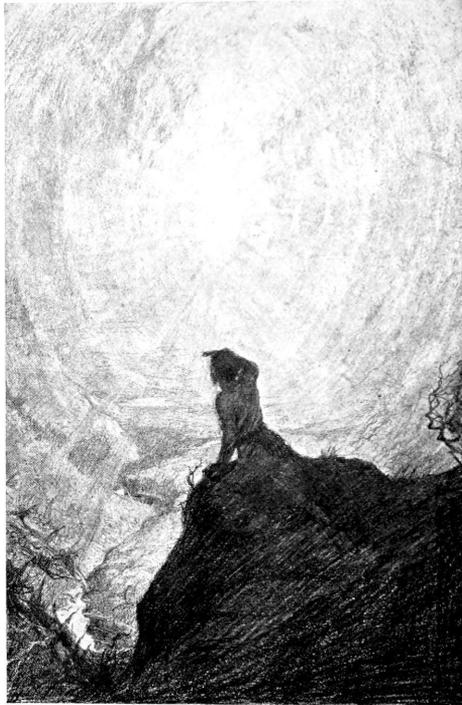


The Overman

By
UPTON SINCLAIR

THE OVERMAN



“I HAD STEPPED OUT UPON THE SUMMIT, AND STOOD TRANSFIXED
WITH THE GLORY OF AN ENDLESS VISION OF DAWN”

The Overman

This is the story of Edward —, as he told it to me only a few days before he died; he told it as he lay half paralysed, and knowing that the hand of death was upon him.

I am by profession a scientist. My story goes back some fifty years, when I was a student. I had one brother, Daniel, five years younger than myself, a musician of extraordinary promise. We lived abroad together for a number of years, each pursuing his own work. About my brother, suffice it to say that music to him was everything—love and friendship, ambition and life. He was a man without a stain, whose lower nature had been burned out by the flame of art. I think the one tie that bound him to the world was myself.

When Daniel was about twenty-three years of age, his health weakened, and a long sea voyage was decided upon. I could not go with him, so for the first time we parted; and it was twenty years after that before I ever heard of him again.

It was believed that the ship had been wrecked in the South Seas; and I had given him up for dead many years, when it chanced that, as a man advanced in life, I was travelling as a naturalist in Ceylon, and met an old sailor who had been with my brother, and who told me a strange story—how one boat containing five men, including Daniel, had outlived the storm and landed upon an uninhabited island; how, after remaining there for several months, they had made up their minds to risk a voyage in their frail craft; and how my

brother alone had refused, declaring his intention to remain by himself, with his violin and the few effects that he had saved.

How this affected me anyone can imagine. The tale was obviously a true one, and I chanced to have means; and so, getting the best idea I could of the island's location, I purchased a yacht outright and prepared to make a search.

The events immediately following bear only indirectly upon my story, and so I pass over them swiftly. We had been at sea for some three weeks, and were in the locality we sought, and watching day and night for some sign of the island, when late one evening the native captain of the vessel came to my cabin, trembling and pale with fright, to tell me that the crew had mutinied and were about to murder me. I rushed to my chest for my revolvers, only to find that every cartridge was gone; and the other's weapon proved to be in the same plight. In this desperate situation the latter suggested what seemed to be the only possible expedient—that we should make our escape from the vessel in the darkness, and trust to gaining the land. While he crept out to provision and lower a boat, I barricaded the cabin-door and waited; and upon hearing the whistle agreed on, I ran to a port-hole, and seeing the boat, slid into it. An instant later the rope was cut, and I got one glance at the leering countenance of my betrayer, before the ship sped on and all was darkness. I was alone!

The emotions of that night I do not like to recall. Life was still dear to me. It was only when morning came that I lifted my head again and recovered my self-possession.

There was no land in sight—I was tossing upon a waste of water, and already beginning to feel the first cravings of the fearful thirst that I knew must come. But by a strange instinct I still clung to my life; and soon a storm arose, and as the waves began to speed my frail boat along, it rose upon one of them, and I suddenly caught sight of a faint streak of land. I seized the oars and set to work to race for my life. I was not used to the effort, and it took all my strength to keep the craft headed aright, while the sea bore it on to its goal; I fought desperately through the whole day, coming nearer and nearer to my hope, but expecting every instant to be my last, and almost fainting with exhaustion. Finally I came to the very edge of the breakers—and then, in spite of all that I could do, the boat was seized by a wave and whirled around.

I saw before me a long line of bright green forest; and, standing upon the beach in front of me, a single figure—a man—motionless and watching. That moment a breaker smote my little craft, and I was flung into the boiling sea.

I did not know how to swim. I clutched at the boat and missed it, and after that I recall only an instant or two of frantic struggling and choking. When next I opened my eyes, I lay upon the shore, with a man bending over me; and upon my dazed faculties was borne in the startling truth that the man was my brother.

It would have been long before I recognised him but that he was calling me by name. A creature more changed no man could imagine. Gaunt, hollow-eyed, and wild in appearance, he was scarcely the shadow of his former self; he was clad in a rough garment of fur, barefooted and barearmed, and with

long, tangled hair. But what most struck me—what struck me the instant I opened my eyes, and what never ceased to strike me after that—was the strange, haunted look of his whole countenance; his eyes, swift and restless, shone from beneath the shadow of his brows like those of some forest animal.

For the first few dazed minutes I thought of what I had read of men who had gone mad, or had reverted to the beast, under such circumstances as these. Yet nothing could exceed the tenderness of my brother's voice and manner to me; he bent over me with a gourd full of milk, which he helped me to drink, and he dried my face and brushed back the hair from my forehead, whispering to me as one might to a sick child.

I can remember the very words of our conversation at that strange moment, so keenly did every circumstance impress me. I answered him faintly when he asked me how I did, and he pressed my hand. "You were seeking for me, brother?" he asked.

"I was," I said.

"I sometimes thought that you might," he exclaimed. "Alas! Alas!"

I had been overwhelmed with joy as the truth dawned upon me—the truth that I had found him. I had forgotten our mutual plight. "Never mind," I whispered. "We may get away somehow; and at least we can be together."

He answered nothing, but helped me lift my head.

“How came you alone in that boat?” he asked.

“It is a long story,” I replied, shuddering as I gazed at the waves that were thundering on the beach before us. “I will tell it later.”

“You have been long upon the water?”

“Only since last night,” I said; and then gazing about me suddenly, I cried: “And you—you have been here all these years!”

“All these years,” he answered.

“And alone?”

“Alone.”

I trembled as I gazed into his face; his eyes seemed fairly to burn.

“How have you borne it?” I cried. “What have you done?”

His answer made me start. “I have done very well,” he said; “I have not been unhappy.”

The words seemed strange to me—but his voice was stranger yet. Surely there were signs enough of unhappiness upon his face!

He seemed to read my thoughts. “Do not worry,” he went on, pressing his hand in mine; “I will tell you all about it later.”

But my mind could not be turned away so easily. When I felt stronger and sat up, I came back to the question, gazing at his haggard face and the strange costume he wore.

“You can make no better clothing?” I cried; “and for food—what do you do?”

“I have all the food that I can eat,” was the response, “and everything else that I need. You shall see.”

“But have you seen *no* one?” I persisted—“no ships, in all this time?”

“I have not wished to see any,” he said; and then he smiled gently as he saw my stare of amazement. “I have not wished for anything,” he said gently; “I have a home, as you shall see, and I have never needed company. Have you forgotten how it used to be, dear brother?”

It took me a long time to understand his words. I was still gazing at him helplessly. “And you mean,” I cried—“you mean that you still—you still live in your music?”

“Yes,” he said, “I mean that.”

I was sitting upright and gripping his arm tightly. “And for twenty years!” I gasped.

“Twenty thousand years would be all too little for music,” was the reply.

I sank back, and he wrapped his arms about me. “Dear brother,” he said, smiling, “let us not go into that just now. Wait until to-morrow, at the least. Perhaps I can help you now, and we can walk.”

We had not far to go, and with his help I managed the task. Back from the shore rose a high cliff, and a cavern in this was evidently his home. At one side there was a pen, in which

were three or four captive goats; and upon the grassy lawn in front was a rough seat. With the exception of a fireplace, and a path he had cut through the thicket, there were no other signs that the place was inhabited.

I sank down upon the grass, and he brought me fresh water and fruits, and cooked rice, which I ate hungrily. Then, when I was stronger, I got up and began to examine his home.

The cave was the size of a large room; it was dry, but bare of all furniture except a table and a roughly made chair and bed. My brother's possessions consisted mainly of a few objects (notably some tools) which he and the sailors had been able to recover from the wreck of the ship. There were a few skins which served him as bags in which to keep his provisions; his bowls and dishes were gourds and the shells of turtles. He was without artificial light, and he had only a few quires of writing-paper from the ship-captain's portfolio. For the rest, a violin without strings, and a bow without hairs, made up a list of the possessions so far as I could make them out. And it was upon the strength of these that he had said to me: "I have everything that I need!"

With rest and food my strength returned, and before long my mind was altogether occupied with my brother.

First of all, of course, my thought was of his home—of his surroundings and his ways. I rummaged about his cavern, wondering at his makeshifts—or rather, at his lack of them.

"You have no lamp?" I cried. "But, Daniel, the wax-plant grows in this climate. Or you might use tallow or oil."

“Dear brother,” he answered, “you forget that I have no books to read. And the few things that need light—cannot I just as well do them by day?”

“But, then, the long nights—you sleep?”

“No,” said he gently, “I do not sleep”; and later, with his strange smile, he added: “I live.”

“You live!” I echoed in perplexity; and then I stopped, catching the quiet, steady gaze of his eyes.

“Just so,” he said, “I live. I had never lived before.”

Most of all, I think, I was perplexed at the sight of his violin. From what I had seen of his youthful life, I could have imagined him spending all day and all night with that; but here it hung, useless as a stick of wood.

“You could have made strings for it,” I said. “I can make them for you.”

“But they would be of no use to me,” he answered.

“And all your music—you have given it up?”

“The music I have to do with,” he said, “has long ceased to be music that anyone could play.”

“But, Daniel!” I protested.

“Listen to me,” he said. “Have you never read that Beethoven never heard some of his greatest symphonies? Do you not understand how a musician can comprehend music from a score? And from that, how he can create it in his own mind and enjoy it, without ever writing it down or hearing it?”

“Then,” I said, almost speechless with wonder; “then you compose music in your mind?”

“No,” he said. “I *live* music in my soul.”

These things were on the day of my rescue, after I had recovered from my exhaustion. The words which he spoke I no more comprehended than if I had been a child; but the strangeness of the thing haunted my soul, and my questioning and arguing never ceased. All of this he bore with a gentle patience.

I had my youthful recollections of Robinson Crusoe; and as a man of science, I could naturally not spend two minutes conversing with Daniel and examining his affairs without thinking some new device by which he could have made his lot more tolerable. I could as yet hardly realise that it was to be my own fate to live upon the deserted island for ever; all my thoughts were of what I should have done had I been in his place. He had no weapons, no traps, no gardens, no house—and so on. “But, Edward,” he would say again and again, “do you not understand? Once more—I have no *time* for such things.”

“Time! *Time!*” I would cry. “But what *else* have you? What have you to *do?*”

“I have my life to live,” was the invariable response; “I have no time for anything else.”

We were sitting that afternoon beneath the shade of a great forest-tree before the cavern. Suddenly, seeing again the dazed look upon my face, he put his arm about me.

“Listen to me, dear brother,” he said, smiling. “You remember Diogenes, who lived in a tub? That was in order that he might have to call no man master, and no thing—least of all his own body. And can you not see that a man’s own soul is his soul just the same, whether he be on a desert island or in the midst of a city of millions? And that mind, emotion, will—he has the life of his soul to live?”

I sat surprised into silence; then suddenly I felt Daniel’s arm tighten about me. “Ah, my dear brother,” he said, his voice lowering, “it will be so hard! Do you think I have not realised it—how hard, *hard* it will be?”

“What will be hard?” I asked.

“Your life—everything you have to face,” he answered. “How can you not see it—do you not see that *you* have to live upon this island, too?”

“I have not thought of it much,” I said. “I have been thinking of you.”

“I know it,” he replied; “but I do not see how you are to bear it. I saw it all while I watched you sweep in with the boat—I saw all the pain and all the sorrow, and it was long before I made up my mind that it was not best to let you die.” I started, but he held me tight.

“Yes,” he said, “and I fear that I chose wrongly. Is it not strange that a man who has seen what I have seen should still be bound by such chains—that what I knew would be best, I could not do, simply because you were my brother?”

He must have felt my heart beating faster. "Listen to me," he went on quickly, but still with his frightful quietness. "Listen to me while I try to tell you—what I can hardly bear to tell you. All the tragedy of being is summed up in such a situation as this of ours; I am as helpless before it as you are—both of us are as helpless as children."

I gazed at him again, and suddenly he caught me with the wild look of his eyes. He had no need to hold me with his hand.

"Brother," he said, "you must think this out for yourself, as you can: I cannot explain it to you—cannot explain anything about it. Suffice it to say that for twenty years I have lived here, and that I have fought a fight which no man has ever fought before, and seen what I believe no man has ever seen. Knowing you as I do, I know that you can by no possibility ever follow me. It is as if I had found the fourth dimension of space; it is as if I dwelt in a house through the walls of which you walked without seeing them. How you are to bear your life here, my dear, dear brother, I do not know; but the truth is merciless, and you must face it—you will have to live on this island all your days, I am sure; and you will have to live here *alone!*"

A sudden shudder passed through me. "Daniel!" I gasped; it seemed to me that his eyes were on fire. "You mean, I suppose, that you are going away to some other part of the place—to another island?"

"Whether I go to another place or not, what matters that? No, I shall not, I think; and rest assured that, whatever I do, I love you, my heart yearns for you, and all my tenderness and

love are yours; but also that though you were with me, and held me in your arms four-and-twenty hours a day—yet all the time you would be alone.”

I could find no word to say—I could scarcely think.

“The pain of it,” he went on, still quietly, still tenderly, “is that I cannot explain it to anyone, that I cannot explain it to myself; that there are no words for it, nothing but the thing. The only explanation I can give is that I am become a madman, and that you must accept the fact. For the thing I do I can no more help doing than I could help the beating of my heart. All the world of love that I might bear to you, or to any other human soul, could no more enable me to stop than it would enable the grass to stop growing. Again you must accept the fact—you must learn to think of me as a man who is in the grasp of a fiend.”

There was a pause. Not once had I taken my eyes from my brother’s, and I sat with my heart throbbing wildly; the strangeness of the whole thing was too much for me—at times I was certain that I was indeed listening to a maniac.

When my brother began speaking again, I was at first hardly conscious of it. “Edward,” he said, “I have thought about this—that perhaps my presence would be painful to you. If so, let me go away. Take what tools I have here, and make this place your home—you have knowledge at your command, you can plant and hunt and study, and do what you will. As for me, such things make no difference; I could soon make myself comfortable again, and perhaps—”

“Say no more about it,” I interrupted quickly; “if anyone must go, let it be me, for I shall have need of occupation.”

For long hours after that strange experience I was pacing up and down the storm-swept beach of the island. What I had heard had disturbed me more than anything before in my life; the whole surroundings contributed to the effect—the perils I had passed through, the terrible future which stretched before me, the loss of my brother, and the finding of this strange madman in his place. But I was by nature a practical person, scientific and precise in my mode of thought; I did my best to convince myself that solitude and suffering had unhinged my brother’s mind. There is no use telling a scientist that he cannot understand a certain matter, and expecting him to let it rest; my mind was soon made up that I would study this malady, and perhaps cure it. My interest in the strange problem did more than anything else to keep me from realising to the full extent the discomfort I must needs face in the future.

When hunger brought my thoughts back to myself, I returned to the cave, where I found my brother pacing backward and forward upon a path which he had worn deep in the ground in front of his home; his head was sunk forward, his eyes on the ground, and he was evidently lost in deep thought. I spoke to him once, but he did not hear me; I walked by him and entered the cavern.

I now set to work to make a thorough examination of his belongings, musing that perhaps the best way to get to the bottom of his strange trouble would be to provide him with some of the ordinary amenities of life. I found that the tools

were not too rusty to be of service, and being a person with talent for doing things, I was soon interested in planning how I could make a habitable place out of the cave. In the latitude I knew that a door and a fireplace would never be an absolute necessity; but I pleased myself thinking that they might not be useless when the storms blew in. Also, being blessed with much knowledge of the natural world, I flattered myself that before many days would have passed I should have added considerably to the comforts of the house.

I gave the balance of the day to a preliminary ransacking of the island. A scientist has an inexhaustible mine of interest in such an environment, and in the plans which I formed for work I forgot everything else for the time.

And so towards sundown I returned to the cabin. My brother was still pacing to and fro, exactly as I had left him. Taught by previous experience, I entered the cabin without addressing him, and set about preparing a meal. I had not gone very far before I heard his step behind me.

“Edward,” he said.

“What is it?” I asked, turning.

“I wished merely to tell you—that you will not see me for a day or two. I wish you not to worry about me.”

I gazed at him in perplexity that was too great to permit of my framing a question. His haggard glance met mine again, and again he put his hand upon my shoulder with a gesture of affection; then he turned and went slowly away.

The incident diminished my appetite, for I had expected to interest him in my banquet. I sat for hours afterwards, gazing out of the cavern entrance at the moonlighted grove, silent and desolate beyond any telling. I think I never felt more alone than just then.

The problem was my only company; I had no idea where Daniel had gone; but after a feverish sleep I was up again at dawn, my mind fully made up for a search. I fear I drag out my story—it was nearly sundown when at last my efforts were rewarded. I was returning home in despair and misery, when, suddenly, in the back of the same cliffs in which was our home, I saw another opening, and with a gleam of hope I hurried towards it and peered in. It was too dark to see, but I entered and stepped to one side in the darkness; and then, as my eyes adjusted themselves to the gloom, I saw my brother.

I was unperceived, and I went forward until I could see him plainly. He sat upon a block of stone, the edge of which his hands gripped tensely; with his face slightly raised, he was staring before him into space. I would describe, if I could, the impression which his whole appearance gave me; it was of a man undergoing some fearful strain. The knotted muscles stood out upon his arms; his nostrils were distended, his breath coming fast, and I could see the veins throbbing in his forehead. I stood for I know not how long, with my heart beating madly, a strange, indescribable *fear* in possession of me. Divining the truth instinctively, I moved in front of him and gazed into his eyes; he neither saw me nor heard me, nor gave any sign that he was conscious of my presence. Then suddenly, unable to bear the strain any longer, I clutched him in my arms, crying wildly: “Daniel! Daniel!”

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