

Duplication of Cases

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Throughout my professional career, I've heard some of the worldlier and enlightened gentlemen of the age say that we surgeons, as members of the medical industry, must have nerves of steel and an idealistic outlook on life while somehow keeping ourselves stern and practical. If we lacked fortitude, they argue, we would lose all hope and be defeated by the sheer gloom of our professions. While their view makes for a useful parable, here is no truth to it. Ever since I retired from the army, my sanity was kept in check by nothing more than apathy and morbid cynicism. Not that I neglected to do my duty as mandated by the Hippocratic Oath, far from it. In fact, I sincerely doubt that they would have allowed a tired country sawbones like me sully the prestige of a hospital like Galahad the Pure without expecting results beyond expectations. Still, sometimes I have my doubts about whether nature's expectations can always be met, and in the case of one specific patient, I start to question whether those cases that spiral beyond our control are more due to the inadequacies of medical science or the unbiased scythe of circumstances.

While Artimus Thaler was never a patient of mine, I chanced to meet the fellow while attending to one of my charges in the same ward. Thaler's case at once piqued my curiosity due to the bizarreness of it all. He had been transferred from the best hospital in the urban north to one in London where doctors thoroughly examined him with the best of medical technology and could find nothing wrong with him. That analysis vexed London's medical elite to no end since Thaler was clearly withering away. Even after he was taken in by Galahad the Pure's most ambitious physician, the condition of the man who lay before my eyes told a different tale than all the futile expectations of our leading minds. Thaler's skin was a sickly shade of grey, wrinkled and scabby to the point where his limp face seemed to be some twisted carnivale mask hiding features with as much life as his eyes. In fact, the eyes would fool any well trained doctor to believe that behind the macabre facsimile of a face was a malingering young prankster cleansed of all the ills of the world. When I spoke to Thaler that day, he did indeed seem in worryingly good-spirits. Through dry lips, he whispered to me of his fiancé's visit and spoke of her impending arrival with such vehement melodrama I thought it may become necessary to sedate him. Luckily he overextended his physical energy and passed out before the grips of hysteria took him.

Circumstances had it that I spoke to him the following day, when again he seemed so obsessed with the arrival of his beloved. Once again he fainted after our conversation, and I decided to have a word with his nurse to attempt to make sense of the poor man's ramblings.

Nurse Lavoie, who staffed the patient's particular intensive care ward, swore that Thaler had neither visitors nor letters from outside since he arrived in the hospital. When I asked if there had been any information about next of kin relayed with his medical information, Nurse Lavoie discerned the root of my inquiries and affirmed that Thaler had also shared the fevered story with her the previous day. It appeared Lavoie had rightfully sent for the attending psychiatrist before informing Ephraim Bran, Thaler's Doctor, about any mental change in the patient. Therefore she cautioned me against advising Bran into prematurely making a decision regarding the patient's condition. I merely acknowledged her comments and went to the office block of the hospital.

Author's Commentary:

For this story I wanted to blend Steampunk and traditional mythology in a way that is different from the typical gaslight-fantasy speculative fiction or generic social commentary with fantasy races or tropes copy-pasted instead of original writing. What I ended up doing was taking the super-science edge of steampunk in the medical direction. The medical devices are clunkier and cruder versions of our advanced medical equipment and the psychological sciences are developed beyond the Freudian level that would have emerged in the Edwardian cut-off of the steampunk timeframe. But there is also the obligatory romanticization of the "arcane old ways" some circles of Victorian scholarship were so fond of, exemplified by the character of Dr. Bran.

In my opinion, there is some sense in the idea that certain of the Victorian esoterica had merit, as the overwhelming majority of the scientific mysticism was superseded by more advanced scientific theories that essentially corrected the nebulous and fantastic of the pseudosciences. Phrenology and humorism, for example, turned out to be proto-scientific forebears of localized cognitive functions and chemical neurology, respectively. Though these disciplines died out as science improved, were a supernatural entity to come along, then science would find itself less able to make sense of the new discovery unless they defaulted back to the folklore and mythology surrounding that type of entity. And that is exactly what happens in this story. When the best doctors in Western Civilization are unable to find out what is wrong with Artimus Thaler, it is exactly that sort of unnatural malady the physical sciences cannot make sense of because they do not understand where it comes from. Without spoiling the story, I will reveal that Algernon Blackwood's "Transference" was a big inspiration for me in writing it, as I like unusual stories of vampirism. So, taking cues from Blackwood and drawing on my love for Irish mythology, I had modern medicine confront an unusual disease. In fact I'll venture there is no classification of disease that would match the criteria of an attack by the Leanán Síde.

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