

The Wages of Sin

A doctor demonstrates his modern treatment methods and regales his assistant with a dream the next morning.

"What is the origin of evil?" A doctor, smartly dressed, stood in a lecture hall's depths. Gas-lamps' sputtering hiss and a dying echo filled the silence among the darkwood pews, the banks of circular rows rising like a coliseum brimful with serious men. "In past eras, men carried a permanent stain: Evil was a curse laid on the hearts of our ancestors, passed through time to be coaxed by devils into the blood-red bloom of sin. A good man—prayerful, generous, honest—had in him the seed of loathsome deeds driven to bear fruit by pure chaotic happenstance. A mother—doting, industrious, respected—could, at any moment, be overcome by the prowling beast lying outside the door, birthing terrible acts against the conscience. In those days, 'twas better to slay the sinner than live with the sin." He paused for a moment, arms outstretched to either side of the hall. "They sat in the dim of flickering flames, as we do tonight," he said quietly before dropping his arms and continuing normally.

"But we live in a new world. I stand in the brittle firelight of ancients as Prometheus Reborn, bringing glorious renewal to man's sight. Cities are now brightened by the light of our Lady Science: lightning captured in a glass dome. Zeus himself bent to our will! The infallible glow of human ingenuity, visible and granting vision. I have preceded their coming as a herald to preach the modern world, to create the new man.

"Truly, the source of evil lies in the mind of man, not in some supernatural recess, but in actual reality. Through a thorough investigation of an individual, an educated man discovers the impetus

for any action. A giant of dead history taught us the self-evident truth: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. I say: the same principle of raw physics applies to a man's metaphysics. There is no spontaneous, supernatural wellspring of evil that overflows and compels malaction; no man is free from his own decisions. We are organized systems of cause and effect, a determinist calculation spanning decades."

Then, a young man brought in a crazed-looking man strapped to a wheelchair. The bound man's hair stood wild, jutting up between leather straps that held his head stone-still, and his eyes lazied around the room with a dull, glowing meanness.

"Isaac Meeks made the papers for an assault on his priest and for outbursts in court. He has, thus, been deemed by the state 'irredeemable'. But I have studied many minds and have come across a similar maladjusted man. Upon his death and disassembly, I discovered a protuberance in both cerebral hemispheres thirteen percent larger than typical. Now, what if such a place held the root of his violence?"

The assistant returned again with a strange device on a storage cart. The doctor continued uninterrupted, "Over the years, I have developed a method by which a titanium probe—non-conductive—with a fine copper wire at center, is driven through the skull's floor into place and either manipulated to sever misconnections or used to stimulate the brain's latent centers with a soft electrical pulse. Until recently, these electroleucotomies were limited to electrified facilities, but a German now produces a terrifically stable

zinc-carbon dry battery. Tonight, I will use this Gassner Cell to power Mister Meeks's procedure.

"You see, the abnormalities in the deceased criminal resided in his brain's enlarged impulse center and the consumed control center. Ergo, a rescession of the connection and stimulation of the stunted would result in a man freed from biological evil."

The doctor walked around the chair and dropped the headrest parallel to the floor, and pulled over a dark lamp from the cart.

"Rest assured. Mister Meeks has, by design, received sufficient ether to erase any memory of this as he resides in an anti-placebo group. He will have no knowledge of an impetus for change and therefore any deviation will be unprompted by psychological effect."

The doctor picked up his probe from its place and a rubber wire with a toothed clip at the end before walking back. He placed the clip on the lamp and the bulb glowed bright, casting pure light onto Meeks's upturned face.

"Be forewarned: this surgery may appear simple, but my hands carry much experience in these matters." As he spoke, his assistant inserted an ophthalmic speculum into Meeks's eyes to hold back the lids. "Thank you, Preston. I will now insert the probe behind the eye. Angle: 15°; Depth: 5mm." He held the probe just so and Preston handed him a mallet. He struck the back of the probe and a slight crunch and moan escaped Meeks before the doctor gently placed the probe.

"I will now manipulate the probe to either side. Deflection: 5°, severing any connections between the oversized impulse and

diminished control centers." And so he did. Silence, again, filled the room, save the lamp's buzz, the gaswick's feeble spitting, and the subtle squelching sound that leaked from the stage floor. The doctor, then, nearly removed the probe.

"With the offending connections dealt with, I will reinsert the probe to his inhibition center. Angle: 28°; Deflection: 33°; Depth: 9mm. Now, I will use the power from the battery to excite this area, encouraging conductivity." His assistant removed the clamp from the lamp—its light dying to an angry, glowing filament—handing it to the doctor who attached it to the probe. Upon slightest contact, Meeks's body convulsed once in his chair and then strained continually. "Don't worry, gentlemen. A common occurrence as the brain is brought into fuller activation with no lasting effect." The doctor then removed the clamp and his assistant replaced it so that the lamp shone again. Meeks's body relaxed and the doctor removed the probe fully and released Meek's right eye.

"Now, the procedure is repeated on the left side to ensure symmetrical effects." And so it all happened again: the mallet, the crunch, the squelch, the angles, the shock, the spasm. Just as before. The probe removed and the left eye released.

The doctor turned to the crowd, "Feel free to find Mister Meeks over the next couple of weeks. He'll be in the county jailhouse just up the street." As he spoke, the assistant wheeled out Meeks and the equipment. "You'll find him in a better temperament than could be imagined. A changed man, possibly eligible for release if he had not already ruined his life. I would understand if you feel that

electroleucotomy promises much and shows little, and, as such, I have come prepared."

The opposite hall doors now opened and the assistant entered with a comfortable hospital bed carrying a woman, awake and seemingly pale, even in the warm gas-lamps' light. A dreamy look filled her eyes as she gazed around the room.

"My assistant, Preston Graves—my apologies, Preston, for not introducing you—and this time with Miss Katherine Duvernay. Miss Duvernay came to me afflicted with debilitating migraines that left her blinded with pain and nauseated beyond relief. I operated on her a fortnight past, removing excess connections between the sight and appetite centers and exciting the forbearance/fortitude centers, and as you can see, she is quite well. Isn't that right, Miss Duvernay?"

She looked over at him slowly and blinked like a sun-warmed cat. "Hmm?"

"I said that you are doing quite well, Miss Duvernay?"

"Oh, yes, doctor." Her words left her as though pushed by a breeze. "I haven't had even a slight headache since the operation."

"As you can see, we have succeeded in our scientific age of mapping the mind. There are no shadows in the corner of our thoughts. Nothing but energy and matter, and with this electroleucotomy, we have the cure for both! Now, we'll move to the interrogatory portion of the evening."

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In the morning, after the late train home, the doctor came down to breakfast, but a malaise clouded him. Preston sat one seat away

from the doctor's spot at the head of the table, thumbing through some prosaic textbook. Neither spoke a word as the doctor sipped his coffee. Then, suddenly, the doctor knocked the whole cup back like a shot of whisky and fell forward with a loud thud, eyes wide and sharp. He looked over at Preston for the first time that morning and spoke quickly.

"I had a dream last night, Preston. A haunting one. I cannot seem to shake it. We were following this old man and a young boy. A father and son, supposedly, but I'm not sure... They were leading a donkey loaded with wood into the wilderness, to a mountain. No one spoke. It was silence and the shadowy land. Then the dream skipped, and we were at the mountain. The old man told us to wait with the donkey as he and the boy went up. He carried the fire and the boy carried the wood. They left us, but I couldn't stay. I followed them in the dark. They spoke a little as they went, but I couldn't hear them.

"Atop the mountain, the man was gasping for air, teetering with every step. Still, he continued and stacked up rocks into a little flat-topped mound as the boy watched. Then, he took the wood and placed it and told the boy to lay down. The boy did. No fuss; just pure obedience. The old man tied him up, feet to hands behind his back. He lifted the boy, placing him on the wood, and took out a sharpened stone, grabbing the boy's hair and lifting his head. I sat there, in the brush, and felt called to speak out, but I didn't. I wanted to watch. His eyes were incredible, dull and flashing as though fire and tears mixed. His raised arm quivered with weariness

and excitement before moving, slowly, deliberately, bringing the knife down. And the boy said nothing! He laid there and said nothing. I couldn't understand it, but the dull knife was at his throat, tugging at his skin so that the man had to press hard before the blood started to flow. Then a change came over them both. The man's eyes bulged and a toothy smile came over him, a smile married with the grimace of effort. He puffed breath through his clenched jaw, sounding like a serpentine hiss. The boy opened his mouth in a soundless moan, tears streaming down from his squinted eyes with raised brows, a poisonous blend of anguish and surprise. And the cutting continued. And the blood gushed, soaking the mound. And the only sound was the hissing of the man and the sawing of the knife.

"Finally, the boy's face slackened, dead. But the man kept cutting. He felt the boy go limp and undid his bonds, butchering him like some heifer, but he didn't light the fire. He brought the severed arm to his clenched teeth and they opened. I watched but didn't really see. It stuttered into my mind like watching through a passing train: the wild gnashing, the stripping of flesh from bone, the tearing sound of dissected muscle, the snapping of sinew and bone.

"Then, it was night and the pyre was burning, and you couldn't recognize anything human in the glow. In the flames was a pile of flesh, leftovers from a sated hunger. Watching on was a figure, black with gore in the darkness of night. The blood covering it caught the firelight and glistened like stars. In the wet eyes, I could see the

monument and the light. There was no emotion left in that face. Then he looked at me and I woke up."

Preston sat stunned, looking across the table at the doctor.

"Well, m'boy? What do you make of it?"

Preston cleared his throat and thought a moment. "The father and son could stand for tradition and progress. That, in your estimation, tradition is antiquated, but sturdy; whereas, progress—or perhaps future—allows itself to be emasculated and servile to its ancestors. Possibly, a manifestation of your fear of man's unwillingness to leave the past behind."

The doctor considered him. "Somewhat formulaic, but for spur of the moment, not bad." The doctor returned to his coffee and morning pastry, grumbling "I am still pondering it myself." Then, he looked up, "I'll let you know if I find anything remarkable," he quipped brightly. "Now, on to business." And he flapped open his newspaper. "Preston, will you fetch me the grey volume? I need to review some patients."

"Certainly, sir." Preston replied, suddenly giddy. He had never been allowed to even look at the grey volume before. It contained records from far before his time.

Preston made the walk to the office, standing grandiose in the stained glass windows' rainbow light falling across the 12-foot bookcase walls. The grey volume, a hefty tome of granite leather with edges reinforced and corners sharpened with golden metalwork, sat out on the desk, strangely open to an old page. Preston walked around the sprawling desk, adorned with ornate inlay and precious baubles: a

skull, an award, a picture, an Edison lamp. He intended to snatch it up and swiftly return to the doctor, but instead he found himself reviewing the page.

Patients, neatly arranged into rows with boxes for details and notes. *Mary Kopeckni, 76.3.25.MK, 36, Acute Female Hysteria, deceased 23 DAO; Stephen Langmore, 76.5.4.SL, 57, Bilious Fever, deceased 167 DAO; Eunice Evers, 76.7.19.EE, 21, Epilepsy, institutionalized.* Only two still had their final disposition box blank on that page. Preston felt a catch in his throat as he was suddenly flipping through filled pages. *Deceased 2 DAO, seizure. Deceased during operation, hemorrhage. Institutionalized. Institutionalized. Deceased, self-harm. Deceased, sepsis. Operation incomplete. Deceased, homicide.*

He slammed the book closed and took it out of the room. The dates spanned decades. Decades of failure. Repeated failure. Incessant failure. Unheeded failure. Something black and hot burbled within Preston. He saw the doctor, lordly and presumptuous. He walked over to him, who said something, and a wellspring burst forth. He gripped the grey volume tightly and swung the metal corner into the doctor's temple. He clattered to the floor, breathing in odd, gasping bursts, his eyes locked forward. Preston dropped to his knees. He seemed small now, and Preston brought the grey volume down on his head again and again. The blood flowed and the breathing sputtered.

Preston did not know how long he had been sitting on the floor, but his arms had grown heavy and the blood had soaked into the rug, becoming sticky rather than liquid. He lifted his head as some sounds entered the room and found the shock-white face of a police sergeant.

He was mouthing at him. Or maybe he was talking. Suddenly, the world returned to Preston and he heard him.

"What did you do, boy?"

Preston looked down at the doctor and saw tears fall from his own face, "I've killed him," he choked.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"What is the origin of evil?" A man, smartly dressed, stood in the depths of the lecture hall. The sputtering hiss of the gaslamps and the dying echo of his question filled the silence among the darkwood pews, the banks of circular rows rising like a coliseum brimful with serious, bespectacled men, blank notebooks and pens in hand. "In past eras, before our current age of science, men had no hope in the light of a permanent stain. Evil was a curse laid on the hearts of our ancestors, passed on as a mutation through time to bud in certain unlucky souls, coaxed by devils and temptation to burst into the blood-red bloom of wrath or lust or avarice or what have you. A good man—prayerful, generous, honest—had in him the seed of loathsome deeds that were driven to bear fruit by pure chaotic happenstance. A mother—doting, industrious, respected—could, at any moment, be overcome by the prowling beast lying outside the door and give birth to terrible acts against the common conscience. In those days, it was thought better to slay the sinner than live with the sin." He paused for a moment, arms outstretched to either side of the hall. "They sat in the dim light of flickering flames, as we do in this room," he said quietly before dropping his arms and continuing normally.

"But, gentlemen, but we live in a new world. I stand as Prometheus Reborn in the brittle firelight of the ancients to bring the glorious renewal of man's sight. There are cities now, as you have doubtless heard, brightened by the light of our Lady Science. Lightning captured in a glass dome. Zeus himself bent to our will! The infallible glow of human ingenuity, visible and granting vision.

I have preceded the coming of those marvels here as their herald to preach the modern world, to create the new man, ready to accept and move into tomorrow. Eager to leave the darkness and fear of shadows in the dark.

"The source of evil lies in the mind of man, not in some supernatural recess, but in actual reality. Whether it be injury, miseducation, malformation, or misunderstanding, through a thorough investigation of an individual's anatomy, history, and psychology, an educated man would discover the impetus for any action. We learn from a giant of dead history, a man against the tide, Sir Isaac Newton, the ubiquitous, self-evident truth: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. I say: the same principle of raw physics applies to a man's metaphysics. There is no spontaneous, supernatural wellspring of evil that overflows and compels malaction; no man is free from blame from his own decisions. We are organized systems of cause and effect, a determinist calculation spanning decades.

As he said this, a young man pushed open the doors and brought in a crazed looking man firmly strapped to a wheelchair. The bound man's hair stood wild, jutting up between several leather straps that held his head stone still, and his eyes bounced around the room with a glowing meanness.

"This man is Isaac Meeks. You may have caught his name in the papers a few months back for the brutal theft and assault he laid on his local priest in his own parsonage and more recently for his wild outbursts in court. He has been deemed by the state to be irredeemable. But I have studied the mind and I have studied the

brain, and in my studies I have come across the mind and brain of a man who engaged in similar misdeeds. Upon his death and the dissection of his frontal lobe, I discovered that a protuberance in both of his hemispheres, deep within the folds, was thirteen percent larger than that of the normal adult. Now, what if such a place held the root of his predilection towards violence?"

The young man, who had quietly exited during the speech, came back through the doors with a strange device of some sort on a storage cart. The doctor continued without missing a beat, "Over the years, I have developed a method by which a probe, a thin piece of titanium, which does not conduct electricity, with a fine copper wire in the center, is gently driven through the thin floor of the skull into proper orientation and then either manipulated to sever undesirable connections or used to stimulate a latent portion of the brain with a soft bit of current by way of the exposed copper at the tip. Until just recently, I was limited in conducting electroleucotomies to facilities that have wired electricity, but I have found a man in Germany who produces a zinc-carbon dry battery which is utterly stable in all orientations and environs. Tonight, I will use this Gassner Cell to power Mister Meeks's procedure. surgery

"You see, the protuberance I located in the deceased criminal resided in the area of the brain connected with impulse and the area it consumed was related to control. Ergo, a rescission of the connection and stimulation of the stunted would logically result in a man freed of his biological evil."

The doctor walked around the back of the chair and dropped the headrest back into a position parallel with the floor so that Mister Meeks could only see the ceiling and pulled over a dark lamp from the cart.

"I assure you that Mister Meeks has been provided with sufficient ether that he will have no memory of this evening. In fact, that is an important portion of my ongoing study as Mister Meeks resides in the anti-placebo group. He will have no knowledge of an impetus for change and therefore any deviation in his actions, perceptions, or personality will be unprompted by a psychological effect."

The doctor, in one hand, picked up his probe, fifteen inches long, from its place in a jar of sterilizer. In the other, he grabbed a rubber wire with a toothed clip at the end and walked back to the chair. He placed the clip on an exposed piece of metal on the lamp and the bulb glowed bright, casting pure light onto the face of Mister Meeks.

"I warn you, gentlemen, this surgery may appear simple, but there is a great deal of experience in my hands when it comes to these matters." As he spoke, the young man had inserted ophthalmic speculum into Mister Meeks's eyes to hold back the lids and make way for the probe. "Thank you, Preston. I will now insert the probe behind the eye at a fifteen degree angle to a depth of five millimeters." He held the probe just so and his assistant handed him a mallet. He struck the back of the probe and a slight crunch and

moan escaped Mister Meeks. The doctor then gently pushed the probe in a little further to reach his destination.

"I will now manipulate the probe to either side by a deflection of five degrees to sever any extra connections between Mister Meeks's oversized impulse center and his control center on the right side." And so he did. No extra sound filled the room but the slight buzz of the lamp, the feeble spitting of the oilwicks, and the subtle squelching sound that leaked from the stage floor. The doctor, then, carefully removed the probe almost fully.

"With the offending connections dealt with, I will reinsert the probe to his inhibition center, located less centrally and deeper in, twenty-eight degrees down and thirty-three to the right, nine millimeters deep." He slowly made his adjustments at the edge of the skull then reentered the opening. "Now, I will use the power from the battery to excite this area of the brain to encourage continued usage." His assistant removed the clamp from the lamp and the light from it died to an angry, glowing filament. He handed the wire to the doctor who attached it to the end of the probe. As soon as it touched, Mister Meeks's body convulsed once in his chair and then strained at his binds. "Do not worry, gentlemen. The convulsion is a common occurrence as a new portion of the brain is brought into fuller activation. There is no permanent paralysis as the head is kept completely still." The doctor then removed the clamp and his assistant replaced it so that the lamp shone again. Mister Meeks's body relaxed and the doctor removed the probe fully and released Mister Meek's right eye.

"Now, the procedure is repeated on the left side to ensure symmetrical effects." And so it all happened again: the mallet, the crunch, the squelch, the angles, the shock, the spasm. Just as before. Then the doctor removed the probe fully and released the left eye before turning to the crowd.

"Feel free to follow up with Mister Meeks over the next couple of weeks. He will still be in the county jailhouse just up the street." As he spoke, the assistant wheeled out Mister Meeks and the equipment. "You will find him in a better temperament than could be imagined. Much more agreeable and sedate. A changed man, one possibly eligible for release if he had not already ruined his life with his past decisions. I would understand if any of you feel that my electroleucotomy promises much and shows little, and, as such, I have prepared further evidence in advance."

The doors on the opposite side of the hall opened now, and the doctor's assistant entered with a woman laid onto a comfortable hospital bed. She was awake and looked rather pale, even in the warm light of the lamps. A dreamy look filled her eyes as she looked around the room.

"Gentlemen, please welcome again my assistant, Preston Graves—my apologies Preston for not introducing you at first—and this time with a fine lady relaxing on the bed by the name of Miss Katherine Duvernay. Miss Duvernay came to me and said that she was afflicted with debilitating migraines that left her blinded with pain and nauseated to the point of emesis. I performed an electroleucotomy on her a fortnight passed to remove excess connection between the

sight and hunger centers of her cortex and excite the forbearance and fortitude centers, and as you can see, she is quite well. Isn't that right, Miss Duvernay?"

She looked over at him slowly and blinked like a sun-warmed cat. "Hmm?"

"I said that you are doing quite well, Miss Duvernay?"

"Oh, yes, doctor." Her words left her as though pushed by a breeze. "I haven't had even a slight headache since the operation."

"As you can see, gentlemen, we have succeeded in our scientific age of mapping the brain and the mind. There are no shadows in the corner of our thoughts. Nothing but energy and matter, and with this electrolyleucotomy, we have the tool to cure both! Thank you for coming to the demonstration!"

In the morning, the doctor came down as was custom and had breakfast with Preston, but a malaise clouded him. Preston sat one seat away from the doctor's spot at the head of the table, thumbing through some prosaic textbook. Neither spoke a word as the doctor sipped his coffee and Preston continued uninterrupted. Then, suddenly, the doctor knocked the whole cup back like a shot of whisky, teetering back in his chair. He fell forward with a loud thud, eyes wide and sharp. He looked over at Preston for the first time that morning and spoke quickly.

"I had a dream last night, Preston. A haunting one. I cannot seem to shake it. You and I were following this old man and a young boy. He called him son, but he was far too old to be his father. But

the boy did call him father. I'm not sure... Regardless, they were leading a donkey with a cord of wood on it out into the wilderness and there was a mountain in the distance. No one spoke the whole time we walked. It was silence and the shadowy land. Then the dream skipped, but I felt the time pass, and we were at the mountain. The old man told us to wait with the donkey as he and the boy went up. He carried the fire and the boy carried the wood. They left us, but I couldn't stay. I followed them in the dark. They spoke a little as they went. The boy asked where the offering was and the man said that God would provide.

"At the top of the mountain, the man was gasping for air. He looked exhausted, his eyes were bloodshot, and he teetered with every step. Still, he continued and stacked up rocks into a little flat-topped mound as the boy watched. Then, he took the wood and placed it and told the boy to lay down. The boy did. No fuss; just pure obedience. And the old man tied him up, feet to hands behind his back. He lifted the boy and placed him on the stone and wood pile and took out a sharpened stone, grabbing a handful of the boy's hair and lifting his head. I sat there, in the brush and felt called to speak out, but I didn't. I wanted to watch and study. His eyes were incredible. They were dull and flashing as though fire and tears mixed. The loose skin hanging from the bottom of his raised arm quivered with weariness and excitement. And then he moved, slowly, deliberately, bringing the knife to the boy's throat. And the boy said nothing! He laid there and said nothing. I couldn't understand it, but the knife was at his throat and it was not that sharp. The

stone tugged at his skin so that the man had to press hard, his face reddening with effort again. Then the blood started to flow. The knife tore at the boy's flesh, ripping it in pieces, and a change came over them both. The man's eyes bulged and a toothy smile came over him, a smile married with the grimace of effort. He puffed breath through his clenched jaw, sounding like a serpentine hiss. The boy opened his mouth in a soundless moan and tears streamed down from his squinted eyes with raised brows, looking like a poisonous blend of anguish and surprise. And the cutting continued. And the blood gushed, soaking the mound and leaking out onto the surrounding ground. And the only sound was the hissing of the man and the sawing of the knife.

"Finally, the boy's face slackened and I knew he was dead. But the man kept cutting. He felt the boy go slack and undid his bonds, butchering him, quartering him like some heifer, but he did not light the fire. He brought the severed arm to his clenched teeth and they opened. I watched but did not really see. It stuttered into my mind like watching something on the other side of a passing train: the wild gnashing, the stripping of flesh from bone, the tearing sound of dissected muscle and the snapping of sinew and bone. It was night now and the pyre was burning. You could not recognize anything human in the glow. In the fire was a pile of flesh, leftovers from a sated hunger. Watching on was a figure, black with gore in the darkness of night. The blood covering it caught the light of the mound and glistened like stars against the endless sky just behind. In the wet

eyes, I could see the reflection of the mound and the fire. There was no emotion left in his face. Then he looked at me and I woke up."

Preston sat there looking across the table at the doctor, taken aback.

"Well, boy? What do you make of it?"

Preston cleared his throat. "Ahem. The father and son could stand for tradition and progress, that in your estimation, tradition is seemingly decrepit, yet surprisingly sturdy. Whereas, progress—or future, you might say—finds itself emasculated and servile to the destructive whims of its ancestors. It might be that you fear that man might not be willing to proceed into the future and cling to the old ways."

The doctor pondered for a moment, tapping his chin with his teaspoon. "A fair interpretation, if somewhat formulaic, but for spur of the moment and unawares, not bad." The doctor returned to his coffee and morning pastry. "I am still pondering it myself," he grumbled, wiping some errant crumbs from his trousers. He looked up, "I'll let you know if I find anything remarkable," he quipped brightly. "Now, on to business." He picked up his folded newspaper and flapped it open.

Breakfast passed a few minutes in typical silence and rustling of the news and pages. "Preston, will you fetch the grey volume from my office? I need to review some patients this morning."

"Certainly, sir." Preston replied and was then suddenly giddy. The doctor had never allowed him to even look at the grey volume

before. It contained records from far before his time in the doctor's tutelage. "Just a moment."

Preston rose from the table and made the short walk across the foyer to the office. It seemed all the more grandiose this morning with its stained glass window shedding rainbow colored light across the 12-foot bookcase walls. The grey volume, a hefty tome of granite leather with its edges reinforced and corners sharp with golden metalwork, sat out on the desk, open to an old page, which was strange. Preston walked around the sprawling desk, adorned with ornate inlay and precious baubles: a skull, an award, a picture, an Edison lamp. His eyes came to rest on the page. He intended to snatch it up and swiftly return to the doctor, but instead he found himself reviewing the page.

Patients, neatly arranged into rows with boxes for case numbers, ages, initial disposition, and final disposition, He knew that each of the case numbers referred to the individual booklets kept for each patient, but these all came before his time. *Mary Kopeckni, 76.3.25.MK, aged 36, Acute Female Hysteria, deceased 23 days after operation; Stephen Langmore, 76.5.4.SL, aged 57, Bilious Fever, deceased 167 days after operation; Eunice Evers, 76.7.19.EE, aged 21, Epilepsy, institutionalized.* Of the almost two dozen each page, only one or two still had their final disposition box blank. Preston felt a catch in his throat as he was suddenly flipping through filled pages. *Deceased 2 days after operation, seizure. Deceased during operation, hemorrhage. Institutionalized. Institutionalized. Deceased, self-harm. Deceased, sepsis. Operation incomplete. Deceased, homicide.*

He slammed the book closed, feeling the carved words of the cover under his hand, and took it out of the room. The dates spanned decades. Decades of failure. Repeated failure. Incessant failure. Unheeded failure. Something black and hot burbled within Preston. He came back into the dining room and saw the doctor sitting in his place, lordly and presumptuous. He walked over to the doctor who said something to him and a wellspring burst forth. He gripped the grey volume tightly and swung the metal corner into the doctor's temple. The doctor clattered to the floor from his chair, breathing in odd, gasping bursts, his eyes locked forward. Preston dropped to his knees behind him and looked over the doctor. He seemed small now, and Preston brought the grey volume down on his head again and again. The blood flowed and the breathing sputtered.

Preston did not know how long he had been sitting on the floor of the dining room, but his arms had grown heavy with effort and the blood had soaked into the rug, starting to become sticky rather than liquid. He lifted his head as some sounds entered the room and found himself looking into the shock white face of a police sergeant. He was mouthing something at him. Or maybe he was saying something. Suddenly, the world returned to Preston and he heard him.

"What did you do, boy?"

Preston looked down at the doctor and saw tears fall from his face, "I've killed him," he choked.

"Why?"

"I don't know."