

The Greatest Discovery

Seymour Ascher sat in his office. His brow was clouded, through his attitude betokened a feeling of complacency. His long extended stiffly stowed from the armchair in which he was sitting. His head rested upon the high back of the chair and a sense of warmth was communicated from the stove through the soles of his well-worn slippers. A half-burned cigar from which the fire had departed hung in the air between two fingers, while the other hand was thrust deeply into his pockets, where the digits moved aimlessly with a few loose coins of silver coin.

"Heartless! Absolutely heartless!" said the doctor.

A cheap clock ticked unmusically on the wall, and then discordant squeaks from the iron pegs on which it hung. They were not heartless how they have accumulated their dead cigar fell from his limp fingers noisily upon the rug, and the coins in his pocket ceased to tinkle.

"Utterly heartless, doctor," said his misfortune, only seeming to be progressive, I grant you, some of their fellow-men, but not out of danger, as indeed no man can be who retains within him that most treacherous of all human qualities.

It was not Dr. Ascher who spoke. The voice came from between the white lips of a tall man who stood with an elbow resting on the desk, looking down upon the doctor. He had certainly not been there before, because, as has been said, Dr. Ascher was entirely unconscious when his first apparently unobtrusive observation on the subject of heartlessness was made.

"Present difficulty," continued the stranger, "as well as most of your trouble in the past, is attributable entirely to the fact that you have a heart."

"An irreparable difficulty," replied the doctor, without changing his attitude or opening his eyes.

"I beg your pardon; nothing may be easily remedied. If it were not for any defect of the brain there would be reason to despair, but, because you acknowledge, purely a heart affection, nothing is more than its cure. When an aching heart is beyond dental repair the obvious course, doctor, is to have it removed with an organ which, besides being utterly valueless, is a constant source of inconvenience and discomfort."

"I understand," said the doctor, "that you are advocating the physical extraction of the heart from the diaphragm?"

"Absolutely," was the reply.

"I do not say that there are individual cases in which the organ may be removed without working irreparable injury to a man's success in life, but the element of danger to man's most cherished plans must remain as long as the possibility of heart mischief exists. Far safer to have the useless organ cut out at once and done with it."

"I am aware," continued the stranger, "that we frequently meet men, like the railroad attorney whom you were thinking at the moment of my arrival, have by a settled disuse of the sentimental or emotional functions of the heart managed to shrivel it into a comparatively inoffensive condition. Like a long-imbedded rifle bullet, they become encysted, but even in those circumstances it is in a most troublesome; one can never when a give or pang may occur."

"Let me give you a case in point," said the stranger, "may I take the liberty of ordering a light refreshment?"

"Don't rise. There is a fellow who can be trusted to procure something for us from a neighborhood restaurant. I bade him wait, and he is doubtless there, whether still alive is uncertain. He seemed shivering to death when I left him."

"I am not further permission," said the doctor, "crossed the room, and, looking out a window, through which came a blast of arctic air and a flurry of snow, said to a thinly clad wretch who was hugging the lee of a tree outside: 'Here, my good fellow, run to the nearest place and get me a couple of brandy and a few crackers. Be sharp, now, for the change.'"

"The doctor closed the window, shutting out the night's icy breath, which caused Dr. Ascher to shiver momentarily and shift his position in the armchair, and resumed his former attitude by the stove.

"There," said he, "is a poor devil

who for three hours has been following me with admirable devotion. He has poured into my ears the tale of a foodless home and a sick and starving wife, the truth of which story I do not doubt in the least. His hunger is apparent from his weakness, and his wretched heart sickness is told unmistakably by his eyes. I have given him a \$20 bill with which to make our purchases. No, I shall lose nothing. The wretch has a heart; he is unable to return to the bedside of his dying wife with stolen money in his hands. Moreover, I cannot possibly lose, as the bill is a counterfeit. He will either be arrested in attempting to pass it, in which case I shall be rid of him with only such momentary inconvenience as being obliged to declare that I never saw him before, or he will obtain the change, in which case I will have profited at no risk, for I would not have attempted to pass the bill myself."

A knock at the door interrupted the explanation, and a moment later the half-frozen messenger had deposited a brandy bottle and a roll of bills on the table.

"Now, my good man," said the stranger, taking a phial from his pocket and emptying two white pellets from it into the palm of his hand, "here is something for that cough of yours. First get yourself some food," extending a \$1 bill, "and then after you reach home—mind, not before—take these pills. I'll look in upon you in the morning."

"God bless you, sir," said the shivering man. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

The stranger's upper lip twitched and disclosed a gleaming, sharp-pointed tooth, but his black eyes twinkled as though a droll thought had crossed his mind.

"Strychnine!" said he, as the door closed behind the poor man.

"What!" exclaimed Dr. Ascher.

"Do you mean to—"

"Yes. Better to stop all chances of his being found and arrested for passing the counterfeit. It might cause me inconvenience. Now, as I was saying before this interruption—excellent brandy, by the way—although a man's heart may occasionally become so shrunken through disuse, or, as we have said, encysted like a bullet in the flesh, that it does not apparently menace his chances of success in life, one can never tell when its baneful influence may be exerted. The case in point of which I am to tell you thoroughly illustrates this proposition."

"Here was a man who more nearly perhaps than any other of your race—observe, I say your race, not of mine—exemplified the operations of twentieth century intelligence in the matter of heart suppression. Nothing that he touched in the way of business enterprise failed of success, and for a simple reason. He allowed nothing to interfere with his purposes or schemes."

"He began his business career as a dealer in chattel mortgages in a small way. By making trifling loans, demanding the highest rate of interest and invariably insisting upon his rights irrespective of others' wrongs, he necessarily accumulated money, until he was at last able to enter that broader, wider, more magnificent field of human industry known as 'the street.' I will not weary you with a long tale, doctor. In fact, the sole purpose of my narrative is to point out the danger of allowing one's self to be deluded into a belief that years of disuse will necessarily deprive the heart of its deplorable and fatal capacity for mischief."

"Once launched upon the golden sea of speculative endeavor, where wrecks piled wreck or wreck served as beacons to keen-sighted and competent mariners, the man of whom I am telling showed abundant fitness to wear the diamond wreath of success. By one 'corner' after another, he gained control of the holdings of his fellow-men and might have had the satisfaction of becoming absolute king of the street. It was a little thing—a silly, trifling, ridiculous incident—that stayed him when he had only to raise his foot and place it on the neck of his sole remaining rival. Another hour of prices held at the point where he was able to hold them, and his only opponent, in the splendid combat for supreme wealth would have sunk under the waves and have drowned so many."

"A little girl, a puny, helpless, insignificant child, of no consequence to the world—better, in fact, out of the world than in it, for nature had placed the seal of her disapproval upon the creature's misshapen back—fell under the wheels of his carriage, and, being extracted therefrom, had only sufficient breath left in her

crushed body to say as she smiled in his white face—white perhaps not without reason because of the ring of angry, threatening visages by which he found himself surrounded: 'Kind gentleman, you won't let them put my mother out, will you? The rent is due today. I was going to see—the own—'

"At that moment her liver stopped beating and—"

Dr. Ascher moved in his chair. His head rolled languidly, so that his half-closed eyes came more directly into contact with those of the white-lipped stranger.

"What did you say happened to the child?" he asked in a voice which sounded far off, as though coming from another world.

"I said," replied the doctor's visitor, "that her liver—oh, dear me, dear me. I quite forgot where I was and to whom I was speaking; I mean the child died."

"Poor child," murmured Dr. Ascher.

The stranger frowned, then proceeded. "Yes, the words I have repeated were her last. Somebody in the street throng finished the sentence for her—a clergyman he was, I fancy; 'going to see the owner,' he said, in those lugubrious tones which men of his trade adopt in the presence of death. Happy child, you see the owner of us all. May He be merciful to those of us you have left behind."

"Silly incident, was it not, to interrupt the morning program of a Wall street king at within a quarter of an hour of the opening of the exchange? Still, all might have been well with him, for he was known by reputation to the policemen who took charge of the child's body, and was able to give satisfactory verbal bond for the appearance of his coachman at the court, and there was yet time for him to hold the market where he had it."

"To a gentleman of your intelligence, doctor, it is scarcely necessary for me to say what happened. That treacherous human organ, the heart, which this man of affairs had supposed, and with good reason, to be inoperative, asserted itself at this critical and vital moment in his career and defeated his well-laid plan and purposes. Instead of doing all in his power to stifle the manifestation of its birth he allowed its insidious development. Perhaps I am a trifle too severe in my censure. It may be that he did struggle to suppress the influence. At all events he did not succeed. His first action on reaching his office was to throw upon the market sufficient stock to break the 'corner' that he alone controlled, thereby not only resuscitating his formidable rival, but losing his entire prestige and supremacy as a financier, so that today, instead of being worth \$100,000,000, he has a beggarly competency of not more than \$30,000,000 at the most."

The stranger helped himself to a liberal dose from the bottle and continued:

"It is trifling with fate, my dear doctor, for a man in this century to shut his eyes to the danger that lurks in the human heart. There has been no previous period in the world's history when the necessity for being heartless was either so great, nor, with all deference to your sagacity, so obvious. Take your own case for example. You need money?"

Dr. Ascher started. It seemed as though he would rise, but he held back by invisible hands. Again his fingers jingled the few silver coins in his pocket and his breath came fast.

"The railroad attorney has made you a liberal offer, and the services he demands of you are not arduous. You have merely to testify that the man you so carefully and so long attended died from causes entirely remote from and in no wise connected with the accident in which he was involved, and you not only at once obtain a generous fee, but form an influential business connection, the ultimate good results of which simply stagger your imagination. Moreover, my dear doctor, since you cannot absolutely know the cause of the man's death, you are not asked to violate in any serious way your respect for the truth, which at all time (or nearly so) is desirable as an adjunct or aid to business success, for, next to the mischief that may be done by the heart, I believe a chronic tendency to falsehoods or prevarication of any kind is most detrimental to twentieth century business success. Truth, certainly truth that cannot be disproved, is recognized as a sound business policy, even by the people of my race and country, from among whom heart-peril has been entirely removed."

"You speak of the people of your country and your race," murmured Dr. Ascher, his eyes still closed, "though you were not of this world, and yet you seem singularly familiar to me."

The stranger laughed, but there was no music in the laughter. It was like the picking of loosened guitar strings with muffled thumb.

"Say an expected rather than a familiar guest, my friend," he said. "You have been looking for me ever since you witnessed that last successful operation for appendicitis; is it not so? Ah, doctor, science is mighty, though life is short, and what was the human brain given for but to compass power and point the road to wealth? In my country there is an old saw that says: 'The fool hath use for tears and sighs and And Pity's tool he is, True wisdom comes when Pity dies And dead are sympathies.'"

"Would it not be utterly preposterous for any man to suggest that the people of your race go back to the aboriginal days when they hung by their tails from branches of trees and fought with hands and feet for the coconuts? Well, believe me, my dear sir, a proposition in my country that we return to the far-away times, when, like you, we were infected with hearts, would be regarded as equally ridiculous, not to say abhorrent. Caudal appendages might still be useful in keeping away flies and pestiferous insects, but hearts! hearts, doctor, great, red, flabby, sentimental, useless, mischievous hearts! Bah, it is nauseating. Hearts! a plague on the human heart. What has it done for you?"

The stranger had moved a step forward and his long, beak-like, colorless nose was in close proximity to the face of the man in the chair who wiggled to escape, and shivered as the icy breath of his visitor touched his throbbing forehead.

"What has your heart done for you? I repeat. Why did you antagonize the only relative on earth who could have been of any assistance to you, by marrying that silly, ignorant, commonplace country girl, whose treacherous heart had betrayed her into unworthy and inexcusable weakness in your presence? Was there not mischief enough in the fact that her heart had led her to disgrace, without necessity for further idiosyncrasy to be indulged in through the senseless prating of your own?"

"Then, when the unexpected wind-fall came and you were able to begin the practice of a profession (in which I must say, my dear brother, you are unmistakably clever) why should you have used all but a modicum of the legacy to pay off the mortgage on the house that sheltered your sisters? Think what that money meant to you! A location in the vicinity of people who could afford to pay for medical attention; an association with men of your own caliber. But even after you sacrificed that, or rather were swindled out of it by a tender heart, why should you have chosen to attend the sick without your fee in advance? Why is your coat as shiny as the eyes of those wretched, wheedling, consumptive paupers upon whom you attend? Has any good come of all this? Ah! Dr. Ascher, this is a critical moment in your career. Out with that heart of yours; throw sentiment and pity to the winds."

The stranger paused and then, resuming his former easy attitude by the mantel-piece, said in a calmer voice:

"One of our distinguished poets, who lived at, or just before, the period of the Great Discovery—I think it was a few years prior to the Great Discovery—wrote a poem, only a single verse of which I can recall, and that perhaps imperfectly: God may have meant that fellow-love In man should be intense, But hawks still prey upon the dove And self-love is the only love That brings true recompense."

"It is just as true in your world today as it was in ours prior to the Great Discovery, that the man who permits sentiment, pity, compassion, and all kindred unbusinesslike emotions to interfere in any manner with his aim toward success in life stands an excellent chance of dying a pauper. The present situation is, however, nothing to what it will become a few years, say half a century, from now, unless—here the stranger drew closer—"this world of yours should decide to profit by the Great Discovery."

A spasm of pain crossed the doctor's face.

"What," said he, and his voice had a distant sound, as though it came to the ear muffled by a bank of snow, "is the Great Discovery?"

The stranger crossed the room, peered for a moment through the window into the dark night, and then, drawing a chair close to the side of Dr. Ascher, and leaning over so that his words were audible in whispers, said:

"Listen as you value your future to what I shall tell you. Centuries ago the people of my world—sprung from the same original source as yourself—were made aware only too plainly as you are being

made aware today, that nature had in some manner hopelessly blundered either in constructing the mechanism of man or in her choice of man's environment. As we could not well alter the environment, we sought to repair the mechanism. The discovery of the useless vermiform appendix, and the fact that it could be removed with entire safety to the individual, was made by our surgeons in the time of—but why quote eras that would be unintelligible to you? It was many, many years ago.

"The recognition of the sentiment functions of the heart, independent of its functions as a pumping engine of the blood, was much more full and complete by our learned men than it is by those of your race, for although you rightly characterize the heart as the seat of many tender emotions, you do not know that it is actually so, whereas we, I refer to the learned men among my ancestors, knew this fact positively and beyond question. Wise as many of your anatomical scientists consider themselves in cerebrum and the cerebellum, and although I admit they are on the right track, they are as yet in utter ignorance of the relation which the heart—oh, how I deplore that organ—sustains toward the brain in occasioning thought, and consequently human action.

"The exact power and capacity of the heart to influence, physically, in conjunction with the brain, the actions of man so that man becomes at times a hopelessly unscientific, unmathematical and consequently unworthy agent in the grand plan of success, was at last fully determined and understood by our savants. But the remedy seemed beyond reach. Pernicious and fatal to wealth-getting, as the heart was recognized by us to be, its imperative importance as a means of sustaining life was, of course, fully understood. Although it was recognized that an absolutely heartless man would enjoy tremendous advantage in the race for world success, to be heartless was to be lifeless, and consequently out of the race.

"Then came the Great Discovery. May I ask you, Dr. Ascher, as a physician, what you suppose the spleen was put into the human frame for? You do not answer me, and there is a very good reason why you do not. Neither you nor anyone else of your race can satisfactorily answer that question. The nearest approach to an answer I have ever heard as coming from anybody of your world was that of an old physician, who said that when the Creator had placed all the necessary organs in the human diaphragm there was still room to spare, and that the spleen was then put in as a sort of padding to keep the other organs from being shaken up and getting out of place. Our savants doubtless held no more accurate views of the spleen's intended functions prior to the Great Discovery. It was, however, partly through a study of that organ that the Great Discovery came to be made, although it is more generally believed that a consideration of the action of the liver first set our learned men upon the right

track.

"With our people, as with those of your day and race, the liver was long a source of keenest solicitude and distress. Although it did but a fraction of the work performed by the heart, it required vastly more doctoring. In fact it was frequently, I might say chronically, out of order with many of us. You have the expression in your own medical books, a 'torpid liver,' and you are constantly prescribing nostrums to arouse it from its torpidity, to stir it up.

"Has it ever occurred to you that all the trouble with the human liver is that it has not been given enough work to do? Set it to pumping like the heart, and its torpidity will be a thing of the past.

"There, my dear doctor, is the secret of the Great Discovery. By simply substituting the lymphatic for the arterial system as a means of supplying nutriment to the brain we abolish all need of the heart.

"The people of my race, doctor, are kept alive not through the arterial and venous circulatory system, but solely through the system of the lymphatic ducts and glands. Our livers are the pumps and our spleen performs almost precisely the same functions as your lungs.

"The active liver, thrice the size of any heart, is a more effective and trustworthy pump for the circulation of our lymphatic life-sustaining fluid than is your heart, and our spleen, being much larger than the lungs, is able to perform its special work more satisfactorily than those delicate and constantly troublesome pulmonary organs.

"Such in brief was the discovery that revolutionized my race. Now, to tell you by just what surgical means it was accomplished.

"In the first place, after the patient was under the influence of an anaesthetic much more deadening in its effects than chloroform (the properties of which I will presently make known to you), an incision seven inches long was made between the—"

At this moment a bell in Dr. Ascher's office jingled furiously. At its sound the doctor started, passed his hands over his eyes and stood erect.

The door had partly opened, and a man with hat and shoulders all snow covered stood on the sill.

"If yez please, doctor," said he, "the old ooman is took awful bad again, an' tho' I do hardly have the face to come to you empty-handed so often, I'm feared of me life she'll die. I hope to have some money soon, doctor, for you."

"Oh, never mind that," replied Dr. Ascher, with a smile that would have warmed a stoveless room. "I'll be 'round to see you in a few minutes."

"God bless you, doctor; it's you that have the good heart."

As the door closed upon his visitor the doctor turned to the glass above the mantel and inspected the image reflected there.

"Bless my heart," said he, turning away, "what an ugly dream I've had. My liver must certainly be out of order."

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