

The Stone Cat

by Miles J. Breuer, 1889-1947

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HAVE you ever seen a petrified forest? If you have, you must have wondered by what process this came about. The processes that make petrification possible are not any too well understood by science today, but it is thought quite probable that it is within the scope of scientists to create similar conditions. We all know the biblical story of Lot's wife, when she looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. Evidently we have to do with petrification in this instance as well. You will enjoy this unusual and interesting story by the author of *The Man With the Strange Head*.

INVESTIGATION showed that I was the last person to see young Brian before his sudden and mysterious disappearance. I saw him on the day that my

remarkable friend, Doctor Fleckinger showed the two of us the stone cat. We found the doctor working in his laboratory, a big, airy room with the sunlight gleaming brightly on the myriad things of glass and polished metal. As usual, Miss Lila was there, busy at some of the doctor's scientific tasks.

Brian had eyes only for the demure young lady in the white apron and rolled-up sleeves. As we came in, she looked up and saw him, and nodded her head to him with a smile in her deep, dark eyes. Brian wished the doctor good morning, and then went over to where she sat cutting sections on a microtome, handling the gossamer-like paraffin ribbons with a consummately delicate touch. I walked over to the other side of the room where the doctor was working with some Petri dishes and a microscope, and exchanged greetings with him.

Dr. Fleckinger went on with his work, and such was his concentration that in a few moments he had forgotten about me. He was pouring a black liquid on some lumps of flesh in the Petri dishes and watching them blacken and crinkle; and then he teased out pieces to examine under the microscope. For a while he gazed abstractedly at his notebook. Then came the uncouth thing that makes me shiver when I think of it. Suddenly he jerked up his cuff and bared his arm, and poured some of the greenish-black stuff on one spot. The effect was hideous. The flesh blackened and shriveled, and his arm shuddered. He regarded it for a while; then, seizing a scalpel, he passed it quickly through a flame, and with one sweep cut off the blackened skin and flesh. He put on a compress-dressing to stop the bleeding, and went on unconcernedly with his work, totally oblivious of me standing there and shuddering.

That was the kind of man he was. I was afraid of him. The friendship that I continued with him was one of those things that we do against the protests of our better judgment. I envied him his comfortable wealth, his astonishing intellect, and his beautiful daughter; for I had to work hard for a living with just a mediocre equipment of brains, and all I had to love and worry about was a nephew who could take better care of himself than I could. I enjoyed Dr. Fleckinger's society during his amiable intervals, and delighted in his wonderful private collection of marble and bronze statuary. But, at other times I was uncomfortable in his society. Though I was his oldest and best friend, I had a feeling that he would cut me in pieces did the conditions of an experiment demand it, with the same unfeeling precision with which he had whirled guinea-pigs in a centrifuge during our college days, to determine the effect on the circulation.

Miss Lila and Brian were so interested in some mutual matter that they had not noticed the uncanny performance. In a quarter of an hour the doctor seemed to have come to a stopping place in his work, for he put it aside and entertained me so pleasantly that I forgot and forgave his previous abstraction. It was when Brian and I were taking our departure that he showed us the stone cat. It was on a low pillar, in a room with a lot of small sculptured figures. I did not look at it much, yet it stuck in my memory, and sticks there yet, haunting me when I try to think of pleasanter things. It was natural size, of some black stone, and was no doubt an admirable piece of sculptural art, with its arched back, straight tail, and angry appearance.

But I didn't like it. Brian hardly noticed it, but Miss Lila stood on the stairs and shuddered. The three year old girl of Dr. Fleckinger's housekeeper was toddling

around the room after her mother who was dusting the statuary; and seeing us looking at the cat, came over to join us in her small, sociable way. Spying the cat, she stopped suddenly, looked at it a moment, and let out a wail of lamentation. She continued to weep piteously until she was carried out, crying something about her "kitty." As I went out, I wondered why the stone figure of a cat should make me feel so creepy and cause Miss Lila to shudder, and the child to cry.

Brian and I parted at the corner of the block, and that was the last time anybody saw him. He was missed from his office and his rooms, and the places he usually frequented. His affairs hung in suspense; a case which he was to try the following day had to be put off, and in the evening an opera party with whom he and Miss Lila had engaged a box, waited for him in vain. The newspapers blazed out in big headlines about the utter and untraceable disappearance of the prominent young lawyer.

I had never taken any particular interest in him. That was to come now, for the responsibility of investigating his case would devolve on my department. One thing about him, perhaps held my attention, and that of many others: he was the successful suitor of Dr. Fleckinger's daughter, Lila. The list of young men who had unsuccessfully aspired for this honor was large, and my own nephew, Richard, was among them. It was pretty generally known that it was the doctor himself who stood in the way; he made it so uncomfortable for the young fellows who tried to get acquainted with the girl that they desisted. Richard, who was pretty hard hit, and spent a good many despondent months after his defeat, told me that the "selfish old devil cared less about his daughter's future than he did about his own whims." So, when young Brian, by his persistence and his gracious ways, continued not only in the favor of the young lady, but also in the good graces of her eccentric father, there was a good deal of speculation as to why he, particularly, had been selected.

My nephew, Richard, who is a sergeant in my department of the detective bureau, came to me and asked me to assign him specially to the investigation of Brian's disappearance. I did so gladly, for I had to admit that he was clever, even if most of the time it was difficult for me to believe that the golden-haired lad was really grown up.

"I am looking up Brian's contacts," he reported. "His own record is an easy job; his life is an open book. Miss Fleckinger I know pretty well myself. But, her father seems to be a sort of mystery. You know him intimately. Tell me about him." His brows were dark with angry suspicion.

"Well," I mused; "he and I went to school together. We were drawn together and apart from others by a common streak of intellect, a sort of analytical and investigative faculty that would give us no rest. Out of me, it made a detective, out of him a research scientist. He inherited enough money to make that possible. He keeps to himself, and does not even publish the results of very much of his work. What he is working on, is as profound a riddle to the rest of the scientific world as the secret of the Sphinx. However, I can make my surmises, if he does things like those he used to do. I remember once that he blew a steam whistle for ten days close to a rabbit's ear, and then killed it and made microscopic sections to see the effects on the nerves of hearing."

Richard shut his teeth with a click and said nothing.

"I saw the doctor this afternoon," I continued. "He takes a queer attitude toward this affair. His daughter is all broken up about it, but he acts as though he were relieved. He remarked something to the effect that he was glad that he wouldn't lose his daughter after all. Then he had the nerve to ask me if I wouldn't come in to see a new statue which had just arrived. He was all enthused about the statue, and I left in disgust."

"He's a smooth brute," Richard said.

WE worked hard on the case. I saw him seldom, but when I did, I noted that he was losing weight and growing haggard. He was taking it seriously, because he had not lost his old affection for Miss Lila, who was so intimately connected with the case. Perhaps his motive was to make her happy, even though he knew he had to give her up to his rival if he ever succeeded in finding Brian; or perhaps some deeper suspicion drove him on through those long, discouraging weeks. A number of other good men on the force spent a great deal of effort in going over the problem; but no light was shed on Brian's disappearance.

Then one day a young Frenchman was admitted to my office.

"I would wish that you speak French," he said politely.

"I'm sorry," I said. "What can I do for you?"

"You desire to know where is the Monsieur Brian?" he asked, speaking slowly, and finding each word with evident effort.

"There's a big reward out, and it's yours if you tell us," I said shortly.

"I have hopes, uncle, old dear," he said, with an astonishing change in voice and manner, breaking out into Richard's well-known grin. With a hat on and a change in expression, it was really Richard.

"You old rascal!" I shouted. "You certainly fooled me!"

"It wasn't easy, uncle, I dye the hair and mustache twice a week, and practice French all night. But, it has fooled all my friends. Well, I need it. I am Dr. Fleckinger's laboratory assistant now, and we talk French most of the time. You can see that I've learned something about him, because you all thought he was German. Now I am cataloguing his collection of sculptures, too."

"You're actually in that house?" I demanded in alarm. Some nameless fear for the boy's safety possessed me. Yet, my reason could not tell me what I feared.

"I'm learning all the time," he replied jocularly. Then he gritted his teeth and his face took on a grim look. "Uncle, someone's got to take Lila out of that devil's clutches. Of course he's her father, but—"

"What's the matter?"

"She's wasting away under my very eyes. Every day she is thinner. She goes about and trembles at every shadow; and every now and then bursts into a fit of weeping without any provocation. Something is driving her distracted, and I can see the terrible effort she makes to conceal it. It isn't sorrow that I see in her face; it's horror!"

"What has that to do with Brian's disappearance?"

"I don't know. In order to find out, I've been trying to learn from Lila and the servants what his motive is for refusing to let her have suitors. Apparently there is no real reason for it; it is rather a monomania, a form of insanity on his part."

"One would think you suspected him of having made away with Brian," I hinted.

"Easy to conjecture, hard to prove," he answered enigmatically. "But if you want to see the wind-up, wait until I run a couple of errands, and I'll take you along with me. I think I've figured the thing out."

You could have knocked me over with a feather. Here was a man's job worked out by this boy who still seemed a child to me. He came for me at seven o'clock, carrying some packages. Unwrapping them, he slipped a photograph into an inside pocket, and a couple of live frogs into the pocket of his coat. I stared in astonishment.

"Take your thirty-two automatic along," he suggested. I patted the pocket where it reposed.

WE drove to Fleckinger's house in a car with three officers from the station, and stopped at some distance from the house. We walked separately into the yard, and Richard signalled to the officers to wait outside. I was surprised to see him pull out a latchkey and open the door, until I remembered that he was a member of the household.

On the stair-landing in the lower hall stood a statue. Richard pointed to it.

"The one you were invited to see and refused," he commented. "Oh, he's a cool customer!"

He switched on the light in front of it, and asked me to regard it closely. It was of some dull, black, rough material, and represented a young man, almost nude, seated, with his chin leaning against one hand in deep meditation. The face was suggestive of profound concentration like that of a hypnotized man. The statue looked a little larger than life-size. It was set back in a niche so that the light fell on it obliquely, heightening the furrowed effect of the face. There was something about the appearance of it that I did not like, as it stood there with the shadows of the balusters falling on it. It gave me the same sort of creeps that the stone cat had imparted.

"It is really exactly life-size," Richard informed me. "I have measured it."

I gave him an impatient glare, for I did not see what that had to do with Brian's disappearance.

"Then," he continued, "look at the features closely!" And he jerked the photograph out of his pocket and held it before me. It was a portrait of Brian, done very dark by the photographer; a duplicate of which I had at the office.

I looked from the picture to the face of the statue and back again, and an icy chill shot through me. But, Richard started suddenly, for the bobbing figure of Doctor Fleckinger appeared at the head of the stairs above us. Obviously that was not on the program.

"Put it away," he whispered. Then he went on slowly and loudly: "He is in the laboratoire. I am certain it will make him much pleasure if you come above— ah, there is Monsieur the doctor now."

Doctor Fleckinger came down and greeted me pleasantly, and shook my hand. My head hummed and whirled; I could scarcely gather my senses enough to answer the platitudes addressed to me as we walked upstairs at the doctor's invitation to the laboratory, where he usually received me.

UP in the laboratory we began a rather lame conversation, and the incongruity of the situation jarred my nerves. The doctor knew that something suspicious was up, and did not trust me. I knew that his cordiality was feigned, and yet I was cordial in response. If I had known Richard's plans, I might have known what to do. The electric light was reflected in a million spots from the glass and polished metal; pieces of apparatus assumed strange shapes, and grotesque shadows stretched dizzily off into corners and dark places.

At the far end of the room, the black depths of a recess yawned at us, with a curtain stretched partly across it. Near it, Richard was busy at a sink in the corner. He paused and stood in front of a window to light a cigarette, and the action had all the appearance of being a preconcerted signal to the policemen below. His face was set, and I knew he was thinking hard. Apparently his plans had been somewhat interfered with by the doctor's unexpected presence.

I also thought hard, as I talked with the doctor, wondering how I could help Richard. Finally, it occurred to me that his inviting me along must have been an afterthought. Evidently he had planned things to carry out alone. Therefore, if I left he would have a clear field. I dreaded to do so, for now I was sure that some danger lurked in wait for him. But, duty is duty. I suggested that I had dropped in for a moment, and had to be moving on. I read approval in Richard's eyes.

As Doctor Fleckinger turned his back for a moment to go to the door with me, Richard darted to the curtain across the black recess and dipped out a ladleful of something from behind it. I could see him fish a frog out of his pocket and drop it into the ladle. Then he set the whole into the sink, at the same time that I walked out into the hall. I did not go away, however; I dodged behind the door, and watched through the crack.

The doctor whirled suddenly about and walked with a queer, tense swiftness toward the curtained recess. He crossed the room and reached it before I realized what he was about; and with the suddenness of a wildcat he leaped upon Richard, caught him around the body, and lifted him off his feet. He began to shove the body into the darkness of the recess.

What fiendish fate awaited him there, I could only gather from the scream of dismay that broke from Richard's throat. The lad had been taken completely by surprise, and was helpless. His face was ghastly white, and paralyzed with terror. I stood rooted to the spot for a valuable moment, trying to realize what was happening, and then started toward them.

Suddenly, a piercing scream broke upon my ears, and turning around, I saw Miss Lila's pale figure for an instant in the doorway. Then she fell backwards in a faint. This startled the doctor only a little, but enough to enable Richard to get a hold and make the game a little less one-sided. For another moment I watched, and then my mind was at rest concerning the outcome, for the doctor's sedentary muscles were no match for Richard's splendid training. While I stood there, with Miss Lila's unconscious form lying in the doorway, and the two men locked in reeling, swaying embrace at the end of the room, there was a hurried trampling on the stairs, and the officers who had been waiting below, swarmed into the room.

They stopped an instant in surprise. Then, as one of them picked up Miss Lila and carried her to a sofa, the others hurried toward the combatants in front of the curtained recess. For a moment my heart jumped into my mouth, and I thought

they would be too late. In some way the doctor had gained an advantage and was pushing Richard behind the curtain. Again a cry broke from Richard's throat, something between a gulp and a shout of "Help!" Then Richard made a mighty effort and with a clever twist, had hurled the doctor bodily into the shadow behind the curtain. As the doctor's wriggling body suddenly grew limp. Richard jumped quickly backwards, and as I approached on the run, I heard a splash, and saw drops of a thick, foul-smelling liquid spatter out from the gloom. Richard looked hurriedly at us and himself, to see if anyone had been touched.

He was trembling as though from the ague, and his breath came in gasps.

"It was a barbarous thing to do," he panted. "But I had to do it, or I would be there myself where Brian is now."

We approached the curtain.

"Stay away from the vat!" Richard commanded anxiously. "The stuff may do you harm. I don't know just how to handle it. If you want to know what has happened, look here!"

He stepped to the sink and poured out the ladleful of black, heavy liquid. The frog tumbled out into the sink, and Richard pushed it under a stream of water from the tap. Washing it thoroughly, he handed it to me.

"You saw me put it in alive?" he asked significantly.

Now it was hard as stone, and heavy petrified.

It looked for all the world like the little stone frogs in the Pompeiian collection at the Metropolitan Museum.

Richard explained.

"The first thing that struck my attention," he began, "was the sorrow of the housekeeper's child for her missing cat. The baby recognized the figure on the pedestal, where our acquired conventional associations of statuary put us off the track. Then, gradually, the fearful resemblance of the statue in the lower hall to the missing lawyer, broke upon me."

His face took on a hard look as he turned toward the vat behind the curtain.

"He ought to be set up in some museum," he said grimly. "But, for God's sake, don't make it too sudden for Lila!"

