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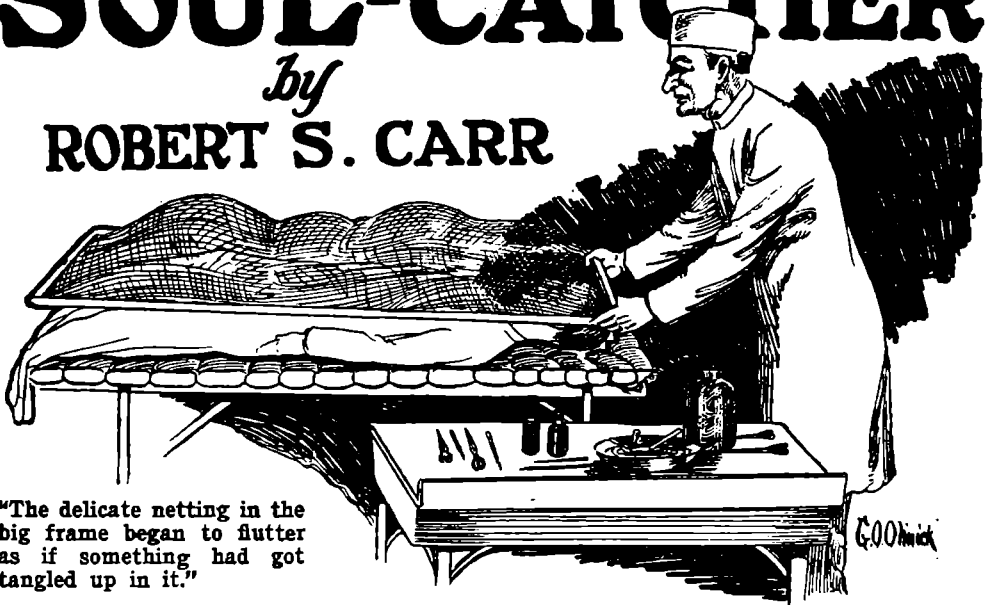
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# SOUL-CATCHER

by  
ROBERT S. CARR



"The delicate netting in the big frame began to flutter as if something had got tangled up in it."

**A**ROUND the hospital, folks said that John Dorsey was a nice old man—kind of puttery, but still a mighty good all-round M. D. He was small and mild and chubby and had soft white hair—the sort of kindly old gentleman you see telling stories to the kiddies in the park.

Old John had his ways, too; peculiar, maybe, but harmless. He was unobtrusive and fitted well into the general scheme of things around the hospital; unobtrusive, that is, except when the emergency cases came in. Old John was an emergency specialist. The ambulance boys would bring 'em in, screaming, moaning, or sometimes huddled up in a silent, blood-stained heap under the stretcher coverings and rush them into Old John's "emergency parlors," as one of the young college interns used to term it.

The ambulance boys would sometimes call me in from the orderly room to help them with some poor devil who had gotten more than his share of hard luck at a grade crossing smash. At these times I noticed

that Old John wasn't the same as he generally appeared to be. He would flash into action as quickly as any first aid man in the front line trenches ever did. Old John had his own operating room, and as he didn't have much else to do, he always kept things in readiness for the emergency cases. The water in the sterilizing basin was always gently simmering over the sharp, wicked-looking things with which he did his wonder-work; the bandages, the antiseptics and the sponges were always laid out in readiness on a long table which he kept close at his side while operating.

Here is where Old John's peculiarity cropped out—he would not use an assistant or have another person in the room. The moment he heard the ambulance siren—and he always heard it before any of the rest of us did—he would hurry to his room, and by the time we had the howling unfortunate stripped and laid out and under the ether, Old John would know what the trouble was and be ready and waiting to begin.

"Clear out of here," he'd say good-naturedly, "but stay close around outside the door where I can call you if I need you."

Only, he never seemed to need any help.

But after all, there wasn't so much use for an assistant in the kind of emergencies we handled. The very messy cases often died in the ambulance boys' arms, much to their disgust, and the poison cases were taken care of with a stomach pump on the way to the hospital. The majority of Old John's patients required only to have a shut-off jammed on a squirting artery or a splintered bone yanked out of some vital organ in a hurry.

"Seems like with just me and the patient in there by ourselves, with no fool girl to get pale and shiver and act heroic, and everything right where I can reach it without having to ask for it or fall over somebody, I can do my best for a patient in the least time—and that's what counts." So spake Old John and no one disagreed.

One time McCarty said something kind of queer about Old John. McCarty's the slim young doctor who wears the thick horn-rimmed glasses and smokes so many cigarettes. It was when some Italian window-washer did an eleven-story nose-dive to the pavement and smashed himself all up. He didn't look very bad, though, so the ambulance boys rushed him in to Old John. Anybody with any sense at all would have known the wop would cash in inside of five minutes, but as an M. D.'s business seems to be taking nothing for granted, Old John ran everybody out of the room as usual and went to work. Pretty soon—according to McCarty—Old John came to the door shaking his head kind of sorrowful-like and said "too late, boys," the way he always does.

"Humph!" said McCarty, with a

queer sideways look through those big glasses of his, "it does seem as if it took Dorsey a long time to find out that man was dead. And listen, Jack"—he looked up and down the hall before he spoke—"Old John didn't put his rubber gloves on all the while he was in there! Must not have even examined the man!"

Not being as smart as some, I didn't see anything special about that to bowl anybody over, but I kept still. I wasn't there when it happened, being busy at the time on the fifth floor sitting on the chest of some looney fever-case who thought he needed an airing out on the fire escape. After the little blond nurse in Ward 10 gave him a shot in the arm and got him quiet, she said to me, "Gee, but you're strong," and I kind of grinned and—

But as I was saying, Old John sure did do some wonderful things there by himself in that room. One time he took a bullet out of a fellow's head—I forget the long names the M. D.'s called the operation—but it made the other doctors sit up and take notice. Of course, a lot of the emergency cases died—but that's why they're emergency cases—because they're dying. None of the deaths were Old John's fault.

WELL, things went on as usual for a while; the interns and me bribing the drug room man to give us our little drinks of prescription whisky; the nurses smoking their cigarettes up in the roof-garden; and the ambulance boys charging the hospital double for every tire they bought.

One day along in the spring, when the auto-wreck cases began to pile in, Old John asked me to go down to the supply room and get him a new pair of surgeon's gloves. I said I would, and while I was down there rummaging around, I heard the ambulance siren, but didn't think

anything about it. I came back upstairs with the gloves and went to Old John's room. The door was closed and nobody was around. I suppose if I'd stopped to think I would have guessed that Old John had an emergency case in there, but I didn't—I went right on in. Now working around a hospital just naturally gets you to be mighty light-footed, and with the noiseless door and soft floor-pad, I guess I must not have made a sound. Old John had his back turned and didn't hear me come in. For a moment I looked, then sank back against the wall and stared while my eyes popped out and I began to sweat.

There was one of the usual busted-up fellows, all bloody and out-of-joint, lying on the operating table under the strong light. Over him bent Old John, holding in his hands a light rectangular frame about six feet long and two feet wide. Inside the frame was stretched the queerest, webbiest fine net-work I ever saw. The netting wasn't wire and it wasn't thread—I don't know what it was. A big, black wire ran all the way around this frame, under the handle by which Old John was holding it and into a round glass jar. The whole thing kind of reminded me of an old-fashioned indoor radio aerial. As I stood and looked I could see that the patient was pretty far gone, but that didn't seem to worry Old John. He stood very quiet, very tense—and waited. Soon the figure on the operating table quivered a little, then sighed and went limp all over, the way they do.

Right then is when the hair started to rise up on the back of my neck, for just a second after that fellow had passed out, the thin, delicate netting in the big frame began to flutter as if something had got tangled up in it—something you couldn't see. Then the glass jar that was hooked up with the big black wire began to fill up

just as if someone was blowing cigarette smoke into it, only this stuff was thicker and gray-colored—not bluish like cigarette smoke. Pretty soon the net quit quivering and the jar was full of this smoky stuff. Old John laid down the frame on the dead man, unhooked the wire and held the jar up to the light.

“Got him, all right!” he chuckled to himself.

I guess I must have moaned or made some kind of a noise about then, for Old John wheeled quick as a cat, and when he saw me his eyes blazed up like a bad brain-fever case's. I don't know how long we stood like a couple of stone statues staring at each other—all I know is that I felt numb and sick and paralyzed all over, the same as I did the day I got hold of the wrong bottle down in the drug room.

Then little by little the glare died out of his eyes, till at last he set the jar down and smiled.

“Here's your rubber gloves,” I said kind of shakily, and turned to go.

“Wait a minute,” he said in his kindly soft voice, just as if nothing had happened.

I stopped. The gray vapor in the jar seemed to be restless, moving. . .

“You saw everything?” he asked.

I nodded.

He smiled the same sad way he does when he says, “Too late, boys.”

“Sit down,” he said, “I want to talk to you.”

I sat down.

“I get all the bad cases in here,” he began, “and I do all I can for them. I work mighty hard to keep them from dying and I often do it, don't I?”

Again I nodded.

“And listen,” he said, leaning toward me, “if I can't save their bodies I—*save their souls!*”

Seeing the look on my face, he arose and led me to a tall black cabi-

net in one corner of the room. Lifting out a dummy shelf of books, he pointed with pride at row after row of glass jars, all filled with a thick, grayish vapor.

The instant he uncovered those things I nearly keeled over. It's a hard thing to explain, but I'll try to do it. Before I got this job, I worked behind the scenes in a big theater. Sometimes, when the stage was dark, I'd slip out to fix a set for the next scene, and from the very first I noticed a queer sensation caused by suddenly stepping into the gaze of so many eyes. I could *feel* the eyes of the audience out there in the dark even though I couldn't see them. And so it was with the jars in Old John's cabinet—I immediately felt that I was the target for a great many eyes. There was nothing I could see except those little jars full of something gaseous and gray, but—

Old John closed the cabinet and it was the same as stepping off the dark stage. The feeling of eyes was gone.

"I may need an assistant some time," he began again, "and since my secret had to be found out, I'm glad it was you and not one of those know-it-all young interns. I can depend on you to keep still about this, can't I?"

There was nothing for me to do but say yes. Suddenly the ambulance siren screamed in the distance, then screamed again, coming closer.

"Another case," he breathed. "Here—get behind this screen until after they have gone."

I hid, and in a few moments the ambulance boys had brought in another limp, sprawling bundle and turned it over to Old John. As they carried the other one out I heard him say his customary "too late, boys" and add something about "this one's going to take a lot of time." After he had locked the door I came out of hiding.

He motioned me to be still, so I stood quietly and watched him.

The case on the operating table was a big, beefy, middle-aged man, his throat and shoulders horribly crushed and bloody. I marveled at Old John's magic rubber-gloved fingers as they twinkled over the mangled area. He bent forward, quivering in his intensity of purpose, snatching up or flinging down an instrument like lightning; probing here; or with a fairylike lightness of touch tying up a severed artery. Truly Old John needed no assistant. Presently, after a most painstaking final examination, he stood back and sighed, shaking his head sorrowfully. I saw his lips silently form the words, "Too late, boys." Then suddenly another light came into his eyes, a different expression gripped his face. The transformation somehow reminded me of a story I had read about a Collic dog that tenderly guarded a flock of sheep by day, only to slip out and murder them by night.

Old John took the big net from its place of concealment. He motioned for me to help him, and together we lifted the dying man and laid him on a long pair of hospital scales. As Old John felt his pulse, he pointed at the register hand, which stood at 173 pounds and 6 ounces. He made ready his soul-trapping apparatus and held the net close over the body. In a moment that indescribable yet definite change took place which marks the death of an unconscious person. Old John directed my eyes to the scale hand and I watched carefully. The hand held its mark steadily; then, precisely as the delicate web before me began to flutter, *the hand quickly dropped back four ounces!*

I sat dumbly as Old John completed the capture of the soul and stowed the jar away with the others. I had heard—had even read in the *Sunday* supplements—that the weight of a body decreases sharply at

death, but never had I expected to have it proved to me in such an awful manner. I became dimly conscious that Old John was speaking.

"You see, there is something definite which escapes from the body at death. That something I have in my jars, ha, ha! But the weight of the something is quickly replaced by air, exactly on the same principal as when you submerge an uncorked bottle in water—the air bubbles out and the water rushes in. . . . Look at the hand."

I looked, and saw that the body had regained the lost four ounces, the four ounces of gray nebulosity now imprisoned in the glass jar. . . .

Later, as I fled unsteadily down the corridor, I heard Old John announcing sadly that it was "too late, boys."

NEXT day I came upon Old John stretched on a couch in his room, oblivious of everything. I shook him gently, but as he did not wake, I left him to sleep on.

An hour afterward he called me in, shut the door, and went to some lengths explaining that he had been "astralizing" himself. The whole story didn't sound very plausible to me, this thing of leaving your body for a jaunt in spirit form. Still, I told myself, if anyone should know about that kind of things, it would be Old John.

To a rough, practical mind like my own, this astralizing process would seem more realistic and believable if a hypodermic syringe and a bottle of morphine went with it. But even so—there's nothing left on earth that's ungodly and spooky enough to surprise me any more. . . .

WHEN they told me Old John was dead I was almost afraid to go and look at him, but I went.

He hadn't been dead very long—hadn't been disturbed. He was

stretched out on his old couch the same as if he were astralizing himself. But what made my knees start to give in like soft rubber was the sight of the janitor before the tall black cabinet, sweeping up the fragments of a great many small glass jars.

"Wha—what happened there?" I asked one of the nurses weakly.

"Why, when the elevator motor tore loose up in the attic it shook the whole building. Broke several vases in my ward and it must have jarred those glasses out of that rickety old cabinet. What on earth Old John was saving them for beats me."

I had been away from the hospital all day. The more I looked at those broken jars the queerer I felt. Pretty soon I stepped over to see Old John. The M. D.'s had his face covered up and were arguing loudly about apoplexy. I pulled the cloth down and looked at him.

Ugh! I'll never forget it! It was awful. He looked as if—oh, I can't half describe it!—looked as if he had been torn to pieces from the inside. Just as a light sack would break if there were a dozen big cats all trying to get out in different directions. Oh, his body was all together, it wasn't mangled, but—well, you could see that was the way he had died.

It took me quite a while to figure it out, but when I had, believe me, I didn't feel any better. I guess it must have happened like this:

Old John had astralized himself, and his body was lying there without any astral, or soul, or spirit, or whatever you want to call it. This must leave a sort of empty space, as near as I can understand. Then when all those jars full of captured souls, or astrals, were broken and released those things inside, then *they*—I guess you'd say "they"—saw Old John's body lying there empty—and they must have had it in for him,

keeping them canned up like that—maybe they all saw it was a chance to get a body and live again. . . . They must have all crowded inside and taken possession of his body at once. . . . wonder what his astral did?

Maybe they fought. . . .

Anyhow, they couldn't all occupy one body, and so. . . .

This thought is driving me crazy.

The ambulance boys say I'm getting jumpy.

This hospital gives me the creeps. .

Guess I'll see if I can't get another job.