

# An Unscientific Story

By Louise J. Strong

He sat, tense and rigid with excitement, expectancy, incredulity. Was it possible, after so many years of study, effort and failure? Could it be that at last success rewarded him? He hardly dared to breathe lest he should miss something of the wonderful spectacle. How long he had sat thus he did not know; he had not stirred for hours—or was it days?—except to adjust the light by means of the button under his hand.

His laboratory, at the foot of his garden, was lighted day and night in the inner room (his private workshop) with electricity, and no one was admitted but by especial privilege.

Some things he had accomplished for the good of mankind, more he hoped to accomplish, but most of all he had been searching for, and striving to create, the life-germ. He had spent many of his years and much of his great wealth in unsuccessful experiments. He had met ridicule and unbelief with Stoical indifference, upheld by the conviction that he would finally prove the truth of his theories. Over and over again, defeat and disappointment had dashed aside his hopes; over and over again, he had rallied and gone on with dogged persistence.

And now! He could not realize it yet! He leaned back, and clasped his hands over his closed eyes. Perhaps he had imagined it—his over-strained nerves having deceived him. Was it an optical illusion? It had happened before. There had been times when he felt that he had torn aside the veil, and grasped the secret, only to find that a few abortive movements were all that existed of his creation. In sudden haste he turned to the glass again.

A—h! He drew a long breath that was almost a shriek. It was not illusion of sight, no delusion of his mind. The creature—it was plainly a living creature—had grown, and taken shape, even in those few moments. It lived! It breathed! It moved! And his the power that had given it life! His breath came in gasps, his heart beat in great throbs, and his blood surged through his veins.

But soon his scientific sense asserted itself, and he carefully and minutely studied the prodigy. Its growth was phenomenal; the rapidity of its expansion was past belief. It took form, developed limbs, made repeated attempts at locomotion, and finally drew itself out of the glass receptacle of cunningly compounded liquid in which it had been created.

At that the learned professor leaped to his feet in a transport of exultation. The impossible had been achieved! Life! Life, so long the mystery and despair of man, had come at his bidding. He alone of all humanity held the secret in the hollow of his hand. He plunged about the room in a blind ecstasy of triumph. Tears ran unknown and unheeded down his cheeks. He tossed his arms aloft wildly, as if challenging Omnipotence itself. At that moment, he felt a very god! He could create worlds, and people them! A burning desire seized him to rush out, and proclaim the deed from the housetops, to the utter confounding of brother scientists and the theologians.

He dropped, panting, into his chair, and strove to collect and quiet his mind. Not yet the time to make known the incredible fact. He must wait until full development proved that it was indeed a living creation—with animal nature and desires.

It had lain, quivering, on the marble slab, breathing regularly and steadily, making aimless movements. The four limbs, that had seemed but swaying feelers, grew into long, thin arms and legs, with claw-like hands, and flat, six-toed feet. It lost its spherical shape; an uneven protuberance, in which was situated the breathing-orifice, expanded into a head with rudimentary features. He took his spatula, and turned it over. It responded to the touch with an effort to rise;

the head wobbled weakly, and two slits opened in the dim face, from which looked out dull, fishy eyes. It grew! Each moment found it larger, more developed; yet he could no more see the growth than he could see the movement of the hour-hand of his watch.

‘It is probably of the simian order,’ he made memorandum. ‘Ape-like. Grows a strange caricature of humanity.’

An aperture appeared in the oblong head, forming a lipless mouth below the lump of a nose; large ears stood out on either side.

The caricature-like resemblance to humanity increased as it grew older. It crawled a space, sat up, made many futile efforts and at last succeeded in standing. It took a few staggering steps. It made wheezy, puffing sounds in its motions, and drivelled idiotically. Finally it squatted down on its haunches, the knobby knees drawn up against the rotund paunch, the hands grasping the ankles.

‘It grew!’

‘The attitude of primitive man,’ the Professor muttered.

For long it crouched thus, increasing in size, and beginning to display a crude intelligence; looking about with eyes that evidently saw—noted things: the arc of light, the glistening glass and brass, and most of all, himself.

It had as yet made no manifestation that indicated desire; but soon a fly, alighting near it, was snatched up and thrust into its mouth with incredible quickness and an eager, sucking noise. At this expression of animalism, the Professor’s hand shook so violently that he could scarcely record the movement.

Nervousness only! He would not admit to himself a feeling of startled misgiving. He was worn out. For days he scarcely tasted food, and he had dozed only at long intervals. A half-hour’s sleep would refresh him, and the creature could not change much in that time, for its bodily development seemed nearly completed. His head dropped on his arms, and he slumbered profoundly.

He was awakened by a sense of suffocation and a gnawing at his neck; he started up with a cry, pushing off a clammy mass that lay heavy on the upturned side of his face. Merciful heaven! It was the beast attacking him; its teeth, which he had not before discovered, seeking his throat!

It lay where he had thrown it, its long tongue licking the shapeless mouth, its eyes hot with an awakened bloodthirstiness. In a wave of repulsion, he struck it savagely.

He was appalled at what he had done; he seemed to have committed a crime in striking it.

He went to the anteroom, where fresh food was left for him daily, and selected different sorts, questioning whether any would or could satisfy a creature which had been brought into existence in such a marvellous manner.

It met him, with alert expectancy, and ate, with a ravenous gluttony that was loathsome, of all that he put before it.

Apparently it possessed all the animal senses; all had been tested but hearing. He spoke a few words in an ordinary tone; it lifted its face, with an expression of inquiry.

He paced the room in perplexed thought. Could it possess mental faculties beyond those of an ordinary animal? He had not hoped to produce anything but a lower form of life. Never had he imagined a creature of his creating, with consciousness of its existence; that was a responsibility for which he was not prepared.

Exhausted in body and mind, he locked the creature in the inner room, and threw himself on the couch in his study for a night’s rest.

The creature was standing when he entered, next morning, and, stepping toward him, it correctly repeated every word he had spoken the night before, as if reciting a lesson, showing an eager expectancy of approval.

‘Good heavens!’ ejaculated the Professor, reeling against the door.

‘Good heavens!’ it echoed, its small orbs sparkling.

He sprang toward it as if to force back this evidence of intelligent reason; it fled, keeping the table between them; brought to bay, it dropped on its knees, and put up beseeching hands, mumbling a prayer—a prayer from its own inner consciousness!

Aghast, terrified, he gazed at it, tremblingly assuring himself that many animals made imitative sounds—parrots readily learned human speech.

The curious creature had shown no bodily growth for several days; it had perhaps reached maturity, and would soon show signs of decay. Already a lump had appeared on its breast, which it picked at uneasily; he must not much longer delay exhibiting it. Yet he hesitated to do so until he was more certain concerning it.

He tested its power with a multitude of words that it not only easily repeated but retained perfectly, muttering them over, forming and reforming a number of proper sentences with various definitions, which it seemed to submit, in comparison, to some inner or waking intelligence.

Once, after long muttering, it came to him, with timid perplexity, and put the astonishing question: ‘What am I?’ And when he answered not for amazement the poor creature wandered about, repeating the words. Like one rallying from long unconsciousness, it seemed seeking a dimly remembered clue to its identity.

Fear clutched him! Impossible! Oh, impossible that he had a human soul imprisoned in such hideous form! A soul that would, by and by, fully awake to the wrong he had done it! No! No! He spurned the thought as a wild fancy. But even so—he had done nothing unlawful. Man was free to use his intellect to the utmost. He had brought into existence a living creature, but he was not responsible farther than the body. To the Keeper of souls be the rest.

Possibly some long-disembodied spirit, grown wise in its freedom, animated the creature, and its full development would open a channel for such knowledge as the earth had never before known, and the world would ring with his name, and honour and fame be his! Again he exulted while making record of its mental unfoldment, which was as rapid as had been the development of its uncouth body, and with much the same distortion. It recognized him as its creator, did him reverence, and obeyed his commands.

The lump, which he had taken for a symptom of decay, assumed the appearance of a large scale, and dropped off. When he would have examined it more closely, the creature put a hand over it, looking up at him with a show of hostility and cunning, for the first time disregarding his command; and he would not enforce obedience.

He was confounded next morning to find that the scale had developed into a second creature! About it the first hovered with evident joy and pride, inviting his attention to it with the gushing babble of a child. He had not imagined it possessed the power of generation, but here was reproduction with an ease and rapidity beyond any creature of like size in existence.

The second one, fed and taught by the first, matured in body and mind more quickly; and they invented or discovered a speech of their own—a strange jargon (of which he could make nothing) by which they exchanged thoughts and conversed, and which he tried in vain to help them reduce to a written language, through which he might obtain the wisdom for which he hoped.

And reproduction went on; while he subjected them to many tests to determine their nature.

As they grew in age and numbers, they began to evince for him less reverence; and an animosity appeared, that burst out at times in a horrible flow of invectives—a mingling of their own strange speech and his.

When he did not comply with their desires, they wailed piteously-demanding: ‘Why?’ ‘Why’—or hurled blasphemous defiance at him.

These things convinced him that they were a lower order of humanity, possessing souls; for no creature but man observed, with like or dislike, the bodily form in which its life was manifested. He was torn and racked with dread and a crushing sense of guilt and responsibility. It was as if he had started an avalanche that might overwhelm the world.

Already they had become a heavy burden to him. He was obliged to make nightly visits to the markets for food to satisfy their rapacity—food which he flung to them as to so many dogs, and which they pounced upon and fought over, with curses at each other’s greed. Yet at a word of reproof from him, they banded solidly against him, each for all.

All complacency over his handiwork had vanished; never could he bring himself to exhibit to mortal eye these repulsive creatures. His only thought was the unanswerable question: what should he do with them? On this he brooded continually, reaching no conclusion because he could no more contemplate destroying creatures possessing human intelligence, however distorted and degraded, than he could have taken the life of a born idiot or one insane.

In his absorption he neglected to lock the door one day, and roused to find them swarming in his study. Besides the high skylight there was one large window, securely closed by a heavy inside shutter, above which was a long narrow opening admitting air. Some of them, clinging to shutter and casement, and uttering low, sharp cries, like wolves scenting their prey, had climbed to the opening, and were peering out with gloating eyes. They clawed and jibbered, with hot tongues lolling eagerly, the saliva dripping from their ugly mouths—hideous pictures of unsatiated animal appetite.

And what was it that so aroused their ghoulish lust? His little children playing on the lawn, their innocent voices rising like heavenly music in contrast to the hellish sounds within. A rippling laugh floated on the air, and the creatures’ eagerness increased to a fury; with tooth and nail they strove to enlarge the opening, not heeding his horrified commands.

In a frenzy of rage, he snatched an iron rod, and swept them to the floor, driving them with blows and maledictions to their room. They fled before his wrath, but when he turned his back to lock the door, they flung themselves upon him, with desperate attempts to reach his throat.

After a sharp battle, he beat them off, and sent them huddling and whimpering to a corner. ‘Monsters! Monsters!’ he cried, pale with the discovery. ‘Monsters, who would prey on human flesh! What a curse I have called forth! It is of the devil!’

‘Devil; devil; yes, devil,’ one muttered, a leering and malicious knowledge gleaming in its oblique eyes.

In that moment he saw his duty—all hesitation vanished, and he made up his mind—they must be destroyed effectually, and he could not survive the destruction.

By that occult sense or power they possessed, which was beyond anything he had ever found in man, they divined his decision almost as soon as it was formed, and prostrated themselves with cries of mercy. They hastened to lay at his feet propitiatory offerings of their belongings: cards, pencils, picture-books—all that he had provided for their amusement and instruction—entreating him for life, the life that he himself had given them.

Their prayers and offerings rejected, the creatures became his open enemies. Intent on escaping from their prison, his every entrance was a battle with their persistent efforts to gain control of the door, the only outlet to the room.

They were not easily injured. No maiming nor bruises resulted from his hasty blows with the rod. Would it be possible to destroy them? Their bodily substance resembled clammy putty in appearance, with the consistency of rubber. He had never conquered his repugnance sufficiently to handle one. He could not experiment upon them, but the chemicals he meant to employ with the most powerful explosives, he trusted, would make the work of annihilation swift and thorough.

His preparations were delayed and hindered by their never-ending attempts to overcome him. The moment he became absorbed in his work, they crawled and crept with malignant insistence to a fresh attack. Once, in a movement of defence, he pricked the body of one with a sharpened tool, and he was almost suffocated by the fumes that arose from the yellow, viscid fluid that oozed from the wound.

Escaping from the affrighted, indignant uproar that followed, he stood at his study-window to recover from the dizzy sickness. 'That alone would make them formidable enemies of mankind,' he muttered.

'The slaughter of a few would put to flight an army. Turned loose, they are sufficient now in numbers, with all their hellish characteristics, to lay waste this teeming city. Wretched, impotent creator that I am! Could I but turn back the dial of time a few short weeks how happily I could take my place beside the most ignorant toiler, and meddle no more with the prerogative of the Almighty!'

In a few hours, the wound had healed, no trace of injury remaining; but they had learned new reason to fear him, and skulked about glowering, commenting upon him with shameless, insulting epithets.

He found a note from his wife in his mail, informing him of the arrival in the city of a noted scientist whose coming had been largely of his arranging, months before. There was much dissatisfaction expressed at his absence, and demands were made that he attend the forthcoming banquet.

'Of course, you will go,' she wrote. 'And, dear, do come in early enough to give a little time to your family. We have hardly seen you for weeks and weeks; and though I have obeyed the law, I so long to see you that I have been tempted to transgress, and boldly make my way to you. Baby, who was just beginning to totter about when you saw him last, runs easily now on his sturdy little legs, and he can say "papa" quite plainly. Do come, dear; a few hours with us will rest you.'

Rest indeed! Heaven itself could seem no sweeter to the miserable man than this glimpse of his home. His dear wife, content to live the life Omnipotence had planned for her; his sweet children, daily and harmoniously unfolding new graces of mind and body like lovely flowers—not for him was it to see their perfected maturity, from which he had hoped so much. With a groan he dropped his head, and wept bitter tears—tears that meant the renunciation of his own forfeited life.

All was complete when the banquet-day arrived. He had but to press a small knob in the floor, and the mighty currents of electricity would flash around the room, setting in motion forces of such tremendous power and instantaneous action that the entire space would instantly be one flame, of an intensity that no conceivable matter could withstand.

He had taken extraordinary precautions to guard the works from the curiosity and cunning of the creatures, protecting the button that controlled the whole with a metallic cover, which was held closely to the floor by screws.

And now he looked upon the creatures, itemizing their hideousness, as if to prepare a paper descriptive of them for this gathering of scientific authorities. Pygmies, between three and four feet in height, immensely strong; long, thin, crooked limbs, in some of unequal length; squat, thick bodies; pointed heads, bald but for a tuft of hair at the crown; huge ears, that loosely flapped, dog-like; nose, little more than wide nostrils; mouth, a mere long slit, with protruding teeth; and eyes, ah! eyes that showed plainly far more than animal intelligence.

They were small, oblique, set closely together, of a beady black, their only lids being a whitish membrane that swept them at intervals—but they sparkled and glowed with passion, dimmed with tears, and widened with thought. Those eyes, more than a score of them, were fixed upon him now with entreaty, menace, fear, revolt, and, most of all, judgment burning in their depths. Even the smaller ones, of which there were many in various sizes, eyed him with resentment and hate, while scurrying, like frightened rats, from corner to corner as he moved about.

Let accident put him for a moment in their power, and the whole pack would be upon him, and tear him to shreds, as they would any human being. Yet so strange, so monstrous was this unprecedented creation, mingling of lowest animal ferocity and human mind and soul, that he had found it quite possible to teach them to read and write, and work mathematical problems, and they were perhaps capable of considerable education—but without one redeeming trait. Earth had no place for such.

Their taste for blood was appalling; of all the food he offered, they preferred raw meat, the more gory the better. He had provided a quantity to employ them while he was away, and left them snarling over it.

He tried to put all thought of them behind him as he locked the doors. For a few hours he would be free, rid of torment and anticipation. But a deep melancholy shadowed the happiness of his reunion with his family, and gloom sat with him at the banquet-table. He took no part in the festivities and discussions, and was so manifestly unfit to do so that none urged him. Only when the distinguished guest touched on the subject of the possibility—or impossibility, as he viewed it—of producing life chemically, did he rouse to interest.

‘It can never be done,’ asserted the guest, ‘for the giving of the breath of life is the prerogative of the Omnipotent alone.’

‘Ah, but Professor Levison believes otherwise, and hopes some day to astonish us by exhibiting a creature which he has created, but whether beast or human we will have to wait for time to reveal!’ one said, with light sarcasm.

‘And in the impossibility to determine beforehand what the creation shall be lies my objection to man’s assuming the responsibility, even if he could by any means attain to it. For who could say what a calamity might not be brought upon humanity in the shape of some detestable monstrosity, whose evil propensities would be beyond control? Science has a large field for research; one need not step aside to intrude where success, if possible, might mean widespread disaster.’

The Professor shrank as from a blow, and the desire he had momentarily felt to exhibit his creation to the scoffers, and prove the reality of his assumption, died out in despair as he thought what an intolerable, devilish curse that creation was.

No, Nothing remained but silence and annihilation. He wondered, vaguely, as to the state of himself and his creatures in that place beyond the seething crucible of fire through which they would shortly pass together.

His wife was alarmed at his worn face and the dull apathy with which he spoke of the meeting, to which he had formerly looked with such eagerness.

‘Dear,’ she said, pleadingly, ‘you are wearing yourself out; drop everything, and rest. What will all the experiments and discoveries in the world matter to us if we have not you? Come, take a vacation, and let us go on our long-planned visit.’

‘I cannot now, he said, so decisively that she felt it useless to insist.

‘At any rate, you can give yourself a few hours’ rest. Do not go back to the laboratory tonight.’

‘Oh, but I must!’ he exclaimed. Then, taking her in his arms, he added: ‘My dearest, I cannot stay now, but I am planning to take a long rest soon.’ This was for her comfort afterwards.

He gazed at his sleeping children with yearning tenderness, and took leave of her with a solemn finality of manner that increased her anxiety. ‘It is as if he never expected to see us again,’ she murmured, tearfully.

From his study he could hear the creatures leaping, laughing, wrangling, forgetful as children of the impending fate they so clearly realized in his presence. He pitied, but could not save, them.

And now the hour had come—all things waited the last act. But, like the condemned criminal taking leave of earth in a last lingering gaze, he longed for another farewell glimpse of the home he would enter no more.

Going to the anteroom he threw open the shutter, and leaned out. How quiet the night! With what divine precision all things ran their appointed course, held and guided by Omnipotence! He lifted his heart in a prayer for protection and blessing upon the silent house which contained his dear ones. How dear he had never known till this sad hour in

What was it? Had the day of doom burst in all its terrible grandeur? The earth rocked with awful thunderings, the very heavens were blotted out with belching flame—then, suddenly, silence and darkness enveloped him.

He opened his eyes, and looked about with feeble efforts at thought. He was in his own bed, and surely that was his wife’s dear face, bathed in happy tears, bending over him, asking: ‘Dear husband, are you better? Do you know me?’

He nodded, smiling faintly; then memory returned, and a stream of questions rushed from his lips.

‘Hush! Hush!’ She stopped him with her soft hand. ‘Be quiet. I will tell you all, for I know you will not rest otherwise. There was a fearful explosion at the laboratory, so fearful that it was heard across the city; the whole building seemed to burst out at once into flame, and—oh, my dearest!—we feared you were in it; but a kind providence must have sent you to the outer room, for you were blown through the hall-window, and you were rescued from the burning debris.’ She paused to control her emotion.

‘How long?’ he asked.

‘Three weeks, and you have been in a raging fever till two days ago.’

‘Was all destroyed?’ he breathed, anxiously.

‘Yes dear; everything. Nothing was left but a few scraps of twisted metal. But we will not mind that when your precious life was spared. You can rebuild when you are entirely recovered.’

‘I belong to you and the children now,’ he murmured, in ambiguous answer, drawing her face down to his, feeling his stored life not his own.

It was clear to him what had happened. The creatures had loosened the screws of the cap covering the knob, and had themselves brought about their destruction. With a thankful sigh, he fell into a restful slumber.