

The Eternal Man

By D.D. Sharp



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Written by

D.D. Sharp

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Transcription: Yan Viana

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Email: atomicvintage10@gmail.com

The Recluse

HERBERT ZULERICH was a big, heavy-framed man with a tangled mop of shaggy hair which lay back from his sloping forehead and clustered about the collar of his dark coat. His nose was big and prominent, swelling like a huge peak upon his face, and his mouth was a deep-lined canyon between the peak of his nose and the bulge of his chin.

Zulerich's habits were as strange as his face, and ponderous as his big body. How he lived no one knew, and no one knew either how he managed to maintain the formidable array of test tubes, and retorts. In his laboratory was every conceivable kind of peculiar glass, holding liquids of all colors.

Zulerich had, at one time, been a chemist of somewhat more than local fame, but of late years he had become a recluse, staying alone most of the time in his big stone house just back of the highway where the constant stream of autos seemed to disturb him but little.

In truth they disturbed him a great deal. Some days he would watch them in their hurry as they drove furiously along the straight line of paved roadway, and into his face would come gloom and melancholy. And into his large blue eyes would come a hurt look; a feeling of sympathy for those who seemed so full of life, so gay, so thoughtless.

"Death! Death!" the old man would whisper, "Man goes through long years of preparation for the few days of accomplishment before the conqueror destroys all."

"So much preparation," he would whisper as he shook his big head. "So many brilliant minds polished and blazing for an hour, like roses grown and tended to be cut for an evening's bloom; hands so skillfully trained, and so soon folded quietly at rest."

That he was in quest of some great secret, everyone who knew him had long ago suspected. But what that secret was, no one knew and few could even guess.

The truth was that Zulerich's mind was obsessed by a single thought—the appalling waste of death. And since science and invention were conquering the other enemies of man's

existence, Zulerich set out after the example of Ponce de Leon, to discover the elements which might be combined to give eternal life.

Strange as it may seem, Zulerich was making some progress. He had found out some things which had astonished him. Some of his experiments had awed and stupefied him, and then he made a discovery which gave him a decided fright.

He had been experimented with unicellular organisms, and had found that they did not behave as inorganic chemicals did. He knew that the reaction of those animalcules was distinctly physiological and not merely physical, organic and not purely chemical. They did not resemble any known chemicals, for they reacted as individuals and not as mere materials. This discovery, he found, was confirmed by Jennings in his book "Behavior of Unicellular Organisms."

Old Zulerich had studied the intricate processes of cellular division and multiplication, hoping to penetrate the law of the organism and discover something of the life it maintained. He wanted to discover what it was that, at the peak of growth, prevented further cleavage of cells. In short, he wanted to find the principle which confined the limits of size and growth. Find what it was that caused the cells of a living body to increase and multiply until maturity and then cease growing except when incited by a cut or other accident to the tissue. Why should a cell become active to replace wounded flesh, yet balk at rebuilding vital tissues, such as the lungs; or refuse to replace a lost tooth more than once.

He experimented in numerous ways to provoke cell growth, trying to divine whether they had individualities of their own or whether they were bounded by the individuality of the whole. He wanted to find whether cells had an intelligence which caused them to do the remarkable things necessary to their coordination in the body.

Zulerich found out many things; stupendous, mystifying things, which no amount of scientific theory could possibly explain. He perfected chemicals which applied to a rabbit's

head caused its hair to grow so long as to make it necessary for him to gather it into a bag. And even then the weight of it grew so great the rabbit could no longer drag its load and he killed the animal out of mercy. But still its hair grew and grew. His high-walled backyard soon held some monstrous freaks from his chemicals; dogs with heads as big as water barrels and bodies of normal size, and rats with bodies as big as cows and small peanut-sized heads. And one day he applied a chemical to a horse's eyes and the eyes grew out of their sockets like long ropes of white sinew with great knobs of gelatine-like iris—limp flabby canes which dragged upon the ground. The effect of this last experiment so cut the kind soul of Zulerich that he killed the monstrosities and wished to abandon his whole business. Then he would look again from his window over the wide world where death laid waste, and he would sigh and tighten his lips to plunge ahead again.

Growth was not what Zulerich wanted. He was quite content that man should retain his present stature. What he desired was to increase man's years.

And then he discovered it. He did not need to prove the experiment by waiting and watching until the end of time to find out whether the cells would eventually die. He knew they would not die. A few drops of pale green fluid in the graduating glass in his hand would permit any man to live eternally. He knew this was possible for he had at last found the combination he sought; the chemical which continued life without the necessity of decay.

The Elixir Found

After a year of experiments upon his cells he tried a drop upon a rat. He caught the rat in one hand and held his medicine dropper with its pale green fluid in the other. But, as the dropper released its globule, the rat moved its head and the drop hit the side of its face and trickled down and spread about its throat. It left a scar upon the hair, a peculiar scar like a

question mark. Zulerich tried again with a second drop with better success. The rat swallowed it.

Zulerich watched carefully. The animal's heart seemed to cease beating. The lungs became motionless, and yet the rat lived, with a fire in its pink eyes. It lived on, day by day, week after week, month on month, without the slightest loss of weight or sign of hunger or thirst. It lived with its tiny soul imprisoned in it.

Yet even then Zulerich dared not drink his elixir, though his work was exhausting his strength and his heart was very weak and with its flutterings gave him frights at times. There was a flaw in his experiment. The animal lived without breath, food or water, but it was entirely unable to move! To see it one would presume it dead, except for the fire in its fierce little eyes and its lack of decay.

So Zulerich set out to mend the flaw. He worked feverishly now, for he was a very old man and his heart threatened to fail. He did not want to die with success just within his reach. He did not want to come so near offering mankind the one boon it craved and then to fail.

Two years passed before Zulerich found the ingredient lacking in his pale greenish drops. The thing was so simple he had overlooked it altogether. He discovered it quite by accident.

One day he had a pail containing a solution of washing soda near the window and was washing down the dusty glass so that he might see out over the blighted world and gain strength from its curse to continue his work. He would allow no one else in his laboratory and washed the windows himself.

A few spattering drops fell into the motionless, upturned mouth of the rat where it stood upon the deep casement. Its mouth was open in the same position Zulerich had left it when he had forced it to receive the life preserving drops. It had stood a tiny, paralyzed, living statue in that same attitude for two long years. Zulerich had really thought to remove the animal from

the window before beginning to wash them. But as he grew older he had grown more absent minded. He was unable to use the same care and forethought he once had; but this time his carelessness resulted in a great discovery.

Immediately when the soda dropped into the rat's mouth it squealed and scurried for cover. But it soon came out to nibble a crust of cracker the parrot had dropped upon the floor.

Zulerich had been overjoyed at the rat regaining the use of its muscles, but now he became worried and anxious because it developed hunger. He thought that hunger might forebode decay which meant death.

Even as he pondered he trembled, for he knew he was very old and had not much time to watch and wait. And then as the result of his suspense and relief over the new discovery of the soda drops, his heart began fluttering alarmingly. It acted as it had never done before. He thought his time had come to die, and his precious experiment was almost completed, perhaps perfected, but not yet given to a life-hungry world.

All the legends he had ever read of the discovery of elixirs of life had had their fruits frosted just before the eating. And so it seemed it was to be with him. This was the end. Then he thought of his drops! He would drink them and there would be ample time to conclude his experiment.

He stepped quickly over to the table and sat upon his high stool. Then picking up the vial of pale green, which had become dusty with its long idleness upon its shelf, he measured his drops. But his hand trembled so that the vial dropped to the floor and spilt its precious fluid. He drank the drops in the measuring glass Then he reached for the soda water sitting just at a touch of his hand.

The Living Corpse

He could not move! He had forgotten he would be unable to hand the soda to his mouth. For the moment he was too upset and frightened to think clearly. He had overlooked a very vital thing. There was nothing to do but sit and wait for a neighbor to pass. He was as immovable as though cut in stone. He could not move an eyelid. He was very frightened.

A week went by.

During that week the rat played all over the room. One time it came out mockingly upon the table before him. Zulerich regarded it closely. It was not breathing.

Another week passed before anyone came into the house. During this time the rat became bolder and Zulerich had much time to observe it. He knew his experiment had been a success. The rat only consumed food to replace its physical energy. It needed fuel for running about the room, which of course was a method of decay. The rat needed no food to support its life. Zulerich knew he had discovered a great secret. He had accomplished life perpetual which only needed food for its physical energies.

Then a neighbor peeped in. His look of uneasiness gave way to one of pained sorrow. The neighbor's face became melancholy as he saw old Zulerich sitting stiffly upon his stool beside his chemicals. Zulerich tried to cry out, but his voice like his limbs was paralyzed. He tried to croak, even to whisper, but there was no noise at all. He put his appeal into the fierce, cold fire of his living eyes which were turned straight toward the door. The man saw the eyes, bright and living. He slammed the door and fled the room.

Zulerich created quite a sensation after that. No one knew what had happened to him. They thought he was dead, and surmised that he had spilled some mysterious compound over him which had embalmed him with the look of life still in his eyes.

Undertakers came from long distances to study him as he sat in his laboratory. They pried and tested among the fluids in the bottles, and years passed, and still old Zulerich was not

buried because they believed he had found some marvelous embalming fluid and he was kept for observation.

Old Zulerich, growing no older at all, knew all this, for he sat there, in a glass case now, and heard all they said and saw before his eyes all that was done.

And in the dead of night the rat with its selfishness and its eternal life, and the unselfish chemist in his glass case, would meet again. The rat would scamper lively across the top of the glass case in which Zulerich sat as stiffly as though sculptured in stone. It would sit upon the table before him and stare at him with red spiteful eyes, and then scamper away. And Zulerich always knew it by the peculiar scar upon its neck. The rat knew what he lacked. For two long years it had been frozen, as he was now, before he had given it movement as well as life. But it was too mean to do so great a deed to a man. It hated him. It never brought him the few drops of alkali he craved.

One day they packed Zulerich carefully in a case and moved him, and when the case was opened he found himself in a lofty building with the mummy of a Pharaoh one side of him and musty relics of other ages all around him. He recognized the old building, for in the other days he had loved to potter around there and let his fancies wander and his thoughts seek something tangible in these fragments of a vanished age.

As he sat there upon his stool, protected within his glass case, the unalterable line of his vision vaulted the narrow aisles below him and gazed through the great glass of a tall window in the opposite wall.

Out there he watched the throngs that passed. People of a day. Men who yesterday were babes in mothers' arms, today fighting up the long and difficult ladder for their fragment of success, to leap tomorrow into oblivion at their allotted rung.

Customs changed, women scrambled with the male, and there became even less time or inclination to enjoy the fruits of preparation. The years of training lengthened.

In all the years upon the earth it was bound that the two should meet again. The rat with its selfish greediness and the chemist with his unselfish dream. The rat had been seeking him so that it might gloat over him as it used to do. So that it might scamper upon his case and deride him with its motion. But the keeper of the museum saw the rat and beat it with his broom and mangled it with his big leather-shod heel. This happened in the night and he left the rat upon the floor until morning so that the cleaners might take it away.

Before the cleaners came the next morning one of the scientists who were studying Zulerich saw the rat lying there upon the floor before the case with its mangled body and its eyes were so bright and full of pain. He stooped to examine it, and his interest became intense, for its heart and lungs were quiet and it seemed quite dead, and yet its eyes had the same living look of the man Zulerich in the glass case.

So the rat, too, was placed under observation and set in a tiny case upon a perch just before the case in which sat old Zulerich looking out upon the great world through the big window. The rat in its case cut off part of the vision of the chemist so that in seeing the world beyond the window he must look straight into the eyes of the creature to whom he had given eternal life, and which had been mangled until it was given eternal pain.

The years passed on, long years, all the longer that there should be no end of them. It was all the sadder that, instead of viewing the misery and waste of eighty years, he must watch it for eight hundred years, and even then be not done.

Life streamed by under his gaze, burning up with decay. Yet he held the secret they so much desired. Between them and eternal life was a connecting link, a few drops of alkaline water. The wires of communication were down and none had the wisdom nor the wit to raise them up. He had the secret, they had the power, if they only knew.

Eager, anxious, weary, discouraged and broken, the people of the world tramped by; torrents of wasted motion. For long years he envied them, of all that waste, the power to say

one small word for their freedom. For long years the undying man and the undying rat stared hatefully at each other. For long years he studied and contrived within his mind some means for breaking the paralysis of his body so that he might give eternal life to humanity. Then he learned a great lesson from a small child.

The child had discovered the mangled rat and had seen the pain and desire of death in its eyes. She begged her father to kill the little rat as he had killed her little dog after a car had wounded it.

That night Zulerich's eyes softened as he regarded the rat under the bright glow of the electric lights, and in his heart felt remorse. For the first time he was glad that he had not been able to give man his magic formula. He discovered that he should need to improve life before trying to lengthen it.