

TERMINALIA

By

Sean McMullen

My field is new, it is just fourteen years since Friedrich Maas used cardiac compression to restart the hearts of two patients. Sadly, successful revivals are greatly outnumbered by failures, and even when patients have been dragged back from the afterlife, the functioning of their brains is often impaired. Exploration of the frontiers of death is not impossible, but it remains difficult and dangerous.

In the winter of 1905 I was working in a London hospital, and had developed something of a reputation for reviving patients whose hearts had ceased to beat. One of the hospital's benefactors, Lord Ealing, was being given a tour and I was featured as an important asset. His lordship was a little shorter than myself, and dressed conventionally in a suit, shirt and gloves. His hair reached down to his shoulders, his beard was lush, and he wore gold rimmed spectacles with tinted blue lenses. Note that. Very little of his skin was visible.

"This is Doctor Jules Lascal, his field is reviving the dead," is how Firth, my supervisor, introduced me.

"Always guaranteed to raise a laugh at parties, what?" said the peer jovially.

"Indeed, sir, people assume me to be a spiritualist," I replied, taking care to show deference without seeming servile.

"He's a graduate of the Sorbonne, and his work is founded on the firmest of scientific principles," said Firth breathlessly. "He has combined the techniques of cardiac massage, induced respiration and electro-cardiac shock, and applies them to patients who show all the standard sign of death."

"Electric shock!" exclaimed Ealing. "Impossible! That Italian, Aldini, attempted such a procedure a century ago. The patient remained dead."

"The man had been executed, and he had been dead too long," I explained. "John McWilliam did a more scientific study on the fibrillation of hearts in 1889, and six years ago Prevost and Battelli pioneered the use of electrical counter-fibrillation."

"But electricity stops hearts. One might as well use a pistol to heal someone who has been shot."

"Nevertheless, it works."

Faced with disputing my record of successes, Lord Ealing relented.

"So, you drag them back from heaven, or maybe the other place?" he said.

"No patients have reported anything so dramatic," I replied.

"What did they see?"

"Some reported a tunnel of light, others had a sense of euphoria."

"Still, that might be significant," Ealing was saying when he froze.

The change in his manner was nothing dramatic, he merely stopped speaking. His lips were slightly parted.

"Sir?" I said after some moments. "Are you not well?"

"Best if you sit down, lordship," said Firth, taking him by the arm.

Lord Ealing toppled sideways and crashed to the floor with a heavy, metallic concussion. Firth cried out in horror, then put his hands to his mouth.

"Heart attack!" I said as I dropped to my knees. "Help me get him on his back."

Firth was an administrator and had not touched a patient in years, so he deferred to me as we rolled Ealing over. The man was astonishingly heavy, with muscles that felt harder than those of a prizefighter. There was no trace of a pulse at his neck. Thus I opened his shirt to apply cardiac massage - and stopped.

The man's chest was all gleaming metal strips and silvery scaffolding. I now noticed the faint whirring of a small electric motor, and there was a distinct smell of machine oil. I sat back on my heels, unable to think what to do. The healing and maintenance of the human body is my profession, but this body was clearly not human.

"Make way, let us pass!" shouted someone behind me.

Three men pushed their way through the gathering crowd. Two had the look of hooligans wearing sac suits, but the third was well spoken, wore an expensive frock

coat, and had the same type of tinted spectacles as Lord Ealing. Before I could protest, Ealing was lifted from the floor by the two burly men - although this seemed to require considerable effort. He was carried to a nearby ward, but I was not permitted to follow.

"My name is Barnes, I'm his lordship's personal physician," said the third man.

"But his pulse has failed!" I protested. "Unless I apply cardiac massage, he will die."

"Lord Ealing wears extensive metal prosthetics as a result of a riding accident. The equipment requires some minor adjustments, it is nothing serious. Your help is not required."

I was not at all happy with this arrangement, but Firth was only too willing to let someone else take responsibility for our visitor's collapse. I was returned to my usual duties, and for the rest of the afternoon and evening I stood ready as surgeons performed operations on rather more conventional patients. Fortunately my services were not needed.

By the time I returned to my rooms in Clerkenwell Road it was very late and the sun was long down. I struck a match and lit a paraffin lamp on the mantelpiece, then knelt to start a fire in the grate.

"You will not be needing a fire tonight, darling," said a female voice behind me.

I turned, and the lamplight illuminated two women and a man sitting in my armchairs.

"Best not to make a fuss," said a woman who wore tinted spectacles like those of Lord Ealing. "This dear little gun is a Browning Modele 1900. It's accurate to a hundred feet, and you are only ten feet away."

I raised my hands, very slowly.

"You will be disappointed, there is little to rob here," I said quietly. "Most of my money is in a bank, and I keep my instruments at the hospital."

The woman with the spectacles stood and walked across to me. She was close to my exact height and was dressed in a plaid double breasted jacket and circular skirt, with a little straw hat featuring a single pheasant feather. The overall effect was neither masculine nor feminine, she did not stand out, neither did she fit in. When she removed her spectacles I found myself looking into two pools of absolute blackness.

"I'm Valentina," she said. "We need your help with a medical procedure. Do cooperate."

There was a hint of machine oil on her breath. The other woman stood and gestured to the door.

"There's no time to sit about explaining," she said. "You would only say that it's impossible, or madness, or both."

We walked east to Aldergate Street, turned right, then turned into London Wall and continued past Moorgate. Notice the mention of gates and a wall, for we were near the old Roman city wall. It was no longer visible after fifteen hundred years of being plundered for building materials, but the ghostly names still lingered.

The other woman introduced herself as Doctor Lucielle Franklyn as we walked. She was somewhat older than Valentina and wore clothes more fashionable back in the 1890s.

"In an hour or so Duncan will kill me," she declared.

I turned to Duncan, who smiled sheepishly and shrugged. Imagine a draper's assistant in a cheap sac suit and bowler hat, and you have him.

"I know something of cardiac massage and compression," Lucielle continued. "You have treated thirty-one patients with these methods, and restored seventeen of them to life."

"You are too generous, Madame," I replied. "Five of them recovered fully, but nine have impaired minds and three show no more signs of consciousness than the vegetables on a dinner plate."

"Sounds like they should sit in the House of Lords," said Valentina.

"I read your papers in the Lancet," said Lucielle. "You suggest that four minutes is the upper limit for a patient to be revived safely, and that after six minutes the prospect of damage to the brain is inevitable."

"I stand by those figures."

"I have revived a man who was dead five minutes, using a combination of cardiac compression and Doctor Silvester's induced respiration method. His mind was not damaged."

"The cases presented to me were hospital patients, and not in good health. If the man you treated was strong and healthy, perhaps five minutes is risky but possible."

"I'm in good health, so Duncan will stop my heart and after two hundred and fifty seconds you will revive me."

You can imagine my alarm. In the eyes of the law Duncan might become a murderer, and I would certainly be an accessory if I were unable to revive this woman.

"Madame, what you are planning is appallingly dangerous," I said at once. "What possible reason can there be to do this?"

"I wish to meet Death," she replied.

I insisted that we stop for dinner, for it was sure to be a long and difficult night. .
Valentina said that she did not need food. Being the patient, Lucielle knew better than to eat before a medical procedure.

We reached Wormwood Street just after midnight. Here these people had the use of a house, and in the garret was an oxygen generator attached to a hose and mask, along with batteries, wires, switches and surgical equipment. The scent of disinfectant was on the air, and incandescent lights had been rigged to the beams of the ceiling. Somewhere nearby I could hear the chuffing of a small steam engine.

"We can't risk using the London grid to supply our electricity," Lucielle explained. "A failure at some critical moment could mean my death, so Duncan has installed an oil fired steam engine and electrical generator in the room below."

"You are liable to die anyway, and for what?" I said, exasperated. "Death is a process, not a person. You cannot meet a process."

"Can you explain why a person is not a process?" she asked as she took off her coat.

"I am a person, Madame. If I put ten pounds into my bank account, that is a process."

"Yet all through your childhood, schooling and years of medical training you were taught processes. You raise your hat when you meet a lady, encase a broken arm in plaster, and drink a glass of wine with friends on Bastille Day. You once met a rival for a young lady's love in a field, at dawn, with pistols. That was a process, too. We are all bundles of processes, Doctor Lascal."

Valentina presented us with a tray, upon which were two pieces of honeycomb, and two glasses of wine.

"Eat and drink, in honor of Terminus," she said.

"Terminus?" I asked.

"The Roman god of boundaries and borderlands."

I took a glass, as did Duncan. The wine was probably from Bordeaux, and the honey had a hint of lavender.

"This house was built where the old Roman wall once stood, so it is an ancient boundary place," said Lucielle. "What is the date?"

"As of some minutes ago, the 23rd of February."

"This day is Terminalia, it honors Terminus. The ancient Romans once drank wine and ate honeycombs at boundary places on Terminalia Day."

"Why are we performing a pagan ceremony fifteen centuries old?" I asked.

"The Greeks and Romans made some very advanced scientific and engineering discoveries, so there might also be something behind their religious ceremonies. We know nothing about the borderlands of the afterlife."

"So we pay our respects to what *might* be there?" I asked.

"Precisely."

"It seems like lunacy to me, but your friend has the gun. What else is required?"

"A sacrifice. Myself."

Again I attempted to explain how dangerous their scheme was.

"Doctor Franklyn, the odds of this procedure leaving you dead or impaired are three times greater than those for a full recovery. As a leading authority in this field, I cannot sanction what you have planned."

Valentina drew out her gun and twirled it on a finger.

"Such a sleek, elegant little toy, not like those nobly, penile revolver things that you men prefer," she said.

"You misunderstand me. My only concern is for Doctor Franklyn's life."

"I'm dead, darling, but it's not as depressing as it sounds."

For me this established that Valentina was not entirely sane. Quite possibly none of them were.

"You were present when Lord Ealing collapsed this afternoon," Lucielle stated, rather than asked. "It was at 2pm."

This was supposed to be a secret, but it would have done no good to deny it.

"It was five minutes past the hour, I always check my pocket watch during medical emergencies."

"A very dear friend of mine lost his life at 2pm today. If Death exists, George had resolved to reveal that Lord Ealing was a spirit in a metal body, like Valentina. It seems that he was successful, because his lordship was drawn out of his body, and this world."

"This George fellow died?"

"Yes."

"This is monstrous!" I exclaimed. "He died to confirm a fairy tale?"

"I did my best to bring him back, but I don't have your skills. It was also Terminalia Eve. Perhaps we should have waited a few hours."

"And now you want to do something no less dangerous because the date is better? Please, Madame, I beg you to reconsider."

"Doctor Lascal, would you say this to the American brothers who fly in oversized kites powered by unreliable petroleum engines? What would you say to the mariners who crew submarines that are powered by batteries that can leak poisonous chlorine gas? Exploration is dangerous, and I am an explorer."

Without another word Lucielle unbuttoned her blouse and handed it to Duncan. There was no corset beneath, but at least her skin was not metal. Naked to the waist, she climbed onto a workbench padded with blankets. I estimated that she was about forty-five, and had never given birth. Duncan strapped her ankles to the bench.

"Madame, such idle speculations are harmless enough when in front of a fire, drinking brandy and smoking pipes, but this really is a matter of life and death."

"Then I'll turn idle speculations into an experiment that produces hard, scientific facts," she replied.

"It is an experiment that you may not return from."

"True, but the stakes are very high."

Timed by the second hand of a large clock on the party wall, Lucielle instructed me in the use of her equipment. Duncan's task was to raise Lucielle's arms after every fifteen compressions, so as to draw oxygen from the feeder pipe into her lungs.

"Have you read my papers on cardiac compression?" I asked as Duncan prepared his electrical apparatus to deliver a lethal shock.

"We all have," said Lucielle.

"And not an amusing phrase in any of them," sighed Valentina.

"Then you must know that I have continued compressions of the heart for as long as an hour with some patients, only to have them die. Sometimes the heart cannot be started again, even though cardiac compression maintains blood flow and body temperature."

"I am an explorer, and we explorers take risks."

Valentina put her gun away and stood facing us with a clip board.

"Are you ready, Doctor Franklyn?" she asked.

"That I am, Lady Valentina," Lucielle replied.

"Duncan?"

"Aye, ladyship."

"I know that you're not ready, darling, but the majority rules," she said to me. "Step one: Duncan will strap Lucielle's wrists to the bench."

Duncan did this.

"Done," he declared.

"Step two: Duncan will attach electrodes to either side of Lucielle's chest by means of adhesive resin."

The wires were red, as were the two blobs of resin. To me they looked like long, predatory worms feeding on Lucielle's body.

"Done."

"Step three: Jules will set the minute and second hands of the clock to 12, then count out five seconds aloud. Duncan will switch an electrical charge through Lucielle's body, then switch it off on the count of 5."

I reached up to the clock and drew the minute and second hands to 12. They pulsed beneath my fingers as I restrained them. With my free hand I took out my pocket watch and glanced at it. The time was six minutes past one.

"Are you ready, Duncan?" I called.

"Aye, that I am."

I released the hands of the clock. There was a sharp click behind me, followed by a wheeze of indrawn breath.

"One, two, three, four, five!" I called, almost shouting.

I turned in time to see Duncan switch off the electricity.

"Step five: Jules will check Lucielle for a pulse."

I hurried to the bench where Lucielle lay and felt for a pulse at her neck. There was none.

"No pulse!" I called.

"Step six: Duncan will release Lucielle's wrists from their straps."

Duncan released the dead woman's wrists. Valentina turned to face the clock.

"Step seven: Valentina will call out the minutes while Jules stands ready. Step eight:

Duncan will attach the oxygen mask to Lucielle's face."

Duncan attached the mask, and I must admit to an almost overwhelming urge to start the oxygen flowing at once. Lucielle was already in the borderlands of the afterlife, but she could be brought back. Every second that we waited worsened the odds of saving her, yet we had been instructed to wait for two hundred and fifty of them.

Thus far Duncan had said almost nothing. I tried to relieve the tension by chatting with him.

"Have you ever faced death, Duncan?" I asked.

"Lots of times, doctor."

"I have too, but only once."

"That duel?"

"Yes. I fought a fought a rival for my sweetheart's affection."

"What happened?"

"He shot first, striking my right shoulder. I dropped my gun without firing, and was judged to have lost. I went into exile once I was well enough to travel, and have been in London ever since."

"One minute!" called Valentina.

"Did Doctor Franklyn really revive a man after five minutes without a pulse?"

"Aye, she did. I was there."

"Did the patient recover fully?"

"It was George Langley, and he did recover."

"But yesterday he died."

"Aye."

That gave me pause for thought. These were violent, insane but very brave people.

"Two minutes!" called Valentina.

"Is Lady Valentina really dead?" I now asked, as softly as I could.

Valentina overheard.

"I blew my brains out, darling," she said. "And in spite of what people say about our current king, one does not get far without brains."

"May I ask why?"

"There was a scandal involving a photo of me playing reproductive games with someone other than my husband."

"I brought her back, like," said Duncan. "I invented the idea of puttin' ghosts in metal bodies, then Lord Ealing and other rich coves stole my plans and diagrams."

"I am tempted not to believe you."

"As you like."

"But I never ignore evidence."

If his words were true, Duncan was clearly a genius. Nevertheless, from his speech and manners I suspected that he had not received a university education.

"Three minutes!" called Valentina. "Step nine: At four minutes and ten seconds Valentina will call *Revive!* Step ten: Jules will commence cardiac compression while Duncan opens the valve to the oxygen supply. Duncan will raise Lucielle's arms to induce breathing after every fifteen compressions."

"Understood," I replied.

"Standin' ready," said Duncan.

"Step eleven: if no pulse has been established after ten minutes of cardiac compressions, Duncan will apply an electrical shock to stimulate the heart into beating."

Neither Duncan nor I felt like conversing after that. He took up his position at the oxygen valve, while I stood ready with my hands together on Lucielle's chest.

"Four minutes!" called Valentina, and there was a pause that seemed far longer than ten seconds. "Revive!"

I barely remember counting out the first fifteen compressions, then I stood back and shouted "Raise her arms!" to Duncan.

How effective is Henry Silvester's technique to induce breathing? I dislike it, I think that merely pressing and releasing the chest is enough to draw breath into the lungs. The air being supplied to Lucielle was pure oxygen, which is five times more potent than the air around us.

I checked for a pulse. There was none. I returned to my compressions. I can remember little of the first ten minutes, other than the fact that I was exceedingly tired at the end of them. Lucielle still had no pulse when I checked.

"Stand back!" ordered Duncan, and he switched a brief surge of electricity through Lucielle's body. She convulsed, but I could still feel no pulse.

"More compressions!" I declared, then returned to providing Lucielle's heartbeat.

After another five minutes Duncan had to take over the compressions, under my instruction. At twenty minutes we had still not revived Lucielle's heart. Duncan applied his electricity again, but with no more success. At twenty-five minutes I told him to try for a third time.

"It's only supposed to be after ten minutes of compressions," he protested. "It might kill her."

"You fool, she is already dead!" I shouted back.

It did no good, and we continued to raise her arms and compress her heart.

"Thirty minutes!" called Valentina.

"Ready with your switch!" I panted, then reached over to Lucielle's neck. "No, there's a pulse!" I shouted. "Stand away from the switch. She lives."

Lucielle's body was once more alive, but this was not the end of her dark voyage. Had the tissue of her brain been damaged by four minutes without oxygen and a further thirty with myself operating her heart? Science does not yet know the mechanism of necrosis within the brain. Do its cells just die of suffocation after a few minutes, or do bacteria act so very quickly? All I knew was that four minutes was a significant milestone on the road to the afterlife.

"What's to do now?" asked Duncan as we slumped exhausted on bentwood chairs.

"Nothing," I replied. "Doctor Franklyn could just wake up and ask for a cup of tea."

"When?"

"In a minute, an hour, or a month. The longer it takes, the stronger the possibility that she has not returned to us as she was. She may never wake up."

"I thought you were the best at this sort of thing."

"The best, sir? Being best at cardiac massage merely means getting it wrong less often than other doctors."

I checked Lucielle's pulse again. It was as strong as could be expected, but she displayed no signs of consciousness. Valentina walked over. Although she looked quite gracile, the floorboards creaked under her weight. I offered her my chair, and sat on the end of Lucielle's bench.

"I know you are French, but are you from Paris?" she asked.

"I studied there, Madame, but I was born in Calais."

"I spent three years in Paris, being an artists' model and doing cultural things. Why did you go there?"

"I wished to become a doctor, like my father. Being from a port city, he attended a lot of drownings and I accompanied him when not at school. I noticed that a few victims who had displayed all the signs of death sometimes returned to life spontaneously, so I resolved to make a scientific study of the arts of revival."

"A pity our paths never crossed, you may not have had to fight that duel. Have you had any affairs since then?"

"No. The duel left me disillusioned with romance - but I am less interesting than yourself. How long have you been dead and, well, metallic?"

"Twelve years."

"Twelve! Yet you are beautiful and unchanged!"

"Not entirely unchanged, Jules. I'm stronger than any man, and can remove my rubber breasts and be a man with just a change of clothes and the right wig."

"Have you done so?"

"Of course! So much nonsense is woven into our roles as women. With just a flat chest, trousers and short hair I can vote, join a gentleman's club and earn more money for the same work - not that I work, of course."

"Put that way, your status sounds quite desirable."

"A lot of people agree with you about that, Jules."

The conversation was terminated by a groan from Lucielle.

I have a suite questions that I use to establish whether or not damage has been done to the brains of revived patients. Lucielle passed every test that I gave her, yet there was a subtle change in her attitude that I was unable to define.

As the dawn of Terminalia Day lit up London's murky skies, Lucielle bathed, then dressed in fresh clothes. The four of us then set off in search of breakfast. In a city whose cafés are fewer and vastly inferior to those of Paris, this involved quite a long walk.

"So, did you meet the chap with the scythe and black cloak?" asked Valentina.

"I have no memory of it," Lucielle replied.

"So all that effort, yet we failed?"

"I remember nothing. That's all I can say."

I whistled to a newspaper boy and bought a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*. When we reached the café, I retreated to the safety of the morning news while Valentina continued to question Lucielle, and Lucielle continued to insist that she remembered nothing. Duncan had brought a book about spark gap radio transmission, and he ignored us all. I laid my paper down when our orders arrived.

"Will anyone tell me why we sacrificed you to a pagan god who does not exist, then snatched you back?" I asked as we ate.

"Rich, powerful, greedy, evil people are a fact of life, but they used to die like the rest of us," said Lucielle.

"Present company excepted," added Valentina.

"Used to?" I asked.

"Just imagine if enormously rich people never lost their grip on wealth and power by dying. They would become like gods, and they would never allow riffraff like the rest of us to become immortal."

"And it's already happening?"

"Yes, and Ealing was one of them. Some of us have been fighting back, but they are well guarded and hard to kill."

"Spray liquid nitrogen from a pump and Dewar flask, and their bodies get paralyzed by metallic cramps," said Duncan. "I invented that weapon."

"We trapped a few that way and sent them on to the afterlife," said Lucielle. "Now they are more wary and better guarded."

"And a spray of liquid nitrogen has five times less range than one of these," said Valentina, patting the coat pocket that concealed her Browning. "All the guards are armed."

"I'm designing a liquid nitrogen grenade launcher," said Duncan, but the women ignored him.

"So venturing into the afterlife is really a new type of warfare?" I asked.

"You have it," said Lucielle. "I am a weapon, and so are you."

"For me it's just an excuse to see more of you, Jules," added Valentina.

Because I had managed to get no sleep at all during the night, I drank four cups of coffee with my buttered toast. I remembered that I was due to sign on at the hospital by 8am, and a glance at my pocket watch told me that it was growing late.

"Unlike the lilies of the field, I have to toil for a living," I said as I stood. "Ladies, Duncan, please pardon me."

Valentina stood too, and handed me an envelope.

"There's a hundred pounds in there for your trouble," she said.

"A hundred pounds for one night?" I exclaimed. "That could buy a voyage to Australia and back, first class."

"It's our way of saying that we appreciate your work, dear boy. After all, you are the very best."

Cold kid leather lips kissed me on the cheek, and I smelled machine oil and perfume. I felt curiously elated as I set off for Saint Bartholomew's Hospital.

I have a reputation for being punctual, and so I arrived at work ten minutes before the eighth hour of the morning. I did not expect the reception that awaited me.

"Where the hell were you last night?" demanded Doctor Firth, who was standing beside the register at the front desk. "I've sent five errand boys to your rooms over the past two hours."

"I was with a lady," was as much as I managed to reply.

"Bloody frogs, don't you think of anything but women? Sign on and come with me."

Instead of going into the wards, Firth escorted me out to where a Hansom cab was waiting. Very soon we were rolling along the Strand, and I had the absurd notion that I was being taken to see the king at Buckingham Palace. This turned out not to be the case, for we skirted the palace and made for Belgrave Square. As we left the cab Firth put a finger to his lips.

"Say nothing, just do as you are told," he whispered.

We approached a large and magnificent residence, which was guarded by men wearing knee length coats and top hats. I suspected that guns were being concealed, for all of them had a distinctly military bearing. Firth presented papers that apparently satisfied the man in charge, and we were admitted.

Once inside, we passed yet more guards. These were openly carrying guns, the very intimidating German Mauser pistols that can fire ten shots without reloading. Even Firth and the guards were not allowed through the final door. Here a man lay still on a bed, stripped to the waist. A nurse was administering cardiac compression while another induced respiration. A man who was either completely bald, or who shaved his head, was standing beside a table littered with medical and electrical equipment.

"This is Sir Charles Harris," he announced. "He died during a medical procedure three hours ago."

Sir Charles was known to me. He was a very wealthy man, and had funded some of my research.

"May I examine him?" I asked politely, aware of how many men with guns were outside the door.

"Do so."

There was a faint pulse, doubtless due to the nurse applying cardiac compression, but the knight's skin was quite cold to the touch.

"This man is well beyond any hope of revival," I announced. "How long after death was cardiac compression applied?"

"One hour. The nurses have been working in rotation for two hours since then."

"Then they have been wasting their time. Cardiac compression must be commenced within four minutes of death, five at most. You were fifty-five minutes too late."

"The procedure took an hour."

"What procedure could involve this man being dead for so long?"

"That is none of your business."

"But the procedure failed."

"Yes. Now bring him back."

"Monsieur, Sir Charles is quite cold and unresponsive -"

"Get to work!" he shouted.

While the nurses continued to apply compression and raise the arms of the corpse, I rigged up an electrical stimulation apparatus from a household electricity socket. After fifteen applications of electrical shock, there was still no trace of an independent heartbeat. At last I was permitted to give up.

I asked for a jug of coffee, because I had been awake thirty hours by then. A butler brought it to me on a silver tray. As I was filling my cup for the third time the bald man entered with a woman of perhaps fifty. Unlike Lady Valentina, she was dressed in an expensive evening gown with a bolero waist and embroidered sleeves. My impression was that she had expected to celebrate something. There was something odd about her eyes, as if the irises had been painted on the eyeballs. I stood up and bowed.

"Yesterday I successfully underwent the same procedure that my husband did not survive," she said. "What changed, Professor Magnason?"

Magnason, I knew the name. He was a professor of physiology who had studied in Oxford, then moved to America.

"The procedure followed this morning was absolutely identical," he replied.

"My husband is dead!" she snapped angrily. "Something was different. What is your opinion, Doctor Lascal?"

"Lascal does not know of the procedure," said Magnason at once.

"Let the doctor speak for himself."

"All I know of this procedure is that one must lie dead for an hour," I said, choosing my words with exquisite care. "My specialty is restoring respiration and heartbeat, and from experience I can assure you that sixty minutes without circulation and breath is twelve times longer than the human body can endure. You should not be alive, Madame."

"Yet here I stand."

"I cannot account for it."

She turned to Magnason, shook her head, then left without another word.

"Are you familiar with a device known as the naughty helmet, Doctor Lascal?" he asked.

"Indeed. Some men delight in being almost suffocated for erotic arousal. A bag of rubber is sealed over the head. As the oxygen within the bag is consumed, consciousness fades. Apparently it is accompanied by a feeling of sexual euphoria."

"Word will be discretely put about that Sir Charles made use of the device, and the coroner will be sympathetic. He died of sexual misadventure, understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Say nothing else of what you saw or did here to anyone. Is this clear?"

"Yes professor."

"And I am still in Boston."

"Of course."

A cab returned Firth and myself to Saint Bartholomew's Hospital, where I wrote an account of Sir Charles's death as I had been instructed. Such sexual misadventures are not entirely unknown, especially among the rich and aristocratic, and families like to avoid any hint of a scandal. The rest of my day was routine, which is fortunate because I

was now ragged with exhaustion. I walked back to my rooms at Clerkenwell Road, buying a hot pasty at a Cornish bakery and eating it on the way. I suspected that I would not get a chance to cook when I got home, and I was right.

Valentina's clothes were on the floor, as were her hair, ears, face and breasts. Imagine, if you will, a glittering metallic body reflecting highlights of gold, copper, silver and gunmetal blue, but with a striking resemblance to a human cadaver from which the skin had been removed. Her face was all metallic muscles and tendons, stretched over a skull and jaw of what may have been steel.

"Do forgive this display of familiarity, darling," she said, "but you are a little early and I'm simply desperate for some maintenance."

Words had failed me entirely. I just stood staring.

"Never seen a naked woman before?" she asked.

"You are a work of art, and quite the most beautiful art I have ever seen," I said, and with complete honesty.

"You say that to all the girls."

She was spraying her joints with machine oil from a perfume bottle, and polishing her metal workings with a cloth. I watched as she plugged an electrical cable where her naval should have been. She then opened her chest cavity and replaced two containers that trailed wires.

"Dry cell batteries, Duncan is rather good at them," she explained. "They power my eyes and voice."

"You never pause for breath when you speak," I observed.

"I suppose I should pretend to breathe. I have an electric fan instead of lungs."

"Forgive my observation, but surely two small boxes of batteries are not sufficient to power an entire body."

"Oh, clever," she replied. "I'm dead, but my spirit has become a hole in your world. Heat flows out through it, and into some very cold place. Where heat flows, work can be done. Duncan has made muscles of bi-metallic strips that flex with changes of temperature."

"I am tempted to say that the idea is preposterous, yet what scientist ignores hard evidence?" I replied. "How do your eyes work?"

"They are glass globes filled with salt water and coated on the back with selenium. The amount of electricity selenium can conduct changes when light shines on it."

"And resistance causes the temperature to rise a little. Your disembodied eyes can detect changes in heat caused by light, and voila, you can see. This is very advanced science."

"True, and it's been tiresome for me to learn that science, but who ever heard of an engine driver who doesn't understand steam engines? Without the body that Duncan built for me I would be blind, mute and deaf."

"Do the batteries power your hearing as well?"

"No, there are two globes of storm glass fluid inside my head and they let me hear. Don't ask how they work, even Duncan is not sure."

"What of smell and taste?"

"I do without, but I have a rubber stomach so I can eat and drink to keep up appearances."

I watched in absolute fascination as she reattached her breasts, which were rubber moldings filled with gelatin. Try as I might, I could not prevent my eyes being drawn to her groin. She noticed.

"Go ahead, ask," she said, the bi-metallic muscles of her face forming a smile.

"I am assuming that you have female, ah, facilities?"

"Duncan was kind enough to install a cushioned rubber arrangement, but I've never bothered to test it. Men are sure to find my body a bit ..."

"Confronting?"

"Splendid word."

Wearing her dress, blouse, boots, coat and gloves, Valentina had the look of quite a normal sort of woman, if a little thin. A wig covered her metal head, while a high collar hid the machinery of her neck up to the level of her chin. This left her face, which was creamy white kid leather over latex, anchored into the bi-metallic muscles that let her smile, frown and pout. Spectacles with a heavy violet tint disguised her glass and selenium eyes.

"There, how do I look?" she asked.

"Absolutely alive," I replied. "What is next?"

"Champagne, when the others get here."

Valentina seated herself on one of my lounge chairs. It creaked alarmingly under the weight of her metal body, but held.

"There is tension between you and Duncan," I observed. "Do you have a romantic past?"

"We have a past involving romance, which is not quite the same. The man who died yesterday, George Langly, was once a scandal detective. Duncan built him a brilliant little camera, it could be used with one hand, at night, while dangling by a rope outside a bedroom window. George's photograph caught me in the most adulterous circumstances possible, and my husband sent copies to everyone who was anyone. Preferring a theatrical exit to reduced circumstances, I shot myself. Do you want any more of the sordid details?"

"I can guess. Duncan somehow detected your spirit presence, then built this body out of sheer remorse. He does appear to adore you, you can see it in the way he stares."

"Amazing, you could be reading my mind. What other naughty thoughts can you see in there?"

"A gentleman would never say. How did people like Lord Ealing and Sir Charles's wife acquire bodies like yours?"

"Duncan contracted out the building of my metal parts, they would have taken a lifetime for one man to complete. He did not expect the contractors contact each other, and work out what he was doing."

Being a consummate burglar, Duncan did not bother knocking. The door just opened and he entered with Lucielle. They were carrying champagne in a bucket of ice and a platter of French cheeses.

"Now what about another intelligence test, I do like my men intelligent," Valentina said as I fired the champagne cork across the room. "What are we celebrating?"

"It is not the death of Sir Charles Harris," I replied.

"Darling, that is not an answer."

"We are celebrating the failure of the procedure that killed him."

"Full marks," said Valentina, smiling and clapping. "Impress me, how did you work it out?"

"George Langly died at the same time that Lord Ealing collapsed in front of me in the hospital. Perhaps it was proof that he did indeed have a conversation with Death."

"Well done," said Lucielle. "George said he would reveal Ealing's name to whoever, whatever, he met."

"And when Ealing's mechanical body collapsed, it proved that Death can drag reluctant spirits into the afterlife?"

"Correct."

"But *you* did not pass on any names, did you Doctor Franklyn?"

"There's no hiding anything from you, Doctor Lascal."

"Rather than pick off immortal machine people like Valentina, you put an end to all future ghosts. You told Death how some souls get overlooked when their bodies die, and linger in the borderlands of the afterlife as ghosts. Death will no longer permit that."

"Brilliant, simply brilliant," said Valentina, clapping her hands again. "If ever you fancy a highly unusual affair, do put me at the top of your list."

"If I had such a list, yours would be the only name on it," I said, and she coyly batted a hand at me. I turned to Lucielle. "So there will be no new ghosts? Ever?"

"Is that such a great loss?"

No new ghosts. For some reason the thought saddened me. So many people die with business not concluded and important words unspoken. Now there was no more hope of faint whispers from the afterlife to tie off loose threads for the living.

"What of the mechanical dead who have already been created?" I asked.

"They must be identified and killed, one by one," said Lucielle.

"Named to Death by sending you into the afterlife for two hundred and fifty seconds?"

"Yes."

"Everyone needs a hobby," said Valentina.

"This is not possible!" I said, as sternly as I could. "Damage to the brain builds up over multiple revivals, even after just three or four minutes. A half dozen more ventures to the edge of the afterlife will impair your mind as much as a severe stroke."

"Are you sure?"

"I am currently the world's best authority on this subject, Madame. Duncan's idea for liquid nitrogen grenades is far safer."

That cast something of a cloud over our little celebration, but to my surprise it was Duncan who tried to raise the level of cheer.

"What about some decorations to brighten the place?" he suggested.

"The ribbon shops will be closed for another twelve hours," said Lucielle.

"Unless you burgle one," added Valentina. "He's a brilliant burglar, Jules."

"I noticed," I said. "What about some rolls of bandage instead?"

"Only if you have them in nice colors."

"Holly and ivy are used by country folk for winter decorations," said Duncan.

"But this is inner London," said Valentina.

"The Bunhill graveyard park is only half a mile away, there's sure to be ivy there. Come on, Doctor Lascal, just thirty minutes there and back."

A waning, gibbous moon shone brightly through London's haze as we hurried east. The night was cold and there was little traffic on the road, so we had no chance to hail a passing cab.

"So, you won't be needed to revive Doctor Franklyn again?" asked Duncan with breath that condensed into steam.

"Not unless she wishes to cripple her mind."

"Then you'll see no more of us?"

"That will depend on Lady Valentina."

"She does like you."

"That is obvious. She is something of a flirt and tease, but I find myself charmed by her."

"I've known her twelve years, but she's never even kissed me on the cheek."

"Ah, but you seek to impress her with your grasp of machineries, Duncan. Have you ever tried suggestive words and flattery?"

"Never was much inclined to words."

This was obvious. I had known Duncan barely twenty-four hours, yet for every hundred words that I had spoken, he might have said one. Again he fell silent, and after ten minutes of brisk walking we entered a park scattered with occasional headstones and monuments. The old graveyard had been turned into a public space by some enlightened council, and ivy was not hard to find. The moonlight was more than sufficient to work by.

"I have an armload of ivy, but can see no holly!" I called as I walked onto the open lawn where Duncan was waiting.

"There's a Webley Bulldog on the grass, just near your feet," he replied. "Pick it up."

Now I saw that Duncan had a gun in his hand, pointed straight up. I dropped my bundle of ivy and raised my hands.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's a duel, doctor. Pick up the Webley. When Big Ben rings half past the hour, we fire."

"No!"

"Then I fire. The choice is yours."

"You are jealous of myself and Valentina."

"Aye. I held back while I thought you were needed, but now it's not so."

"Very well, I'll not court her or see her again."

"She'll come after you, she's like that. I saved her, I built her body. She's mine."

"You owed her a great debt, Monsieur. You built the very camera whose photograph shamed her into suicide."

"That's enough! Duel or execution, frog. I don't much care."

"Then let it be execution. I have always worked close to death, I do not fear it. Valentina and Lucielle need your skills with machines and burglary."

The first clang of the half hour pealed out from distant Westminster. Duncan extended his arm. A gunshot barked out, and he fell. This was something of a surprise, because my gun was still at my feet. I then noticed Valentina, standing to one side in the moonlight, her arm still extended and holding the sleek Browning.

"You refused to duel for me, I ought to shoot you as well," she said.

I checked Duncan, but he had been shot through the temples and was without question dead. Valentina gathered up the gun that had been at my feet.

"It's Lucielle's," she said. "I followed after you two as soon as she noticed it was missing."

By now police whistles were sounding in the distance. Valentina took me firmly by the arm and marched me out of the park and into the back streets.

"Why?" I asked as we walked. "I am of little use to you, but Duncan was the greatest inventor since Leonardo da Vinci."

"You're cute."

"Please, try again."

"You're being serious, but I'll humor you just this once. Duncan wanted you dead because he loved me. This was flattering, but the man was a bore and I was once married to a bore. Never again."

"I was willing to sacrifice myself for your war against the metallic immortals," I pointed out. "Are you sure that did not influence you?"

"Do keep your voice down, Jules, altruism is so unfashionable."

"Apologies."

"And you owe me a very substantial favor."

We crossed Aldersgate Road and entered the grounds of Saint Bartholomew's Hospital. I worked there, so it was a convenient sanctuary for us. While we waited for the police to stop blowing their whistles and checking everyone who was out and about, I took a notepad from my coat pocket, wrote UNUSUAL AFFAIRS and below that VALENTINA, then handed the page to her.

"That will do nicely," she said, then wrapped her arms around me and squeezed until the joints of my spine crackled.

Like a modern Victor Frankenstein, Duncan was destroyed by his own creation. Like Shakespeare's Juliet, Valentina made an inconvenient but glorious choice. Where does that leave me? I have to take over from Duncan, the master machine builder. I can never hope to replace him in this very strange war, but I am a formidable authority on death and dying so perhaps I too can be useful.

Big Ben rang out the tenth hour of the night. It was still the Terminalia Day, 1905, the day that saw the extinction of ghosts begin. The Angel of Death is always abroad in the land, but as of that day everyone would hear the beating of his wings.
