

THE SECOND DOCTOR SERVICE

By Daniel Mason

Sirs—Having read with interest Dr. Pritchard’s recent report of the young woman with paroxysmal amnesia and transformation of personality, as well as Dr. Slayer’s study “On the So-called Cumberland Were-wolf,” I have spent the past months in deliberation over whether to share my own case with your readers. If I have hesitated, it is less out of concern for privacy than the simple fact that, though bearing the title of physician, I am but a country doctor, whose medical expertise extends little beyond those afflictions befalling the farmers and milkmaids of K—County. Indeed, I likely never would have opened your learned *Journal* were it not for the very strange events of the past year. Most of the members of your Society, I am aware, publish with that noble aim of

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advancing medicine; I write with the hope that one of them has encountered a case like my own, and so might save me before it is too late.



Unlike with most illnesses, Sirs, which arise within us so insidiously, creeping through vein and fiber, unsettling our slumber, awakening within us that ineffable, horrific sense of disease, it is possible to state the very instant, indeed the very longitude and latitude, of my affliction, being four strokes after noon, on August 24, 1882, on the cusp of Mersey’s Ridge, outside

S—. I was returning from a sick-call; the patient was a parson’s son who had fallen ill with a tertian fever. I had attended to him for three days and nights

with the constant application of Beedham’s Ointment and, upon restoring him to health, had saddled my horse and begun my journey home. It was a warm summer day, one of those particularly golden mornings when the air is thick with motes of pollen, and the scent of wet grass rises from the fields, and everywhere life appears to swirl in such a miasma that I have since wondered if I did not inhale some invisible animalcule as I galloped up the

hill, and that it is perhaps this beastie upon whom I should lay the blame for all that followed. Down in the valley, the noon bells had tolled twice when there arose a very strong odor of chestnuts, overwhelming the sweet of the grass and the sharp bloom of all the goldenrod stirred up by my horse’s feet. This was impossible, of course: chestnuts would not be in season until No-

vember, and this thought, delivered whole and instantaneously between the second and the third tolling of the bells, seemed to carry on its wings the conviction that something odd and terrible was to occur. It was then, just as I crested the hill, expecting the spectacular vision of the forests below, that I found myself not before that view but somehow *five miles farther*, thundering over the bridge at Wilson's Mill.

We are all accustomed, I believe, to the experience of traveling and drifting into distraction, only to arrive safely at our destination as if directed by some unseen hand. My first suspicion was that this was what had happened, and yet I also knew it wasn't so: I had passed along this road a thousand times, and not once had I failed to stop on its descent into that ancient forest of beech and linden, where the soft light filters down through the whispering leaves, and the air is filled with the tintinnabulation of the chickadees, and the odor of the mushrooms and mosses awakens in me a profound nostalgia for my childhood adventures amid the cathedrals of fallen boughs. Nor, I knew, could I have been asleep, for the road is too perilous, with hanging limbs that have nearly beheaded even the most alert traveler. Such is my reasoning in retrospect; at the time it was a particular *sensation* that told me something was different, a feeling, unlike any other I had experienced, of *complete nothingness*, as if an *ellipsis* had occurred between the fields of goldenrod on Mersey's Ridge and the linden depths of the Mill, as if time and distance had somehow *folded* upon themselves, or—to put it differently—as if I had simply ceased to be.

There is little more to be said about this incident, save that it was the first. Shaken, I continued my ride. I stopped at H— to dine, finding myself in the company of an old friend. I made no mention of the event, ate heartily, and, having steadied my nerves, continued home.

For the next two months, nothing happened. I entered my forty-eighth year in the finest of health, other than an old toothache and the gout in my right knee. The oaks autumned, followed by the beeches; the parson's boy fell sick again; I rode back and forth

over Mersey's Ridge without incident. In October, I was invited to a ball in H—, to raise funds for the deaf school there. Now, since my youth I have dreaded such decorous affairs, preferring the company of my milkmaids and farmers. But the school was dear to Constance, my wife, who has devoted many of her hours to helping those unfortunates. And so it was I traveled with her to that town, where, in the gaily lit ballroom, I suffered the second of my paroxysms.

Again, I can time the exact moment of the seizure. I was standing in a crowd of doctors and doctors' wives, enduring the rambling braggadocio of a mission surgeon who had recently returned from curing Suriname of her hydroceles. He was attempting to shock the ladies, speaking ominously of natives who carted their tuberous scrota about in wheelbarrows, when I noted that same odor of chestnuts and, glancing at the clock, *observed it to advance in one clean stroke*, from 7:15 to 7:48. Perplexed, I raised my wineglass to my mouth, only to find it empty. Around me the others, nearly a dozen in number, were watching me, laughing. I was certain I had gaffed. Nervously I looked about the circle, and yet the laughter was welcoming, as if the crowd were eagerly anticipating more of my words. Fortunately, someone rang a bell. Dancing would begin! I turned to Constance, expecting to be scolded. Instead, with a little laugh, a toss of her frizzed bangs, and breath that lifted her bosom against her pale-blue bodice, she uttered those words that would prove fatally prescient—*Whatever, Service, has come into you?* Then, with a pleased shiver ruffling the silken rump of her polonaise, she led me to the floor.

Of course, I still had no idea what had happened. Dizzied by the absurd notion that I was absent from a conversation in which I had so clearly taken part, I tried, as we waltzed, to pry the story from Constance, without letting on that I had absolutely no idea what I had done. She was happy to rehearse the events—apparently I had given the braggart surgeon quite a humbling, and in such a subtle manner that he had scarcely realized what was happening until it was too late. *Myself*, I thought, humbling *him!* However much I might have wished to do such a thing, I

couldn't fathom actually doing it. The waltz ended and a mazurka started up; though my knee ached, I joined her again if only to collect my thoughts. Of course I immediately associated the attack with the strange occurrence at Mersey's Ridge, both for the sweet aroma that preceded it and that identical sense of an impenetrable void. Clearly, I thought, as the circle turned, I had suffered a *fit*, an *ecstasy*, an *alienation* from my mental faculties. And yet as to the source of this delirium, I had no clue. It had neither the wildness of *mania transitoria*, nor the residual left by an apoplexy, nor the violence that accompanies lycanthropy and those other perverse transformations of the soul. The premonition of chestnuts, the suddenness of onset, the total lapse of consciousness, followed by my precipitous, if slightly stunned, return—all, of course, pointed to epilepsy, if not the *grand mal* of fame, the *larval* or *petit* form, known sometimes simply as the *absence*. But, though not an expert on the nerves, I have attended, twice, to patients diagnosed with this affliction, and while both reported a similar sense of vanishing during their attacks, both *appeared* vacant before the world. Whereas I, apparently, *appeared* to have been possessed by none other than myself.

If I had regarded my first attack with some nonchalance, the second left me with a severe disquiet. Like the tertian of the parson's son, my malady had declared itself as a form prone to repeat. And whereas two months separated the first and second attacks, it was but a fortnight before they returned a third time, this while I was hunting with my brother Thomas, who'd come from Boston on a visit. Again the attack was heralded by the smell of chestnuts, again the onset was sudden, again the amnesia was total. We had spread a blanket out for supper. The dogs lay resting at my feet. I looked up at the sky and saw a distant nimbus, thought *It will rain*, and then—as if I had summoned the clouds myself—I was on my mount, riding, a heavy rill streaming from the brim of my hat and onto a clutch of four wet quail, their black-gray feathers ruffling with the wind.

I screamed. I could not hold it back. So sudden was the change, so grotesque

the bloodied birds. I pulled up my horse. I dismounted. Rain tickled down my collar. I felt a horrid sensation, as if something were fleeing me, like vermin scurrying across my skin. I tore off my coat, my scarf, opened my shirt.

It was then I caught my brother's eye. Thomas removed his hat and wiped his sleeve across his forehead. *Richard?* he said. The dogs, too, I saw, were watching, with their own puzzled, canine airs.

Embarrassed, I muttered something, tried to climb back on my horse, slipped, and fell into the mud. Thomas dismounted, to de-bog me. Are you ill? he asked.

I shook my head. A swoon, I said. Only nerves! Don't worry, *I am not myself*—that's all.

It was this phrase that did it. A common enough turn, of course: never do we stop to think exactly what it means. But with these words, the slumbering fears that had been with me since my first attack came pouring out. I stuttered out a confession. Thomas listened. He tried to comfort me and denied perceiving any change at all. We'd had a normal lunch, argued heartily about the wool-tax repeal, packed our bags, and resumed hunting. Indeed, if there had been any difference, he added with a laugh that was meant to comfort me, *it was for the better*; I even appeared to be free from my typical brooding. A *seizure*? No. He wasn't a medical man, but he'd known many afflicted with seizures, and they were all *tumbling fellows*. Certainly none had carried on as I did, none had such opinions on the revenue code, none—and here he indicated the birds—were such a fine shot.

A fine shot! Sirs, never in my life have I been a "fine shot." Whether it is a mild tremor or a fondness for nature's gentler creatures, something always seems to unsteady my hand when I attempt to pull the trigger. I go hunting for love of the out-of-doors, for the manly company, for the beneficial effects of fresh air on the lungs, and if I have returned with bounty, it is only out of sheer fortune. Thus while four quail in a single afternoon might have been welcomed by most, for me it seemed a terrifying aberration. I was *not* myself; something *had* come into me, and if no change was observed in my countenance, this was proof not of the intruder's clemency but of the sophisti-

cation of his deception. By then, I had spent enough time in our County Association library in search of insight into my condition to know about the violence man commits in altered states. I speak of the district-court judge who, seizing, would rise at his supper, and, with the clatter of silverware trailing in his wake, commence such a devastation that his family had no choice but to employ a strongman to wrestle him into submission. Or the case reported by Hoyle of the somnambulist who awoke to find himself dining on raw meat from the icebox. Or the virtuous young lady of Northampton who, in fits of insanity, would seek congress with chimney sweeps and rag-mongers. Or the young schoolteacher turned murderer who following his execution was found to have a large tumor of the temporal lobe. Or Pritchard's epileptic who awoke with magpies in his pockets *with no memory of what had occurred*.

Can you imagine, Sirs, what it is like to pass one's hours like this, waiting, knowing that at any moment you will be transformed? That you could retire to the sitting room only to find yourself standing among the shards of your treasured china, blood on your hands, some leering ragman on your flanks? I feared each new smell, every shiver of wind. The seizures were massing, I knew. Like some monstrous human Leyden jar, I stored them until they were ready to discharge. And discharge they did, with ever-increasing frequency. At dinner, I lifted ham to my mouth but tasted pudding. I tossed my grandson in the air and caught my granddaughter. I began Genesis 25 and finished Exodus 12. I unsheathed the knife I used for my caesareans and found myself with a bonneted baby in my arms. But no matter how complete the alienation, there was no crime, no *morbid* transformation. When I inspected the surgical sites repaired by my impostor, there was not a stitch awry. By every account, I was very much the same man; indeed, as Constance noted, this second Dr. Service was perhaps a subtle *improvement* on the first: he didn't clean his nostrils by advancing his handkerchief into them, or lick his comb, or swear. He was even—I learned, after a seizure struck while I was being photographed at the annual meeting of the County Association—ever so slightly

handsomer: less stooped, with a “twinkle” in the eye and a smile befitting the confidence of a man who has a secret he is about to confide. As to the nature of this secret, I could only wonder; it wasn’t long, however, before I suspected its relation to a new flush in Constance’s cheeks, a new limpid depth to her gaze—a suspicion, Sirs, which filled my heart with man’s most ancient envy, an envy unmitigated by the knowledge that the cuckold and the cuckoo were the same.

Let me return, though, to the County Association photograph. How many hours I spent staring at it! I don’t know what, exactly, I was seeking, save that somewhere in his visage I expected to find an explanation of who he . . . I . . . we . . . were. He wore *my* black overcoat and *my* top hat and *my* silken gray ascot, which Constance had given me for my birthday. His mustache was waxed into the sharpest arabesque (mine was in the “natural” style). While the velvet collar of my overcoat had a tendency to accumulate all forms of detritus, his was finely brushed; the satin of the hat almost glistened. But it was into the eyes that I found myself staring, and the more I studied them, the more I perceived, behind their gay façade, something deeper, a perplexity and quiet sadness that one often encounters in the eyes of those who have struggled vainly against the mysteries of the world. Indeed, the more I considered it, the more I came to think that however strange this *possession* had been for me, it must have been so much stranger for him. A babe is spared the horror of its birth by virtue of its stupidity. It need not ask where it comes from, or whether the sun will rise tomorrow, or what will become of its soul when the worms descend into its flesh. And yet the second Dr. Service was forced to take up the very reins of life that morning of his awakening on Mersey’s Ridge. Was he born, then, knowing how to ride? If so, are we all conceived with infinite capabilities, such that what man calls learning is actually a winnowing of inborn wisdom? Is it the nursling who is the true sage, while the figure of the wise old man is but an illusion perpetrated by his whiskers and his cane?

Or perhaps he hadn’t been so immaculately conceived. Had he come

from elsewhere? Was this less a possession than a collision, a stone skipping across a pond, an errant soul in transmigration who had the misfortune of selecting not a newborn as its vessel but a man of forty-eight, with his melancholies and gouty knees?

Or was he I, divided? A cutting that, cleaved from the stock, goes on to send forth its own roots? Or the corybantic twitching of a severed lizard’s tail, which eventually grows still? Were my memories his? What happens, Sirs, to the soul of the sea cucumber when the sea cucumber is cut in two?

The more I pondered my condition, the more such questions gave onto others, budded, and bred, until they churned with such violence inside my mind that I had to do something to set them free. But to whom was I to turn? When I ventured to speak of my illness to Constance, she could scarcely hide her irritation. By then, she, too, had been transformed, into a raven-eyed Messalina who endured her first husband as if he—I!—were the aberration. My brother was in Boston. I dared not approach another physician lest he commit me to an asylum.

This left only my double. I contrived, therefore, to seek him out directly, tucking about my person various inquiries, in the hope that, during my paroxysms, he might place his hand into my coat pocket, discover one of the missives, and in turn reply regarding who he was, where he had come from, and—this I added only with hesitation—*what he would become*. Constance, driven to fury by the notes, which inevitably found their way into her possession, begged me to stop. Think what will happen if the authorities discover you! she pleaded. You will lose your patients, your practice, *our* home.

But by then I did not care. By then, with winter drawing on, I’d experienced, for the first time, two seizures in the course of a single day. I *needed* to reach him, if but to strike some kind of entente. I begged. I reasoned. I reminded him that it was I who gave him life. I offered him all he wanted if he would only swear to continue granting my return. I warned him of the fate of the parasite that kills off its host.

Nothing. No reply. No word of comfort. No tearstain of fellow suffering on my lines of ink. The creeping evidence of his passage surrounded me: fingerprints on the crystal Constance told me to reserve for visitors, tooth marks on my pipe stem, those humid sheets. But still he remained deaf to my entreaties. Deaf, Sirs—and then one evening in December, on the top shelf of my library, a sheaf of papers caught my gaze. I can still recall my trembling hands as I climbed the bookcase ladder, certain I had found that long-awaited letter from my other half. And yet, as I brought the pages into the light, I discovered to my surprise what appeared to be a novel. It was unfinished, with corrections scattered over the manuscript, and if not the confession I'd hoped for, it was proof, nonetheless, that "R. Servus; or, the Slave," as the author called himself, did not live a life of naïve indifference, but grappled, as I did, with the puzzling mystery of his transformation.

It was a long work—I do not have time to set down all the details here. I will distill it to the following: A young nobleman named Gaspard, after a youth of dissolution, meets, like Goethe, his double riding down a wintry path. But while the German's famous vision vanished as soon as it appeared, the protagonist of Servus's tale rides for a while *with* his doppelgänger, the latter telling him the story of the life he led up to the moment of their meeting. The second Gaspard's story is almost identical to the first's, with a good number of lusty adventures, culminating in the night when he (the second Gaspard), returning from his mistress's castle, meets *his* double on a mountain road. We are then treated to what seems to be the story of a third Gaspard, except this time familiar details begin to suggest themselves, and with a chill we realize, as the first Gaspard does, that he is being told the story of his own life, through that same wintry night when he meets his double on the road. And as the second Gaspard continues to speak, the first Gaspard begins to feel a terror growing in his heart, remembering that the vision of one's double is said to be an omen of death. At that moment, *driven by a force not his own*, he reaches into his cloak and finds a dagger—a black dagger with a ruby in

its hilt—a dagger he never owned!—leaps from his horse and—

But as I turned the page, I found only blank paper. I turned back, suspecting the final page had adhered to its predecessor, but there was nothing. Frantic then, I redoubled my search, extracting volume after volume from my shelves, finding nothing beyond my own pathetic queries. It was nearly dawn. I began to feel ill—my head ached—I knew with certainty that the fate of Gaspard held the secret to my own. The violence of the novel, that last, terrifying image of the strange dagger, could not but lead to a bloody finale. Surely, I thought, the first Gaspard would kill the second! But then what? Would he find himself exorcised of the demon? Or the moment he plunged the blade into the other's heart, would he feel cold steel enter his own? What fantasy did my shadow live out on these pages? Was this a fear? A threat? A wish that I might rid *him* of his earthly existence? Until that day I had thought him oblivious to *my* existence, and if not oblivious, at the very least a friend, curious, grateful, even sorry for me. Now I knew it wasn't so. This was why the squatter had never answered my entreaties! He *wished* me to go mad! To lose my mind so that *he* might gain it. I was his enemy, his rotting limb, *his* parasite, the dying lord of the kingdom he would rule.

By then, Constance was knocking at the library door. I gathered up the scattered pages. She couldn't know! There was no hope in trying to explain—she would never believe—she would insist *I* wrote it. No, it was more insidious even than that: *she already knew*. That was it, I realized with horror: she *knew*, she was *waiting* for me to go, so as to welcome that usurper completely to her bed. I smelled chestnuts—I leapt up to hide the volume—*he, they* couldn't know I'd found it—I gained the ladder—I felt a wind and cried out briefly—and then his tongue choked back my own.

I awoke in our carriage, gliding across the winter fields.

Constance was sleeping. I knew not where we were. I opened the door and fled.

Sirs, if I write to you now with some composure, if my pen is steady, my words measured—Sirs, if this seems

so, you must trust me when I say that weeks ago you would not have recognized me for the wild frenzy with which I fought my fate. Oh, I was like the drowning man who, gasping, bursts from placid waters, only to be pulled back in. Every ounce of my force was devoted to his destruction. (There were three of us then: Servus and I, and the terror that drove me to destroy him!) I didn't sleep—no, slumber I would leave for he-I-hatched. I paced, I muttered, ranted, raced my mare into the fiercest storms and then awoke in my reading chair, at home, with some gentle volume open on my lap. On cliffs, I galloped, waiting for the seizure that would send *him* tumbling to the earth. I tried to maim him. I held needles to my eye, hoping that with my seizure he would twitch. I noosed my rope—he restrained me. I lit a match—he blew it out. With my razor I touched the twinned pulse of our carotids, the beat of our eight-chambered heart. His hand clasped mine. My tears fell from his eyes.

I had no February, Sirs.

And now I am grown tired. (A week separates these lines.)

Servus thrives. With each convulsion I wake to find myself a less familiar man. Empty grouse and rag-stuffed stags adorn our walls. Coming to, I feel hunting songs fading from my lips, their tunes barely crossing our threshold before dying out. Sometimes, awaking with the brush of Constance's breath against my cheek, I believe, briefly, that I have returned to stay, only to be swept away again for weeks. Strangely, I am no longer afraid. Have I reconciled myself to my fate? Or is this simply the course of my affliction? Having claimed my wife, my February, my April, has he now come to take my fears? Or is it simply that my lucid intervals, like the briefest of encores, are too ephemeral for terror to take hold? I know not. Perhaps you, Gentlemen, can tell me. For now, I hasten to the post, lest Cain appear and confiscate this cry. I pray that if I am to lose my June, my August—if the year turns before I awake—I might still one day find your answer in the County Association library. Or will you, too, abandon me? Will you dismiss me as but a seizure in *his* mind? Will you rejoice, Sirs, as he advances, steadily, toward cure? ■