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(1880–1966)

The Jelly-Fish

“ALL space is relative. There is no such thing as size. The telescope and the microscope have produced a deadly leveling of great and small, far and near. The only little thing is sin, the only great thing is fear!”

For the hundredth time Professor Queirling repeated his statement, and for the hundredth time we listened in silence, afraid to enter into a controversy with him. It was not the fact that he knew more than we did that kept us quiet, but the haunting fear that filled us when we listened to him or watched him at work.

Working at an unsolved problem, he seemed a soul detached, a spirit separated from its earthly home, a being living only in the realm of thought. His body sat motionless, his eyes catatonic, unwinking stared until his mind, satisfied, deigned to return to bone-bound cell. Then in magnificent condescension he would talk freely in limpid phrases of the things he had considered and the conclusions he had deduced. We, chosen scientists, university graduates, hailed him as our master and hated him for admitting his mastery.

We hoped some evil might befall him, and yet we admitted that the success of the expedition depended upon his continued leadership. It was vitally necessary for our future: we were struggling young men with all life ahead of us, and if we failed in our first effort there would be no other opportunities for fame granted us.

In a specially constructed yacht, a veritable floating laboratory, we were south of Borneo, making a detailed study of microscopic sea life. In deep-sea nets we gathered the tiny organisms and then, with microscope, photography, and the cinema we observed them for the future instruction of the human race. There were hundreds of species, thousands of varieties, each to be identified, classified, described, studied, and

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photographed. We gathered in the morning, studied until midnight and slept restlessly until morning. The only thing in which we were agreed was ambition, our sole united emotion was hatred of the professor.

He knew how we felt and enjoyed taunting us: "I am your leader because I willed it so," he would say, speaking in a low restrained voice. "With me the will to attain is synonymous with accomplishment. I believe in myself and through this irreducible faith I succeed. There is nothing a strong man cannot do if he wills to do it and believes in his strength. Our ideas of space, size, and time are but the fanciful dreams of children. I am fifty-nine inches tall and fully clothed, weigh one hundred and ten pounds. If I desired I could make myself a colossus and swallow the earth as a child swallows a pill. If I willed it I could fly through space like a comet or hang suspended in the ether like the morning star. My will is greater than any other physical force, because I believe in it: I have confidence in my ability to do whatever I wish. So far I have conducted myself like an average man because I desire to so behave and not because of any limitations: Man has a soul and that ethereal force is greater than any law of nature that man ever thought of or any God ever created. He is purely and totally supreme—if he so desires."

It was after such a defiant declaration to us that our chemist, Bullard, gathered courage to challenge his power. He stated his opinion sharply and to the point, "I do not believe you."

"What is that to me?" answered the professor.

"Simply this: You make a statement that you have certain powers. I say that it is not true: Of what good to boast if you know we think you a liar? Can you do these things? If you can, do them for us, and I for one, will hail you as greater than God. Fail to do them and I will brand you a boasting poseur."

The professor looked steadily at the chemist. We waited breathlessly for the blow to fall, but he only laughed.

"You want a sign? A proof? I have thought of just such a thing and I would have proposed it myself had one of you not asked for it. The thing must be visible to all of you, something that I can demonstrate, a thing unheard of, an act all men consider impossible and yet I will do it. Listen to me.

"You have all seen the jellyfish called the Bishop's Miter.

When it is magnified three hundred times under the microscope it looks like a small balloon with a large opening at one end. It propels itself through the water by the flagellate movement of its cilia. The walls are translucent and transparent. At the top there are two specialized groups of nerve cells which we believe may serve as eyes. The opening at the bottom serves as a mouth. Smaller cells enter there and are absorbed. I describe it to refresh your memory, though you have all seen it. I will secure one in a hanging drop under the microscope and then we will attach the camera and cinema to it. We will project the picture on our screen. You will see the Miter move and live; you will observe the cilia move.

“While we have the actual specimen under observation I will look at it through the microscope. Then I will demonstrate to you that I am not the idle boaster you think me. I will force myself to pass through the glass eye-piece down into the brass tube. As I go, I will make myself grow smaller. Finally I will pass through the objective and jump into the hanging drop. I will swim in that drop—swim up to the jellyfish and touch it, make actual observations concerning its structure and functions. While I am in the drop of water you will be able to observe my every motion on the screen: Then I will disappear, pass through the microscope upwards and finally resume my original size and position in the room. I presume that if I do this you will be satisfied.”

We were too astonished to reply. It was evident that the man had suddenly become insane. He smiled superciliously, as though we were children.

He waited for an answer, but we had none and then he began to prepare the apparatus for the experiment. Finally all was to his satisfaction. After examining several drops of water from our specimen-jar he was able to imprison a Bishop's Miter in the hanging drop under the microscope. He switched on the electricity and we saw the jellyfish move upon the screen.

The professor carefully adjusted the apparatus until the organism appeared with more than usual distinctness. We saw the little animal he had so carefully described to us. We even saw the little projections which we believed were its rudimentary visual organs.

Then Professor Queirling told the cinema operator what he

wanted done. He was to take a picture starting from the time the professor disappeared down the brass tube of the microscope and continue until he reappeared. No matter what happened, he was to go on taking pictures.

"It is all well enough," said our master, "for you children to see what is happening and to talk about it later on, but who would believe you? We know that the camera cannot lie. That is why it is important to take a consecutive picture of what occurs. Otherwise you might think that I have been able to hypnotize you. Now I will look down this tube. At the bottom of the hanging drop I see a transparent balloon. It is a pretty sight. Now watch me carefully as I will myself to shrink. I will go on talking as long as I can and you must listen carefully because the smaller I am the less audible will be my voice.

"Now I am twelve inches high. I am standing near the microscope. I grow still smaller and now I am only one inch tall and am standing on the eye-piece. No doubt you can barely hear me. Now I am smaller yet and am ready to will myself through the glass of the eye-piece."

The room became silent. Shivering, we looked at the microscope. The professor was gone. The chemist staggered over to the instrument, looked into it, and silently reeled back to his seat.

On the screen before us, the living inhabitants of the drop of water lived and moved and had their being. Largest of all was the transparent jellyfish, which was moving restlessly as though seeking a way of escape. The only sound in the room was the hum of the cinema and the stertorous breathing of the chemist.

Then on the screen came a new figure we were able to identify as the professor, swimming among the infusoria. Gaining his balance, at last he stood upright and waved his hand at us. It was easy to see his smile, that condescending smug smile that had so often driven us frantic. There was no doubt from his expression that he was highly pleased with his performance. None of us dared look at his fellow; not one of the audience thought for a second of taking his eyes off the silver screen. We were stunned, stupefied, and filled with a wild terror all the more horrible because of the silence.

The professor started to swim again and now approached

the jellyfish. He tapped the crystal walls. Then as though seized with a sudden impulse, he went to the bottom, jumped up through the mouth, and entered the translucent ball of protoplasm. He peered at us through the transparent walls. His arms made a series of peculiar movements and once again he smiled at us.

“My God!” exclaimed the artist. “He is wigwagging to us in army code. He says, ‘I have done it, and now I will return to your world.’”

As though to keep his promise he started for the mouth of the jellyfish, and then—*the mouth closed*.

The professor circled the glasslike ball seeking a way of exit. Once he waved at us in a peculiar manner and then suddenly he sought the wall and with arms and feet tried to break through. On his face was now the look of ghastly despair. The things on top of the jellyfish began to glow—no doubt now that they were eyes, and bright ones.

Before our eyes the professor slowly disappeared into a globule of milky protoplasm. The jellyfish not only had made him a prisoner, but had actually dissolved and digested him. With a shriek the artist went over to the wall and turned on the electric lights. Trembling, the chemist looked down the tube of the microscope and told us that there was nothing in the hanging drop save the jellyfish.

The next day, after a conference, in which each of us said only part of what he thought, we decided to destroy the roll of film—and sent word to the university that the professor had disappeared from the ship and our only explanation was that he had been drowned.