then I rose to go. Uninvited, he was beside me at once, with a light flowing step, and we passed out onto the dimming campus beneath the sturdy elms. Opposite Carson Hall he said in a hesitant way, which he seemed to try to make cordial, "Could you come up to my rooms for a few minutes, Professor Harvey? I'd like very much to have your help with this new electro-neural work I'm undertaking. Professor Jedney says you know more about the action of weak electric currents than anyone else on this side of the Atlantic. I want to ask a few questions."

I was idle that evening, and I went. He installed me by an open fire—it was September, but chilly—and left me, after pushing a box of cigarettes to my elbow. I had time to receive an impression of austere richness—handsome books, the glint of mahogany, etchings—before he returned with a small box that trailed wires. He set it on the table beside me, took the chair opposite, and lighted a cigarette.

The box contained a galvanometer

with a recording dial, and two wrist straps were in the circuit. He explained that he wanted to get some records of the body's resistance to electric currents, and asked if I would mind his taking one while we talked. All that was required was that I should wear the straps. I consented.

We discussed currents and resistances. He spoke intelligently, and betrayed a good knowledge of the physical side of the subject, although he was weak in mathematics. It was interesting to see how he came to life in the talk. Shyness and self-consciousness vanished as soon as he spoke of technicalities. He was vital, interested, assured. But suddenly he seemed to remember something. He checked himself, rose, and picked a book from the table near at hand. It fell open to a familiar passage.

The Shakespearean Test

“**H**ERE'S something I'd like to read you,” he said abruptly. We had been talking about hysteresis and Steinmetz's formulae, and I blinked a bit with surprise when he began to read from Shakespeare—the scene in “King John” where little Prince Arthur pleads with Hubert for his eyesight. The King, you remember, has ordered Hubert to blind the child. Some of the passages are so poignant they hurt.

“Arthur: Must you with hot irons burn out both mine eyes?

Hubert: Young boy, I must.

Arthur: And will you?

Hubert: And I will.

Arthur: Have you the heart? When your head did but ache, I knit my handkercher about your brows, (The best I had, a princess wrought it me) And I did never ask it you again. And with my hand at midnight held your head, And like the watchful minutes to the hour, Still and anon cheered up the heavy time.”

They were two suffering people together, man and boy—the one with his terror of the flaming iron, and the other with his memory of the child's gentleness and helplessness, and his dread of seeing forever the blackened, empty sockets under the smooth boyish forehead—and going to his grave with the smell of searing flesh in his nostrils. It is no wonder Hubert's voice shook as he answered the Prince's question,

“Is there no remedy?

Hubert: None, but to lose your eyes.

Arthur: O, heaven! that there were but a mote in yours,

A grain of dust, a gnat, a wandering hair,

Any annoyance in that precious sense!

Then feeling what small things are boisterous there,

Your vile intent must needs seem horrible!”

It is easy to be brutal at a distance—but to hurt something small and helpless is enough to make a man detest himself.

“Let me not hold my tongue! Let me not, Hubert,

Or, Hubert, if you will, cut out my tongue,

So I may keep mine eyes. O spare mine eyes!”

I have never seen the play on the stage, but I can imagine the sigh of relief that flutters over an audience when Hubert breaks down and exclaims, “I will not touch thine eyes!” And the boy's reply comes like a benediction, “Ah, *now* you look like Hubert! All this while you were disguised!”

I had forgotten Murtha and everything in fact but Prince Arthur—when suddenly the reading stopped. Lifting the galvanometer lid Murtha removed the disc of paper, on which was scratched a wavering line.

A Discussion of the Result of the Test

“SEE,” he said as he took several similar discs from a table drawer. “Here are some pictures of sympathy. You know, I suppose, that the body’s resistance to electricity varies with its emotional state? I couldn’t let you know I was planning a test or you’d have been on your guard—but the light current I sent through you while I was reading made a chart which tells how responsive you are to appeals of this sort.”

I stared at him, uncertain whether to laugh or be irritated at his casual trespass on the emotional privacy of a stranger, his guest. This was science with a vengeance! But he laid the last record beside the others, carefully noting my name and the date, and went on placidly, “Here is President Archer’s reaction to that same passage—” evidently I was not alone!—“and this is Cardy’s—and this is De Graase’s. Notice the excitable Latin temperament in that sharp down-swing. This one I got from the boy who cleans up my laboratory. By the way, come and let me show you the place I’ve fixed up to work in.”

What could I say? He was so simple, so naive about it all! I tried a question as I rose to follow him, “Have you ever tested yourself, Murtha? What does that passage mean to you? Nothing more than material for an experiment?”

“No one could test himself that way—an emotion alters when you try to watch it. I like the scene well enough. It’s a fine piece of writing. Perhaps I do seem pretty cold-blooded about it, but that is because I’ve been over it so often and I know it all so well. Now here is my work table, with water and gas and electrical connections, and this is a small lathe—” and he was of on the subject of his workroom.

It was an admirable places—light, clean, well-equipped. There were sinks and tables, glass cabinets full of glittering

instruments, a hood with a fan for exhausting gases. In one corner, on a pedestal, was a life-sized head and bust in wax-work—which I took to be one of those cheerful models anatomists and psychologists have to indicate the structure of the head, brain, and the muscular and nervous systems. Beside it an electrical transformer gave him a wide range of voltages; dark shades and a battery of powerful lights with reflectors and color screens put the lighting in his control. There was even an operating table rolled against the wall. I was impressed, and said so; and he was very evidently pleased.

But as I left, I wondered about a man who could traffic thus in his associates’ personal feelings with such scant apology, and who could think that that terrible scene was merely fine writing. I agreed with Page in the Department of History, who said to me next day, “The man’s too damned scientific for my tastes. He told me life was simply another form of energy. I’ve met men who said they were mechanists, but I never met one who acted the part as thoroughly as Murtha!” I related my experience of the night before, and Page grinned. “That is just what Archer said—and Cardy—and several more. He’s impartial, anyway.”

He was. He treated us all alike, and all rather as if we were laboratory animals. He sought me out and set himself to cultivate me with earnest thoroughness; but he had no idea of how to go about it. I could not help realizing that he wanted me near him mainly for what I knew of the electrical science he required. He had none of the tact or intuition which might have concealed his selfishness; he hardly knew how to make his contacts agreeable. *As a human being*, I never touched him.

More About Professor Murtha, the Strange Scientist

I TRIED to. Having seats for a symphony concert, I invited him to go with Mrs. Harvey and myself, but he excused himself—and when we came home we saw the lights burning late in his laboratory. I took him around to one of the Wednesday evening bridge gatherings of the men of the faculty, at the club; but he pleaded ignorance of the game, escaped early, and never came again. He even avoided the baseball games. Perhaps it was partly from shyness, and a fear of human contacts; partly from pride, and an arrogant exclusiveness; but, chiefly, I think, from a genuine enthusiasm for his research.

I learned a little of his history while we worked together. He had been sent to medical school by a wealthy uncle—had gained the love of scientific investigation, and had accomplished enough in his ordinary classes to gain his degree—had spent several miserable years as a general practitioner in the country, paying as little attention as possible to his patients, and heartily disliked by most of them—and had suddenly come into wealth on the death of the uncle. Freedom and leisure he turned to account, and he was already a man of note when Jedney introduced us that first evening. He was two-sided—daring and aggressive in his work, thorough and patient and precise, but shy, awkward, inept in everyday matters.

Only once did I detect evidence of real emotion, when a speaker at the commencement exercises paid a tribute to science. It was commonplace enough—Huxley said it all better years before; but I happened to glance at Murtha, and was amazed to see how his eyes were shining. In the crowd moving out at the end, we came together, and he spoke to me almost breathlessly, “Wasn’t that *great*? There’s a man who sees truly, Harvey—he knows! Science is food and drink, it is rest and work, it is life itself to me! You people who can work and stop—” he broke off, flushed and

moved away in silence. I had not the heart to follow him and point out that the speaker was a politician, a professional orator who knew neither science nor scientists—inexpensive and sentimental.

But Murtha was sincere. There are people who can love an abstraction that way—who can fling their own egotisms into a cause, and forget themselves for it, and I believed he was one of them. He had his limitations. Even the memory of his tragic end has not wiped out the general enjoyment of his reply when someone asked him something about the Lion of Lucerne. (footnote 1) “I know absolutely nothing about zoology,” he said.

In his laboratory, however, he was inspired as a great actor is before an audience. My own work was in one of those stages of routine checking important in all research, but leaving the mind free; and Murtha’s daring hypotheses attracted me. I disliked him—but the problems he offered were fascinating.

Experiments in Vivisection—a Selenium Retina

DURING the autumn we restored something very like sight to a blind rabbit. A student named Vinton had volunteered for experiment; but we were uncertain how the voltages we used would affect the nervous system, and it seemed best to try first with the rabbit. I didn’t enjoy the blinding of the poor little beast—it reminded me most unpleasantly of little Prince Arthur, in its patient helplessness—but Murtha was briskly efficient, and had no qualms. With selenium as the basis of an artificial retina, we were able to make the creature turn toward the light, and even follow an electric torch about a darkened room. Later we planned to conduct tests with Vinton, who would be able to describe his sensations.

Sight investigations were therefore postponed, and we took up hearing. By means

of a series of Helmholtz resonators we built artificial ears tuned to cover two octaves, and had just finished them when fortune favored us. A trepanning case at Fairchild hospital gave Murtha the chance to set his electrodes directly on an exposed human brain, transmitting sound over his wires and past nature's ordained channels direct to the center of consciousness. To me it was uncanny—although it was nothing to what followed later.

Perhaps his triumph in this case gave him his dreadful idea. At any rate, he flung himself into the work more savagely than ever, and hardly took time away for meals and sleep. He had but one advanced class that year, and no elementary work, so that almost the whole day (and night) belonged to the work he loved. Also, such had been our progress that he could go on with only occasional assistance from me.

This was fortunate, for a short time before I had been appointed to accompany the Frazier Polar Expedition on the air-flight to the north the following April. We wanted to check Vegard's and McLennan's studies of the aurora, and to pick up whatever else we might see of interest in the region of the pole. I made preparations to turn over my crystal research to Dr. Marling, who also took my classes and my administrative duties. It was necessary for me to do a good deal of extra reading and some consultation with the people in the department of astronomy, and to correspond with other physicists, to be ready. But I found time to be present when Murtha went over the contemplated experiment with Vinton.

A Brilliant Student Afflicted With Blindness—Murtha Experiments With His Eyes

VINTON was blind—but he was a brilliant youngster, and led most of his classes in spite of his handicap. To watch him swing

along the street you might think he could see as well as anyone. There was a curious mottled scar across his face, without which he would have been handsome; for there was none of the vacancy in his expression that generally marks the blind man. He looked clean and young and decent, and he was—the sort that makes me enjoy being a teacher.

Against the dark curtain he used to see pictures—for there were two books of verse to his credit, and he was paying his way through school by writing pirate stories. If he had been different there might have been something pitiful in the idea of a blind boy's writing of adventure; but he never asked sympathy. He wanted desperately to see, however, for as soon as the rumor of our work reached him, he came and offered to help. He would run *any* risk, or endure *any* hardship.

When I was convinced there was very little of either involved, I took him around to Murtha. Before we went ahead Murtha asked him, "How did you lose your sight" and he replied, "When I was nine a chum of mine and I rigged a telegraph line between our homes and studied Morse. One day I pulled a wet battery down on my face. That is why I'm scarred in this way." Murtha was satisfied—"I wanted to make sure that the optic nerves were sound, for I can't get farther in," he explained, and we put the boy on the operating table. Murtha made his incisions, connected his electrodes, and swung in the current.

For a time nothing happened; and then the most beautiful look came upon his face and he said very softly, "I can see a yellow light." Murtha pulled the window blinds and brought his electric torch into action. He flashed it on the selenium, shut it off, flashed it on, darkened it again—and each time Vinton reported the waxing-and waning of the radiance. Color screens were tried, but all except the blue screen dimmed the image or illumination or whatever it was that went to him through the selenium and the wires. In

time perhaps Murtha would enable the blind to see again!

The boy agreed to give him as much time as he wanted, and we came away together. We walked in silence most of the way to his room—he was very evidently stirred—but as he left me he said in a tone of reverence, “He’s wonderful, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I hope he can do this thing he’s started.”

“Won’t you come in and meet Mother?” he asked. “Ever since my accident she’s been eyes for me. She’s very much interested in all this work.”

“Thank you, I can’t this morning,” I said, “I’d like to later though. I wish I might be here to see it all through, but you know about the expedition.”

We parted—but it was certain Murtha had at least one worshipper. Well—who can blame the boy? He had no idea of the hollowness behind that remarkable mind, and the reaction to a promise of sight is a thing which we who see as a matter of course can hardly understand. At any rate, there seemed no harm in it. At worst, he would only lose a few illusions.

An Expedition to the Arctic and the Return

AS the months went by and the time came nearer for sailing, I had to withdraw more and more from Murtha’s investigations. I knew, however, that he was going far to duplicate the whole efferent nervous system—the senses. Taste, he readily matched; nerves of heat and cold he constructed, but the other touch-sensations eluded him—as did the colors blue, red and green; and of course the most difficult of all would be the complex sense of smell. Before undertaking that, he tried to develop an efferent nerve—or at least one relay of the pathway by which orders go from the brain to the muscles. I did not learn how he would know when he had been

successful in this last.

In the excitement of departure, I all but forgot him, and afterward he seldom troubled my memory. The journey was such a novel interruption of my quiet life—the voyage to Norway, the airplane flight, our forced landing, the struggle over the ice by sledge, the coming of winter that forced us to camp on Northeast Land; the polar darkness, the desolation, few chances for observation, but endless hours of playing cards; snow—wind—the returning sun—the grinding ice that piled up on our barren rock, threatening to sweep us into the sea; food running low—the coming of the ship—that glorious first sight of green trees, and the easy journey home, with somewhat of scientific value but without the glory or satisfaction of having been anywhere near the Pole. There was the usual newspaper excitement, and we learned that we had been a source of anxiety to the whole civilized world ever since our start. Frazier’s classic reply that we “had also been something of a source of anxiety to ourselves,” struck the desired note, and the public had a very good time with us.

A Shocking Change in Murtha

I WAS rather surprised to find Murtha at the pier when we steamed in, and still more surprised at the shocking change in the man. He was gaunt and pale, and looked at least ten years older. In place of his former alternations of shyness and disciplined composure, was a manner of slinking furtiveness. He greeted me without heartiness, but with urgent haste. He seemed to want to get me away from my newly-met family, for some mysterious private talk. Perhaps I was rather brusque in pointing out that my own preferences were against him; but certainly that was before I dreamed of the things he had to say!

I went home. How good it was to relax into the old familiar ways and places—to see the people I had known, to enjoy warmth and

cleanliness and safety and leisure once again, to find my friends and my books where they had always been, to see the soft green of the campus, and hear the voices of students in song through the quiet of the evening! But twice I was asked, "Have you seen Murtha?" and one man handed me a newspaper clipping which told of Vinton's death "under rather unusual circumstances." All this was of course before the recent newspaper furor.

These two inquiries coupled with Murtha's curious actions at the pier, disturbed me; and accordingly, early in the evening I walked over to his room. He was away. I left a card with what was meant for a cheery message scribbled on it. I had hardly reached home when his voice came to me strained and tense over the telephone, "Couldn't you come back, Harvey? For God's sake come if you can—I can't come to you, and it is very important."

"I'll be right there," I said briefly.

It is queer now to remember the mood in which I set out. His looks and manner had been ominous—but I was so steeped in the peace and happiness of my homecoming that other people's affairs seemed of small account. I was sorry for young Vinton, a splendid youngster cut off without his chance; but he was gone, beyond recall—and the wind was sweet. Murtha was a solemn, self-centered individual, seemingly in some distress—but I was glad of the young moon peering through the elms. If I seem unduly hard-hearted, I can only suggest that my critic spend seven months of exile on an arctic rock, before passing final judgment.

Murtha opened the door for me, and led me to his fireplace without a word. It was mild autumn, but again a fire burned in the grate. He stooped and warmed his hands; and looking away from me at the fire he began to speak. The words of his prepared speech tumbled over one another and got out of order in his eagerness to get them said,

A Dreadful Revelation

"**H**ARVEY, I—I want to talk to you about Vinton. He is dead, as you've probably heard—or at least people think he is. As a matter of fact he's in the laboratory. He wanted me to do the thing I've done—he urged me to—but I'm not sure—that is—Vinton—Oh Harvey, I've killed him—or rather I've kept him alive—he'll be alive forever!" He broke off short, and gasped like a swimmer coming up from deep water. "I don't know what I'm saying!" He sank back into the chair and covered his face with his hands.

"What do you mean, Murtha? Tell me just what happened."

He looked over at me, caught my eye, and glanced hastily back at the fire. The astonishing confession was meaningless to me. Chiefly I think I was amazed at the evidence that there was really a human being, capable of feeling, inside that shell of mind and matter and handsome clothes which we had all called by his name. He was a new man—able to suffer. But he began now to speak—and his story was beyond belief.

Some months after I sailed, Vinton had been the victim of a motor accident, going home late one night through the familiar streets. Night was like day to him—but alas, not to the driver of the car that crushed him!

He could speak when they picked him up, and he begged to be taken to Murtha's room. Murtha, he knew, was a physician, and he did not want his mother alarmed unnecessarily. He had no idea how badly he was hurt; but a moment's examination told Murtha he could do very little. He stopped the hemorrhages, and tried with local anaesthetics to make the poor broken body temporarily comfortable—but there was no cure ever again for Vinton. Life—yes; but helplessness, and probable pain as long as he might live; pain that would stand between him and his fancies, pain that in time would wear down his

courage and break his self-control. He told it all to the boy, with his blunt, unfeeling tactlessness. I cannot believe he deliberately made the picture dark.

Details of the Awful Experiment

BUT while he was speaking the temptation came—the idea he had cherished as a wild impossible fancy. How he presented it I do not know. He could be very subtle when he chose. Perhaps he promised Vinton immortality in this world—freedom from the body's limitations, time without end for learning and thought and the creative activity the boy loved. Perhaps he only suggested the possibility of escape from pain, and a share in a daring venture. But I can imagine how it was—the confident, self-assured man, speaking as one with authority to the discouraged, tortured youth who was trying to make up his mind to face a future of helpless idleness. He who was to have been the support of that mother who was eyes to her son—who by the magic of his fancy was to have kept them in comfort—must be a burden to her as long as he lasted alive.

At this point Murtha threw his wealth into the scales. He would make her an allowance to keep her comfortable—he would represent it as insurance and furthermore make her his heir. Remember, he was the hero who was slowly giving him back his sight. Vinton knew the things Murtha had accomplished; he knew of the work of Loeb and Carrel. If a heart could be kept beating in a bottle for years at a time, why should not a brain be kept thinking in a bottle forever? There seemed nothing impossible in the plan. How could he communicate? That was simple—for he knew his Morse, and Murtha had solved the problem of efferent impulses. He must trust the man to carry out his promise about the money; but if he did not, there was the certainty of poverty for the woman

struggling to support her invalid son. Insurance policies contain “suicide clauses,” I was well aware—men had been known to kill themselves to get money for someone as dear as this mother was to her boy. I was not surprised to hear that he had said “Yes.”

Murtha was his own anaesthetist. He wheeled the operating table under the lights, brought the head from his wax figure (with its brain-shaped cavity ready and waiting) and set it beside the table, coolly mixed and spread the cleansing, nourishing liquids in the wax interior, made his temperature coils and capillary tubes ready, completed his electrical connections, and applied the ether-cone. The skull was fractured, and he cut along the fracture; he severed the spinal cord with infinite skill, working feverishly. Probably in his excitement he forgot what manner of thing he was doing; but before the night was gone he had moved—Vinton—from the kind, familiar habitation of flesh and blood to that still, dead body of wax and steel which was never meant to hold a fragile living spirit. When he had finished, he collapsed. He slept out the night in the very chair where I was sitting.

His dreams were ghastly; but in the morning he took himself strongly in hand, and forced himself through the routine duties of a physician reporting a death. His certificate was accepted without question then, because of his connection with the University, although he was not yet known locally as a medical man but as a teacher. Then he telephoned the mother and broke the news, calling on her immediately after as her son's friend and physician. He told his lie about the insurance, and faithfully carried out the promised deception. He left her with a check and a promise of more to come; and it is probable that she never noticed that it was a personal check on a local bank. Going back to his rooms he wrote out a clear, short, simple will in her favor, had it witnessed, locked it

away, and faced the placid waxen features of his apparatus.

Dreadful Messages from the Transplanted Brain of a Dead Man

HE took the speaking tube in hand, and in a trembling voice—for by now he was feeling “strangely” about it all—he spoke some words. Instantly the telegraph key began to chatter—weak, wobbly, uncertain Morse, but clear enough to be unmistakable. Vinton was there, alive!

He could not tell what it meant. He did not know the code. He took down the dots and dashes with infinite care for a long time, and closing the key rushed out to buy a code-book. The rest of the day he spent working out the message.

And such things as it contained! Curses, prayers, pleading, long stretches of incoherent letter-groups, quotations from the boy’s verse and evidence of frequent delirium! It was dreadful—I am using Murtha’s word. His horror grew, and often he sprang up from the table, only to return and plunge again into the work. Very soon he had memorized the dots and dashes, and could read whole sentences—always bitter and terrible sentences. In time he could endure no more, and stole away to walk wild-eyed through the streets fighting for sanity and composure. But always, drawn by a fascination, irresistible, he returned to his rooms.

He opened the door again, and the awful metallic voice seemed to condemn him in the rattling language which he could not yet translate by ear. This time he took it gradually, a few sentences at a time—and they were as before. He defended himself through the speaking tube, but it was useless. Again and again he tried. Alterations in the position and temperature of the head—soothing or even narcotic solutions gave no relief. In his intervals of sanity Vinton had complained that

he was being tortured; had bewailed his helplessness. Days went by—weeks—months. Colleagues, accustomed to regard Murtha as a solitary, saw his strangeness and a few even offered sympathy or aid; but he put them off. He grew gaunt, could neither eat nor sleep, was equally tormented in his laboratory or away from it, and lived near to madness with his grisly guest. I think the placid waxen features must have been worst of all—with their staring, indifferent eyes behind which his victim and his judge spoke out in endless alternate prayer and invective—the face without feeling, hiding hell. One thought alone sustained him and stayed his hand from making an end—he would wait for my return. Somehow I would solve the problem.

Speaking to the Dead Vinton

HE rose and led me to the laboratory. The banked apparatus lined the wall. At one end was the figure, from which wires and capillary wicks and tubes led outward. He strode over and lifted the top of the head, so that I saw the gray mass soft within. I turned away. The wax lid, with its well-combed hair, closed down. I wiped my forehead, which was cold and wet.

Murtha put the speaking tube into my hand, and I asked hoarsely, “Vinton, are you in pain? What can I do for you?” The instrument chattered; and Murtha translated in a low voice, “Thank God you have come. He promised to release me now. This place is more terrible than you can know. Set me free. Kill me or let him kill me. Now. Now. Now. Now. Now. Now.”

Murtha’s notebook was out, and as he spoke he took down the words. Later I learned that he had there every word the telegraph key had uttered—the most cruel indictment any man ever wrote of himself. He was a dentist still, through all the strange workings which through habit he still regarded as his great

experiment. No emotion could shake him utterly out of his old self.

The whole thing stunned me. I tried to imagine how it would seem to be a disembodied mind, apart from the obedient creature of bone and muscle that served me. I tried to understand the man whose passion for his work, whose curious callousness, whose inherent cruelty—which was it?—could let him use this boy so, and keep him so. It was too much.

“He asks me for thought!” the machine was saying. “How can I think?” He told me before he put me here that in my body I should suffer so that fancy would be impossible. I am suffering, I have suffered so I cannot think. He is a devil. Let him kill me.” The letters ran together into meaningless rattle.

Then I roused at last. “Finish what you started,” I said. “Kill him!” He raised his arms over his head as if to ward off my look. “I will—I will,” he cried, “But—that will be murder!”

It was ten times murder to keep him there.

Is It Murder?

HE stumbled across the room, grasped a laboratory bottle, raised the sleek cover of the head and poured the contents in. The telegraph key fell silent.

We looked at each other. He walked past me to the laboratory door, and then fell into the chair beside the fireplace. I followed slowly, and sat a long time looking at the flames. We were both relaxed. He seemed visibly to grow larger, stronger, now that the fearful load was gone; but when next he spoke it was in a whisper, and I answered him the same way.

“Well—what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, Murtha. Of course you must be insane—”

“No, I’m not,” he interrupted angrily, “I should have gone crazy if I hadn’t told you—but now I have it is all right. I understand what that means—it is a familiar enough psychological phenomenon. No one can forgive himself—we have to have help, even the strongest. But now I am better. I am as sane as you are.” He was in fact marvelously recovered.

“But Murtha—why in God’s name did you keep him so long? Why did you wait for me?”

“I wanted a witness to science—a man who knew my work and would vouch for my notes, I wanted you to back my word. Everyone knows you, but I am too young a man to have any statements accepted.”

“Why didn’t you call in some of the others?”

He looked at me coldly. Then, “Harvey, I’m not crazy. When I did this thing I realized that I was risking my life, putting myself on the wrong side of the law. When I spoke to you just now I was frantic, but I understood none-the-less that I was gambling again with the revenge the herd takes on those who offend its prejudices.”

“But if you were afraid to tell the others, or to tell me, how could I be your witness to science? How could it ever be told? Sooner or later you must suffer for it.”

“I hoped you would wait until I die. I hoped you would put your name to documents. I may outlive you—I may grow greater than you are—but I am one man alone.”

“You think I will keep still, while you know the rest would bring the law on you?” I reached across the table and opened his Shakespeare to “King John.” “You demonstrated scientifically once, Murtha, that I am very responsive to appeals. Where do you suppose my sympathy is in this case?”

“But Harvey, haven’t I suffered too? Haven’t I been tormented?”

“You deserve it—Vinton doesn’t, and his mother doesn’t. Have you suffered more than those two together. You are paying her for the boy you killed. I wonder if she is pleased with her bargain? You don’t know what they mean—you have no children—”

“But he was hopelessly hurt. Can’t you understand?”

I sat in silence. What was the use of talk? I might better go. He was crouching over the fire, wringing his hands rather horribly. Was it fear, or some worthier anguish? Who can tell? He spoke again.

“Is it nothing to you, a scientist, that I have proved once for all the nature of the neural current? Men a thousand years from

now will look back to this work as the final word on the subject. Harvey—?”

I rose and moved toward the door. He was after me, half kneeling, clawing at me. “Harvey—you won’t take—any—action—”

I shook him off, and went out. The last I saw of him was a wild figure, his whole body quivering in silhouette against the light of the open door.

The papers told how he was found next morning.

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Footnote 1 - * Famous monument to Louis XVI’s Swiss Guards.—Ed.