

The Professor's Experiment

By Edward Page Mitchell

I

The red wine of Affenthal has this quality, that one half-bottle makes you kind but firm, two make you talkative and obstinate, and three, recklessly unreasonable.

If the waiter at the Prinz Carl in Heidelberg had possessed a soul above drink-money, he might have calculated accurately the effect of the six half-bottles of Affenthaler which he fetched to the apartment of the Reverend Dr. Bellglory at the six o'clock dinner for three. That is to say, he might have deduced this story in advance by observation of the fact that of the six half-bottles one was consumed by Miss Blanche Bellglory, two went to the Reverend Doctor, her father, while the remaining moiety fell to the share of young Strout, remotely of New York and immediately of Professor Schwank's psycho-neurological section in the university.

So when in the course of the evening the doctor fell asleep in his chair, and young Strout took opportunity to put to Miss Blanche a question which he had already asked her twice, once at Saratoga Springs and once in New York city, she returned the answer he had heard on two former occasions, but in terms even more firm, while not less kind than before. She declared her unalterable determination to abide by her parent's wishes.

This was not exactly pleasing to young Strout. He knew better than anybody else that, while approving him socially and humanly, the doctor abhorred his opinions. "No man," the doctor had repeatedly said, "who denies the objective verity of knowledge derived from intuition or otherwise by subjective methods—no man who pushes noumena aside in his impetuous pursuit of phenomena can make a safe husband for my child."

He said the same thing again in a great many words and with much emphasis, after he awoke from his nap, Miss Blanche having discreetly withdrawn.

"But, my dear Doctor," urged Strout, "this is an affair of the heart, not of metaphysics; and you leave for Nuremberg tomorrow, and now is my last chance."

"You are an excellent young man in several respects," rejoined the doctor. "Abjure your gross materialism and Blanche is yours with all my heart. Your antecedents are unexceptionable, but you are intellectually impregnated with the most dangerous heresy of this or any other age. If I should countenance it by giving you my daughter, I could never look the Princeton faculty in the face."

"It appears to me that this doesn't concern the Princeton faculty in the least," persisted Strout. "It concerns Blanche and me."

Here, then, were three people, two of them young and in love with each other, divided by a question of metaphysics, the most abstract and useless question that ever wasted human effort. But that same question divided the schools of Europe for centuries and contributed largely to the list of martyrs for opinion's sake. The famous old controversy was now taken up by the six half-bottles of Affenthaler, three of them stoutly holding ground against the other three.

"No argument in the world," said the doctor's two half-bottles, "can shake my decision"; and off he went to sleep again.

“No amount of coaxing,” said Miss Blanche’s half-bottle, two hours later in the evening, “can make me act contrary to Papa’s wishes. But,” continued the half-bottle in a whisper, “I am sorry he is so stubborn.”

“I don’t believe it,” retorted Strout’s three half-bottles. “You have no more heart than one of your father’s non-individualized ideas. You are not real flesh and blood like other women. You are simply Extension, made up of an aggregate of concepts, and assuming to be Entity, and imposing your unreal existence upon a poor Devil like me. You are unreal, I say. A flaw in logic, an error of the senses, a fallacy in reasoning, a misplaced premise, and what becomes of you? Puff! Away you go into all. If it were otherwise, you would care for me. What a fool I am to love you! I might as well love a memory, a thought, a dream, a mathematical formula, a rule of syntax, or anything else that lacks objective existence.”

She said nothing, but the tears came into her eyes.

“Good-bye, Blanche,” he continued at the door, pulling his hat over his eyes and not observing the look of pain and bewilderment that clouded her fair face—“Heaven bless you when your father finally marries you to a syllogism!”

II

Strout went whistling from the Prinz Carl Hotel toward his rooms in the Plöckstrasse. He reviewed his parting with Blanche. “So much the better, perhaps,” he said to himself. “One dream less in life, and more room for realities.” By the dock in the market place he saw that it was half-past nine, for the full moon hanging high above the Königstuhle flooded the town and valley with light. Up on the side of the hill the gigantic ruin of the old castle stood boldly out from among the trees.

He stopped whistling and gritted his teeth.

“Pshaw!” he said aloud, “one can’t take off his convictions like a pair of uncomfortable boots. After all, love is nothing more nor less than the disintegration and recombination of certain molecules of the brain or marrow, the exact laws governing which have not yet been ascertained.” So saying, he ran plump into a portly individual coming down the street.

“Hallo! Herr Strout,” said the jolly voice of Professor Schwank. “Whither are you going so fast, and what kind of physiology talk you to the moon?”

“I am walking off three half-bottles of your cursed Affenthaler, which have gone to my feet, Herr Professor,” replied Strout, “and I am making love to the moon. It’s an old affair between us.”

“And your lovely American friend?” demanded the fat professor, with a chuckle.

“Departs by the morning train,” replied Strout gravely.

“*Himmelshitzen!*” exclaimed the professor. “And grief has you so that you plunge into the abdomens of your elders? But come with me to my room, and smoke yourself into a philosophic frame of mind.”

Professor Schwank’s apartments faced the university buildings in the Ludwig-platz. Established in a comfortable armchair, with a pipe of excellent tobacco in his mouth, Strout felt more at peace with his environment. He was now in an atmosphere of healthful, practical, scientific activity that calmed his soul. Professor Schwank had gone further than the most eminent of his contemporaries in demonstrating the purely physiological basis mind and thought. He had gotten nearer than any other man Europe to the secrets of the nerve aura, the penetralia of the brain, the memory scars of the ganglia. His position in philosophy the antipodes of that

occupied by the Reverend Dr. Bellglory, example. The study reflected the occupations of the man. In corner stood an enormous Ruhmkorff coil. Books were scattered everywhere—on shelves, on tables, on chairs, on the floor. A plaster bust of Aristotle looked across the room into the face of a plaster bust of Leibnitz. Prints of Gall, of Pappenheim, of Leeuwenhoek, hung upon the walls. Varnished dissections and wet preparations abounded. In a glass vessel on the table at Strout's elbow, the brain of a positivist philosopher floated in yellow alcohol: near it, also suspended in spirits, swung the medulla oblongata of a celebrated thief.

The appearance of the professor himself, as he sat in his armchair opposite Strout, serenely drawing clouds of smoke from the amber mouthpiece of his long porcelain pipe, was of the sort which, by promising sympathy beforehand, seduces reserve into confidential utterances. Not only his rosy face, with its fringe of yellow beard, but his whole mountainous body seemed to beam on Strout with friendly good will. He looked like the refuge of a broken heart. Drawn out in spite of himself by the professor's kindly, attentive smile and discreet questions, Strout found satisfaction in unbosoming his troubles. The professor, smoking in silence, listened patiently to the long story. If Strout had been less preoccupied with his own woes he might, perhaps, have discovered that behind the friendly interest that glimmered on the glasses of the professor's gold-bowed spectacles, a pair of small, steel-gray eyes were observing him with the keen, unrelenting coldness of scientific scrutiny.

"You have seen, Herr Professor," said Strout in conclusion, "that the case is hopeless."

"My dear fellow," replied the professor, "I see nothing of the kind."

"But it is a matter of conviction," explained Strout. "One cannot renounce the truth even to gain a wife. She herself would despise me if I did."

"In this world everything is true and nothing is true," replied the professor sententiously. "You must change your convictions."

"That is impossible!"

The professor blew a great cloud of smoke and regarded the young man with an expression of pity and surprise. It seemed to Strout that Aristotle and Leibnitz, Leeuwenhoek, Pappenheim, and Gall were all looking down upon him with pity and surprise.

"Impossible did you say?" remarked Professor Schwank. "On the contrary, my dear boy, nothing is easier than to change one's convictions. In the present advanced condition of surgery, it is a matter of little difficulty."

Strout looked at his respected instructor in blank amazement.

"What you call your convictions," continued the savant, "are matters of mental constitution, depending on adventitious circumstances. You are a positivist, an idealist, a skeptic, a mystic, a what-not, why? Because nature, predisposition, the assimilation of bony elements, have made your skull thicker in one place, thinner in another. The cranial wall presses too close upon the brain in one spot; you sneer at the opinions of your friend, Dr. Bellglory. It cramps the development of the tissues in another spot; you deny faith a place in philosophy. I assure you, Herr Strout, we have discovered and classified already the greater part of the physical causes determining and limiting belief, and are fast reducing the system to the certainty of science."

"Granting all that," interposed Strout, whose head was swimming under the combined influence of Affenthaler, tobacco smoke, and startling new ideas, "I fail to see how it helps my case. Unfortunately, the bone of my skull is no longer cartilage, like an infant's. You cannot mold my intellect by means of compresses and bandages."

"Ah! there you touch my professional pride," cried Schwank. "If you would only put yourself into my hands!"

“And what then?”

“Then,” replied the professor with enthusiasm, “I should remodel your intellect to suit the emergency. How, you ask? If a blow on the head had driven a splinter of bone down upon the gray matter overlaying the cerebrum, depriving you of memory, the power of language, or some other special faculty, as the case might be, how should I proceed? I should raise a section of the bone and remove the pressure. Just so when the physical conformation of the cranium limits your capacity to understand and credit the philosophy which your American theologian insists upon in his son-in-law. I remove the pressure. I give you a charming wife, while science gains a beautiful and valuable fact. That is what I offer you, Herr Strout!”

“In other words—” began Strout.

“In other words, I should trephine you,” shouted the professor, jumping from his chair and no longer attempting to conceal his eagerness.

“Well, Herr Professor,” said Strout slowly, after a long pause, during which he had endeavored to make out why the pictured face of Gall seemed to wear a look of triumph “—Well, Herr Professor, I consent to the operation. Trephine me at once—tonight.”

The professor feebly demurred to the precipitateness of this course. “The necessary preparations,” he urged. “Need not occupy five minutes,” replied Strout. “Tomorrow I shall have changed my mind.”

This suggestion was enough to impel the professor to immediate action. “You will allow me,” asked he, “to send for my esteemed colleague in the university, the Herr Dr. Anton Diggelmann?” Strout assented. “Do anything that you think needful to the success of the experiment.”

Professor Schwank rang. “Fritz,” said he to the stupid-faced Black Forester who answered the bell, “run across the square and ask Dr. Diggelmann to come to me immediately. Request him to bring his surgical case and sulphuric ether. If you find the doctor, you need not return.”

Acting on a sudden impulse, Strout seized a sheet of paper that lay on the professor’s table and hastily wrote a few words. “Here!” he said, tossing the servant a gold piece of ten marks. “Deliver this note at the Prince Carl in the morning—mind you, in the morning.”

The note which he had written was this:

Blanche: When you receive this I shall have solved the problem in one way or another. I am about to be trephined under the superintendence of my friend Professor Schwank. If the intellectual obstacle to our union is removed by the operation, I shall follow you to Bavaria and Switzerland. If the operation results otherwise, think sometimes kindly of your unfortunate

G.S.

Ludwig-platz; 10:30 P.M.

Fritz faithfully delivered the message to Dr. Diggelmann, and then bed toward the nearest wine shop. His gold piece dazed him. “A nice, liberal gentleman that!” he thought “Ten marks for carrying the letter to the Prinz Carl in the morning—ten marks, a thousand pfennige; beer at five pfennige the glass, two hundred glasses!” The immensity of the prospect filled him with joy. How might he manifest his gratitude? He reflected, and an idea struck him. “I will not wait till morning,” he thought. “I will deliver the gentleman’s letter tonight, at once. He will say, ‘Fritz, you are a prompt fellow. You do even better than you are told.’ ”

Strout was stretched upon a reclining chair, his coat and waistcoat off. Professor Schwank stood over him. In his hand was a hollow cone, rolled from a newspaper. He held the cone by the apex: the broad aperture at the base was closely pressed against Strout's face, covering all but his eyes and forehead.

"By long, steady, regular inspiration," said the professor, in a soothing, monotonous voice. "That is right; that is right; that— is—right—there—there—there!"

With every inhalation Strout drew in the pleasant, tingling coldness of the ether fumes. At first his breathing was forced: at the end of each inspiration he experienced for an instant a sensation as if mighty waters were rushing through his brain. Gradually the period of the rushing sensation extended itself, until it began with the beginning of each breath. Then the ether seemed to seize possession of his breathing, and to control the expansions and contractions of his chest independently of his own will. The ether breathed for him. He surrendered himself to its influence with a feeling of delight. The rushings became rhythmic, and the intervals shorter and shorter. His individuality seemed to be wrapped up in the rushings, and to be borne to and fro in their tremendous flux and reflux. "I shall be gone in one second more, he thought, and his consciousness sank in the whirling flood.

Professor Schwank nodded to Dr. Diggelmann. The doctor nodded back to the professor.

Dr. Diggelmann was a dry little old man, who weighed hardly more than a hundred pounds. He wore a black wig, too large for his head. His eyes were deep set under corrugated brows, while strongly marked lines running from the corners of his nostrils to the corners of his mouth gave his face a lean, sardonic expression, in striking contrast with the jolly rotundity of Professor Schwank's visage. Dr. Diggelmann was taciturn but observant. At the professor's nod, he opened his case of surgical instruments and selected a scalpel with a keen curved blade, and also a glittering piece of steel which looked like an exaggerated auger bit with a ginilet handle. Having satisfied himself that these instruments were in good condition, he deliberately rolled up the sleeves of his coat and approached the unconscious Strout.

"About on the median line, just behind the junction of the coronal and sagittal sutures," whispered Professor Schwank eagerly.

"Yes. I know—I know," replied Diggelmann.

He was on the point of cutting away with his scalpel some of the brown hair that encumbered operations on the top of Strout's head, when the door was quickly opened from the outside and a young lady, attended by a maid, entered without ceremony.

"I am Blanche Bellglory," the young lady announced to the astonished savants, as soon as she had recovered her breath. "I have come to—"

At this moment she perceived the motionless form of Strout upon the reclining chair, while the gleaming steel in Dr. Diggelmann's hand caught her alert eyes. She uttered a little shriek and ran toward the group.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she cried. "I am too late, and you have already killed him."

"Calm yourself, I beg you," said the polite professor. "No circumstance is terrible to which we are indebted for a visit from so charming a young lady.

"So great an honor!" added Dr. Diggelmann, grinning diabolically and rubbing his hands.

"And Herr Strout," continued the professor, "is unfortunately not yet trephined. As you entered, we were about beginning the operation."

Miss Bellglory gave a sob of relief and sank into a chair.

In a few well-chosen words the professor explained the theory of his experiment, dwelling especially upon the effect it was expected to have on the fortunes of the young people. When he

finished, the American girl's eyes were full of tears, but the firm lines of her mouth showed that she had already resolved upon her own course.

"How noble in him," she exclaimed, "to submit to be trephined for my sake! But that must not be. I can't consent to have his poor, dear head mutilated. I should never forgive myself. The trouble all originates from my decision not to marry him without Papa's approval. With my present views of duty, I cannot alter that decision. But don't you think," she continued, dropping her voice to a whisper, "that if you should trephine me, I might see my duty in a different light?"

"It is extremely probable, my dear young lady," replied the professor, throwing a significant glance at Dr. Diggelmann, who responded with the faintest wink imaginable.

"Then," said Miss Blanche, arising and beginning to remove her bonnet, "please proceed to trephine me immediately. I insist on it."

"What's all this?" demanded the deep voice of the Reverend Dr. Bellglory, who had entered the room unnoticed, piloted by Fritz. "I came as rapidly as I could, Blanche, but not early enough, it appears, to learn the first principles of your singular actions."

"My papa, gentlemen," said Miss Bellglory.

The two Germans bowed courteously. Dr. Bellglory affably returned their salutation.

"These gentlemen, Papa," Miss Blanche explained, "have kindly undertaken to reconcile the difference of opinion between poor George and ourselves by means of a surgical operation. I don't at all understand it, but George does, for you see that he has thought best to submit to the operation, which they were about to begin when I arrived. Now, I cannot allow him to suffer for my obstinacy; and, therefore, dear Papa, I have requested the gentlemen to trephine me instead of him."

Professor Schwank repeated for Dr. Bellglory's information the explanation which he had already made to the young lady. On learning of Strout's course in the matter, Dr. Bellglory was greatly affected.

"No, Blanche!" he said, "our young friend must not be trephined. Although I cannot conscientiously accept him as a son-in-law while our views on the verity of subjective knowledge differ so widely, I can at least emulate his generous willingness to open his intellect to conviction. It is I who will be trephined, provided these gentlemen will courteously substitute me for the patient now in their hands."

"We shall be most happy," said Professor Schwank and Dr. Diggelman in the same breath.

"Thanks! Thanks!" cried Dr. Bellglory, with genuine emotion. "But I shall not permit you to sacrifice your lifelong convictions to my happiness, Papa," interposed Blanche. The doctor insisted that he was only doing his duty as a parent. The amiable dispute went on for some time, the Germans listening with indifference. Sure of a subject for their experiment at any rate, they cared little which one of the three Americans finally came under the knife. Meanwhile Strout opened his eyes, slowly raised himself upon one elbow, vacantly gazed about the room for a few seconds, and then sank back, relapsing temporarily into unconsciousness.

Professor Schwank, who perceived that father and daughter were equally fixed in their determination, and each unlikely to yield to the other, was on the point of suggesting that the question be settled by trephining both of them, when Strout again regained his senses. He sat bolt upright, staring fixedly at the glass jar which contained the positivist's brain. Then he pressed both hands to his head, muttering a few incoherent words. Gradually, as he recovered from the clutch of the ether one after another of his faculties, his eyes brightened and he appeared to recognize the faces around him. After some time he opened his lips and spoke.

"Marvelous!" he exclaimed.

Miss Bellglory ran to him and took his hand. The doctor hurried forward, intending to announce his own resolution to be trephined. Strout pressed Blanche's hand to his lips for an instant, gave the doctor's hand a cordial grasp, and then seized the hand of Professor Schwank, which he wrung with all the warmth of respectful gratitude.

"My dear Herr Professor," he said, "how can I ever repay you? The experiment is a perfect success.

"But—" began the astounded professor.

"Don't fry to depreciate your own share in my good fortune," interrupted Strout. "The theory was yours, and all the triumph of the practical success belongs to you and Dr. Diggelmann's skill."

Strout, still holding Blanche's hand, now turned to her father.

"There is now no obstacle to our union, Doctor," he said. "Thanks to Professor Schwank's operation, I see the blind folly of my late attitude toward the subjective. I recant I am no longer a positivist. My intellect has leaped the narrow limits that hedged it in. I know now that there is more in our philosophy than can be measured with a metric ruler or weighed in a coulomb balance. Ever since I passed under the influence of the ether, I have been floating in the infinite. I have been freed from conditions of time and space. I have lost my own individuality in the immensity of the All. A dozen times I have been absorbed in Brahma; a dozen times I have emanated from Brahma, a new being, forgetful of my old self. I have stood face to face with the mystic and awful Om; my world-soul, descending to the finite, has floated calmly over an ocean of Affenthaler. My consciousness leaped back as far as the thirtieth century before Christ and forward as far as the fortieth century yet to come. There is no time; there is no space; there is no individual existence; there is nothing save the All, and the faith that guides reason through the changeless night. For more than one million years my identity was that of the positivist in the glass jar yonder. Pardon me, Professor Schwank, but for the same period of time yours was that of the celebrated thief in the other jar. Great heavens! How mistaken I have been up to the night when you, Herr Professor, took charge of my intellectual destiny."

He paused for want of breath, but the glow of the mystic's rapture still lighted up his handsome features. There was an awkward silence in the room for considerable time. Then it was broken by the dry, harsh voice of Dr. Diggelmann.

"You labor under a somewhat ridiculous delusion, young gentleman. You haven't been trephined yet."

Strout looked in amazement from one to another of his friends; but their faces confirmed the surgeon's statement.

"What was it then?" he gasped.

"Sulphuric ether," replied the surgeon, laconically.

"But after all," interposed Dr. Bellglory, "it makes little difference what agent has opened our friend's mind to a perception of the truth. It is a matter for congratulation that the surgical operation becomes no longer necessary."

The two Germans exchanged glances of dismay. "We shall lose the opportunity for our experiment," the professor whispered to Diggelmann. Then he continued aloud, addressing Strout: "I should advise you to submit to the operation, nevertheless. There can be no permanent intellectual cure without it. These effects of the ether will pass away.

"Thank you," returned Strout, who at last read correctly the cold, calculating expression that lurked behind the scientist's spectacles. "Thank you, I am very well as I am."

"But you might, for the sake of science, consent—" persisted Schwank.

“Yes, for the sake of science,” echoed Diggelmann.

“Hang science!” replied Strout, fiercely. “Don’t you know that I no longer believe in science?”

Blanche also began to understand the true motives which had led the German professor to interfere in her love affair. She cast an approving glance at Strout and arose to depart. The three Americans moved toward the door. Professor Schwank and Dr. Diggelmann fairly gnashed their teeth with rage. Miss Bellglory turned and made them a low curtsy.

“If you must trephine somebody for the sake of science, gentlemen,” she remarked with her sweetest smile, “you might draw lots to see which of you shall trephine the other.”