The Living Death

Ferencz Molnar

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Here is a very serious reason, my dear sisters, why at last, after an absence of twenty years in America, I am confiding to you this strange secret in the life of our beloved and lamented father, and of the old house where we were children together. The truth is, if I read rightly the countenances of my physicians as they whisper to each other by the window of the chamber in which I am lying, that only a few days of this life remain to me.

It is not right that this secret should die with me, my dear sisters. Though it will seem terrible to you, as it has to me, it will enable you to better understand our blessed father, help you to account for what must have seemed to you to be strange inconsistencies in his character. That this secret was revealed to me was due to my indolence and childish curiosity.

For the first, and the last, time in my life I listened at a keyhole. With shame and a hotly chiding conscience I yielded to that insatiable curiosity—and when you have read these lines you will understand why I do not regret that inexcusable, furtive act.

I was only a lad when we went to live in that odd little house. You remember it stood in the outskirts of Rakos, near the new cemetery. It stood on a deep lot, and was roughly boarded on the side which looked on the highway. You remember that on the first floor, next the street, were the room of our father, the dining room, and the children's room. In the rear of the house was the sculpture studio. There we had the large white hall with big windows, where white−clothed laborers worked. They mixed the plaster, made forms, chiseled, scratched, and sawed. Here in this large hall had our father worked for thirty years.

When I arrived, in the holidays, I noted a change in our father's countenance. His beard was white, even when he did not work with the plaster. Through his strong spectacles his eyes glittered peculiarly. He was less calm than formerly. And he did not speak much, but all the more did he read.

Why, we all knew that after the passing away of our mother he became a bookworm, reading very often by candlelight until morning.

Then did it happen, about the fourth day after my arrival. I spent my leisure hours in the studio; I carved little figures, formed little pillar heads from the white plaster. In the corner a big barrel stood filled with water. It was noon; the laborers went to lunch.

I sat down close to the barrel and carved a Corinthian pillar. Father came into the studio and did not notice me. He carried in his hands two plates of soup. When he came into the studio he closed the door behind him and looked around in the shop, as though to make sure he was not observed. As I have said, he did not notice me. I was astonished. Holding my breath, I listened. Father went through the large hall, and then opened a small door, of which I knew only so much that it led into a chamber three steps lower than the studio.

I was full of expectation: I listened. I did not hear a word of conversation. Presently father came back with the empty plates in his hand. Somebody bolted the chamber's door behind him.

Father went out of the studio, and I, much embarrassed, crept from behind the barrel.

I knew that the chamber had a window, which looked back toward the plowed fields. I ran out of the studio and around the house. Much to my astonishment, the chamber's window was curtained inside. A large yellow plaid curtain hid everything from view. But I had to go, anyway, for I heard Irma's voice calling from the yard:

"Antal, to lunch!"

I sat down to the table with you, my sisters, and looked at father. He was sitting at the head of the table, and ate without saying a word.

Day after day I troubled my head about this mystery in the chamber, but said not a word to anybody. I went into the studio, as usual, but I did not notice anything peculiar. Not a sound came from the chamber, and when our father worked in the shop with his ten laborers he passed by the small door as if beyond it there was nothing out of the ordinary.

On Thursday I had to go back to Germany. On Tuesday night curiosity seized me again. Suddenly I felt that perhaps never would I know what was going on in my father's house. That night, when the working people were gone, I went into the studio. For a long time I was lost in my thoughts. All kinds of romantic ideas passed through my head, while my gaze rested on that small mysterious chamber door.

In the studio it was dark already, and from under the small door in a thin border a yellow radiance poured out. Suddenly I regained my courage. I went to the door and listened. Somebody was speaking. It was a man's voice, but I did not understand what he was saying. I was putting my ear close to the door, when I heard steps at the front of the studio. Father came.

I quickly withdrew myself behind the barrel. Father walked through the hall and knocked on the door softly. The bolt clicked and the door opened. Father went into the chamber and closed the door immediately and locked it.

Now all discretion and sense of honor in me came to an end. Curiosity mastered me. I knew that last year one part of this small room had been partitioned off and was used as a woodhouse. And I knew that there was a possibility of going into the woodhouse through the yard.

I went out, therefore, but found the woodhouse was closed. Driven by trembling curiosity, I ran into the house, took the key of the woodhouse from its nail, and in a minute, through the crevice between two planks, I was looking into that mysterious little room.

There was a table in the middle of the room, and beside the wall were two straw mattresses. On the table a lighted candle stood. A bottle of wine was beside it, and around the table were sitting father and two strangers. Both the strangers were all in black. Something in their appearance froze me with terror.

I fled in a panic of unreasoning fear, but returned soon, devoured by curiosity.

You, my sister Irma, must remember how I found you there, gazing with starting eyeballs on the same mysteriously terrifying scene— and how I drew you away with a laugh and a trifling explanation, so that I might return and resume my ghastly vigil alone.

One of the strangers wore a frock coat and had a sunburned, brown face. He was not old yet, not more than forty−five or forty−eight. He seemed to be a tradesman in his Sunday clothes. That did not interest me much.

I looked at the other old man, and then a shiver of cold went through me. He was a famous physician, a professor, Mr. H——. I desire to lay stress upon it that he it was, for I had read two weeks before in the papers that he had died and was buried!

And now he was sitting, in evening dress, in the chamber of a poor plaster sculptor, in the chamber of my father behind a bolted door!

I was aware of the fact that the physician knew father. Why, you can recall that when father had asthma he consulted Mr. H——. Moreover, the professor visited us very frequently. The papers said he was dead, yet here he was!

With beating heart and in terror, I looked and listened.

The professor put some shining little thing on the table.

"Here is my diamond shirt stud," he said to my father. "It is yours."

Father pushed the jewel aside, refusing the gift.

"Why, you are spending money on me," said the professor.

"It makes no difference," replied father; "I shan't take the diamond."

Then they were silent for a long while. At length the professor smiled and said:

"The pair of cuff buttons which I had from Prince Eugene I presented to the watchman in the cemetery. They are worth a thousand guldens."

And he showed his cuffs, from which the buttons were missing. Then he turned to the sunburned man:

"What did you give him, General Gardener?"

The tall, strong man unbuttoned his frock coat.

"Everything I had—my gold chain, my scarf pin, and my ring."

I did not understand all that. What was it? Where did they come from? A horrible presentiment arose in me. They came from the cemetery! They wore the very clothes in which they were buried!

What had happened to them? Were they only apparently dead? Did they awake? Did they rise from the dead? What are they seeking here?

They had a very low−voiced conversation with father. I listened in vain. Only later on, when they got warmed with their subject and spoke more audibly, did I understand them.

"There is no other way," said the professor. "Put it in your will that the coroner shall pierce your heart through with a knife."

Do you remember, my sisters, the last will of our father, which was thus executed?

Father did not say a word. Then the professor went on, saying:

"That would be a splendid invention. Had I been living till now I would have published a book about it. Nobody takes the Indian fakir seriously here in Europe. But despite this, the buried fakirs, who are two months under ground and then come back into life, are very serious men. Perhaps they are more serious than ourselves, with all our scientific knowledge. There are strange, new, dreadful things for which we are not yet matured enough.

"I died upon their methods; I can state that now. The mental state which they reach systematically I reached accidentally. The solitude, the absorbedness, the lying in a bed month by month, the gazing upon a fixed point hour by hour—these are all self−evident facts with me, a deserted misanthrope.

"I died as the Indian fakirs do, and were I not a descendant of an old noble family, who have a tomb in this country, I would have died really.

"God knows how it happened. I don't think there is any use of worrying ourselves about it. I have still four days. Then we go for good and all. But not back, no, no, not back to life!"

He pointed with his hand toward the city. His face was burning from fever, and he knitted his brows. His countenance was horrible at this moment. Then he looked at the man with the sunburned face.

"The case of Mr. Gardener is quite different. This is an ordinary physician's error. But he has less than four days. He will be gone to−morrow or positively day after to−morrow."

He grasped the pulse of the sunburned man.

"At this minute his pulse beats a hundred and twelve. You have a day left, Mr. Gardener. But not back. We don't go back. Never!"

Father said nothing. He looked at the professor with seriousness, and fondly. The professor drank a glass of wine, and then turned toward father.

"Go to bed. You have to get up early; you still live; you have children. We shall sleep if we can do so. It is very likely that General Gardener won't see another morning. You must not witness that."

Now father began to speak, slowly, reverently.

"If you, professor, have to send word—or perhaps Mr. Gardener— somebody we must take care of—a command, if you have—"

The professor looked at him sternly, saying but one word:

"Nothing."

Father was still waiting.

"Absolutely nothing," repeated the professor. "I have died, but I have four days yet. I live those here, my dear old friend, with you. But I don't go back any more. I don't even turn my face backward. I don't want to know where the others live. I don't want life, old man. It is not honorable to go back. Go, my friend—go to bed."

Father shook hands with them and disappeared. General Gardener sat stiffly on his chair. The professor gazed into the air.

I began to be aware of all that had happened here. These two apparently dead men had come back from the cemetery, but how, in what manner, by what means? I don't understand it perfectly even now. There, in the small room, near to the cemetery, they were living their few remaining days. They did not want to go back again into life.

I shuddered. During these few minutes I seemed to have learned the meaning of life and of death. Now I myself felt that the life of the city was at a vast distance. I had a feeling that the professor was right. It was not worth while. I, too, felt tired, tired of life, like the professor, the feverish, clever, serious old man who came from the coffin and was sitting there in his grave clothes waiting for the final death.

They did not speak a word to each other. They were simply waiting. I did not have power to move away from the crack in the wall through which I saw them.

And now there happened the awful thing that drove me away from our home, never to return.

It was about half−past one when someone tapped on the window. The professor took alarm and looked at Mr. Gardener a warning to take no notice. But the tapping grew louder. The professor got up and went to the window. He lifted the yellow curtain and looked out into the night. Quickly he returned and spoke to General Gardener, and then both went to the window and spoke with the person who had knocked. After a long conversation they lifted the man through the window.

On this terrible day nothing could happen that would surprise me. I was benumbed. The man who was lifted through the window was clad in white linen to his feet. He was a Hebrew, a poor, thin, weak, pale Hebrew. He wore his white funeral dress. He shivered from cold, trembled, seemed almost unconscious. The professor gave him some wine. The Hebrew stammered:

"Terrible! Oh, horrible!"

I learned from his broken language that he had not been buried yet, like the professor. He had not yet known the smell of the earth. He had come from his bier.

"I was laid out a corpse," he whimpered. "My God, they would have buried me by to−morrow!"

The professor gave him wine again.

"I saw a light here," he went on. "I beg you will give me some clothes—some soup, if you please—and I am going back again." Then he said in German:

"Meine gute, theure Frau! Meine Kinder!" (My good wife, my children.)

He began to weep. The professor's countenance changed to a devilish expression when he heard this lament. He despised the lamenting Hebrew.

"You are going back?" he thundered. "But you won't go back! Don't shame yourself!"

The Hebrew gazed at him stupidly.

"I live in Rottenbiller Street," he stammered. "My name is Joseph Braun."

He bit his nails in his nervous agitation. Tears filled his eyes.

"Ich muss zu meine Kinder," he said in German again. (I must go to my children.)

"No!" exclaimed the professor. "You'll never go back!"

"But why?"

"I will not permit it!"

The Hebrew looked around. He felt that something was wrong here. His startled manner seemed to ask: "Am I in a lunatic asylum?" He dropped his head and said to the professor simply:

"I am tired."

The professor pointed to the straw mattress.

"Go to sleep. We will speak further in the morning."

Fever blazed in the professor's face. On the other straw mattress General Gardener now slept with his face to the wall.

The Hebrew staggered to the straw mattress, threw himself down, and wept. The weeping shook him terribly. The professor sat at the table and smiled.

Finally the Hebrew fell asleep. Hours passed in silence. I stood motionless looking at the professor, who gazed into the candlelight. There was not much left of it. Presently he sighed and blew it out. For a little while there was dark, and then I saw the dawn penetrating the yellow curtain at the window. The professor leaned back in his chair, stretched out his feet, and closed his eyes.

All at once the Hebrew got up silently and went to the window. He believed the professor was asleep. He opened the window carefully and started to creep out. The professor leaped from his chair, shouting:

"No!"

He caught the Hebrew by his shroud and held him back. There was a long knife in his hand. Without another word, the professor pierced the Hebrew through the heart.

He put the limp body on the straw mattress, then went out of the chamber toward the studio. In a few minutes he came back with father. Father was pale and did not speak. They covered the dead Hebrew with a rug, and then, one after the other, crept out through the window, lifted the corpse out, and carried it away. In a quarter of an hour they came back. They exchanged a few words, from which I learned that they had succeeded in putting the dead Hebrew back on his bier without having been observed.

They shut the window. The professor drank a glass of wine and again stretched out his legs on the chair.

"It is impossible to go back," he said. "It is not allowed."

Father went away. I did not see him any more. I staggered up to my room, went to bed, and slept immediately. The next day I got up at ten o'clock. I left the city at noon.

Since that time, my dear sisters, you have not seen me. I don't know anything more. At this minute I say to myself that what I know, what I have set down here, is not true. Maybe it never happened, maybe I have dreamed it all. I

am not clear in my mind. I have a fever.

But I am not afraid of death. Here, on my hospital bed, I see the professor's feverish but calm and wise face. When he grasped the Hebrew by the throat he looked like a lover of Death, like one who has a secret relation with the passing of life, who advocates the claims of Death, and who punishes him who would cheat Death.

Now Death urges his claim upon me. I have no desire to cheat him— I am so tired, so very tired.

God be with you, my dear sisters.