

AN END TO THINGS

Dr Newby was rather proud to have been invited to work at the Institute. A very respectable place, was the Institute: a little old-fashioned and poorly managed, perhaps; in the process of being superseded by other operations in the town, certainly; but its heart was in the right place and it was a Good Thing. Everyone said so.

The Institute took care of a rather select group of people, people whose mental conditions were not, on the whole, all that they could have been. No-one used the word *madhouse* but when one looked at the severe Victorian building from the outside it was not a word far from the forefront of one's mind.

As the most recent arrival on the workforce, it was inevitable that Newby would get the tasks that no one else wanted. And so it was that, on his first day at the Institute, he was assigned Number 8.

"With any luck we'll be able to transfer you to another patient," said the general manager. "Or we may yet be rid of this one, you never know. He's not suited to a place like this. But in the meantime do what you can."

Newby nodded.

"Oh, I should warn you of something," the manager added ominously. "He'll tell you stories."

Number 8 was an odd looking customer. A tall man with a thin, angular face, he had a shock of white hair which, according to the patient's records, had been dark five years previously when the patient had been admitted.

"I'm the doctor," Newby told the patient when he visited Number 8's room for the first time. The patient looked amused for a moment but said nothing.

"I'm told you suffer from amnesia," Newby continued.

"So they tell me too," said the patient, his voice tinged with a slight accent "Scouse, was it? I can't remember, myself."

Newby decided to pretend the patient hadn't made a joke. He looked down at Number 8, suddenly at a loss for what to say. "I'm also told you tell stories," he said eventually.

"Oh yes," said the patient. "Do you want to hear some?"

Newby considered for a moment - there was a chance it might help, possibly. If nothing else, it'd keep the patient happy.

He shrugged without enthusiasm. "Why not?" he said, settling himself down into an armchair and picking up a newspaper which the patient had placed beside it.

And so the patient began his rambling. Newby didn't pay him much attention at first. He was distracted by an article about the situation in America he'd spotted in the newspaper. His interest was suddenly caught when the patient started mumbling something about robots.

"Tell me that one again," he requested excitedly. The patient eyed him in surprise and Newby added, a little embarrassed, "Science-fiction's a passion of mine."

The patient frowned. "I was intending to tell you something a bit more educational. I'm quite fond of history, you see." Newby wasn't, however, and, even though he now paid attention to the stories, he made his irritation plain whenever the patient tried feeding him snippets of fact about Ancient Rome, the French Revolution or even the Battle of Culloden. Eventually, after making a few futile efforts to educate the doctor about the past, the patient seemed to recognise his lack of interest and started to pander to his

audience's wishes. He talked for hours about space and monsters and Newby sat there, enthralled. Occasionally, when he left the patient's room, he reproved himself for enjoying this childish stuff but, for the most part, he didn't worry about that sort of thing.

Against his will, and knowing he had more important duties and patients with far better prospects than this one, Newby found himself paying frequent visits to Number 8's room. Number 8, with infinite patience and infinite invention, would resume telling his stories.

"I hear you've been spending a lot of time with Number 8," the manager commented, his voice neutral but his disapproval plain.

"Yes. He's a fascinating case. And he has a great gift for storytelling, Newby replied with enthusiasm.

"I'll take your word for it," the manager said sourly. "Other doctors have found his ramblings rather infantile."

"Oh no," said Newby. "They sometimes seem that way, I'll agree, but they're far cleverer than that. They have a certain compelling quality about them. I can't quite say why." He hesitated for a second and then added, "Could I recommend him for the Treatment?"

The Treatment he referred to was the only method known to the Institute for curing amnesiacs such as Number 8. Newby didn't know how it was done, it wasn't his area of expertise, but he was aware of two certain facts about the process. Firstly, it was successful only in a minority of cases: the bulk of patients so treated returned to full consciousness for a few years, albeit with radically altered personalities, and then relapsed into amnesia.

Secondly, and more importantly from the Institute's point of view, it was a hideously expensive business.

The manager frowned. "It's always been the policy of the Institute to give Number 8 the Treatment one of these days, but with our finances as they are we'll have to postpone it for the time being. There are more deserving cases. after all."

He clapped Newby on the shoulder. "We'll see how things look in a month's time, shall we, old man?"

Newby walked away, feeling rather encouraged.

He was amazed at the sheer variety of the patient's stories. Sometimes he was enthralled by their plots and the fantastic concepts they encompassed; at other times he had to admit that the plots were both convoluted and dreadful but, nonetheless, the storytelling was such fun that those deficiencies hardly mattered. Sometimes the patient would get very earnest about some scientific idea and at other times he got very repetitive, a trait which Newby found endearing at first but a little irritating after a while.

Even though he enjoyed the vast majority of the patient's stories, there were occasional ones which Newby found less impressive and which tried his patience to the extreme. The one about the giant slugs he hadn't enjoyed at all and the patient had stopped telling the one about the huge spinning balls of energy that trapped people when Newby made it plain that unless he moved on to something else he would walk out.

There was also a stage when Newby began to think the manager had a point about not giving this patient the Treatment. It came shortly after the story with the giant

slugs. For a couple of days every story that the patient told was violent to the extreme. Although the earlier stories had had some unpleasant moments, there had never seemed to be such an absence of morality in them as there were in these. They weren't bad stories, as such, but their nature made Newby uncomfortable and made him worry that Number 8 wasn't quite suited for treatment after all.

Eventually he told the patient what he thought of them and Number 8 was quiet for a day or so. When he resumed his tales, his tone was far more muted and he stories he told were shorter than before. His confidence seemed to have gone and though he carried on talking for a few days, telling some absolute gems in the process, he gave the impression that he might trail off at any point.

This happened not long afterwards, annoyingly just when Newby was starting to enjoy the stories as much as he had done so before.

"I had a friend called *Dorothy*, was it?" the patient mumbled pathetically. "I can't remember how she left me But she was my best friend, for a time."

And he would say no more.

"That's odd," said one of Newby's colleagues the next day, after he reported his progress. "I used to be responsible for a patient in here who said he had a friend with that name."

"Really? He's not the same man, is he?"

"Oh no. My chap was Scottish. Nice little man. He used to tell some quite odd stories, the other doctor smiled nostalgically. "I didn't pay much attention to them at first, they just seemed like nonsense. But then they started getting more complicated and rather more interesting."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, he had the Treatment and got his memory back, don't ask me how. He left here... Must be four years since he left here, now I think about it."

"Do you know where he went? He might be able to help my patient. They may even have known one another."

His colleague smiled. "I'm afraid I can't help you. He left the country soon after he left us. Went to America, I think."

"Oh."

"Yes, somewhere on the West Coast, I think. Or was it Canada?" His colleague's face turned melancholy. "I hope he did all right out there."

Occasionally, the patient had visitors - not many, admittedly, but considerably more than any other patient in the building. There seemed to be far more of them about now that the patient had stopped telling his tales. They were a rather unkempt lot, no two of them particularly alike but all giving the distinct impression of being unlike the visitors any other patient received.

Newby mentioned this observation to the manager. The manager had snorted in response, commenting, "They're as mad as he is: they should be in this place as well. They ring me up and complain from time to time. There's no satisfying them. Keep an eye on them when they go to see your man: they encourage him far too much. They tell him stories too, you know. Barking mad, the lot of them."

It was true: they did tell him stories. Newby was initially very excited at learning of this and for a time listened to the visitors' stories surreptitiously. Some he enjoyed but it wasn't long, though, before he found them somewhat self-indulgent and tiresome and he lost interest. The patient would praise a handful of these stories to the skies and urge the doctor to

give them a try but his efforts were wasted. Newby thought that life was rather too short and he had other duties in any case.

Despite Newby's best efforts, and indeed the efforts of the patient's visitors, Number 8 kept his silence on the storytelling front, and nothing Newby could do made him carry on from where he had left off.

"I can't think of anything," he said helplessly. "I can't. Not with things as they are. My mind... I need the Treatment. Then I'll be able to carry on."

"But you've got such ingenuity, and, personally, I thought you were just getting into your stride."

Number 8 looked worried. "I could repeat some of them, I suppose. It wouldn't be the same though."

"I don't understand why you've stopped anyway."

The patient stared at Newby. "Don't you see? I invented them all before they put me in this place. I can't do anything here other than repeat myself. If were outside, I could do so much," he said wistfully. "So much." He gave Newby a rueful smile. "They won't let me out of here, you know. They say they will, but they're lying."

Newby went to see the manager the very next day, putting forward the case for Number 8 to receive the Treatment as forcefully as he could.

The manager did not look overjoyed to see him nor did he seem very impressed at Newby's demands.

"I wish you wouldn't keep pestering me about this, old man. I've already told you what I think."

"But you will allow him to receive the Treatment, won't you? You must admit he's got a much better chance of success than most of the people here. Anyway, most of the other patients have been forgotten by their friends but Number 8 always gets visitors. It makes sense for him to be revived."

"The manager eyed Newby for a moment across the expanse of his desk and frowned. In that moment Newby knew he had lost his argument and, indeed, could never have won it. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but I'm afraid there's very little chance your patient will ever receive the Treatment."

"But you said..."

"I know, I know, but it's become the policy of the Institute in recent years not to spend good money on cases such as his. Keeping him here is really just a kindness to his friends: something to give them a little hope."

Newby stared at the manager open-mouthed.

The manager continued, standing up behind his desk, walking over to the door and pointedly opened it so that Newby could leave.: "Reconcile yourself to it, old man. He's not going to get the Treatment. It would be more expense than it's worth. And there are more deserving cases."

The doctor looked helplessly up at the manager. "That's as maybe but he is deserving. He tells such stories, so varied... There's so much there and you're letting it go to waste!"

"It would be more expense than it's worth. And there are more deserving cases," the manager repeated leadenly. "It's a matter of policy."

Newby stood there helplessly. "But it's not fair! There's so much potential in him! It shouldn't end like this for him! It isn't fair!"

The manager would not reply. He walked away.