



A Modern Magician
Stapledon, William Olaf

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About Stapledon:

He was born in Seacombe, Wallasey, on the Wirral peninsula near Liverpool, the only son of William Clibbert Stapledon and Emmeline Miller. The first six years of his life were spent with his parents at Port Said. He was educated at Abbotsholme School and Balliol College, Oxford, where he acquired a BA in Modern History in 1909 and a Master's degree in 1913[citation needed]. After a brief stint as a teacher at Manchester Grammar School, he worked in shipping offices in Liverpool and Port Said from 1910 to 1913. During World War I he served with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in France and Belgium from July 1915 to January 1919. On 16 July 1919 he married Agnes Zena Miller (1894-1984), an Australian cousin whom he had first met in 1903, and who maintained a correspondence with him throughout the war from her home in Sydney. They had a daughter, Mary Sydney Stapledon (1920-), and a son, John David Stapledon (1923-). In 1920 they moved to West Kirby, and in 1925 Stapledon was awarded a PhD in philosophy from the University of Liverpool. He wrote *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, which was published in 1929. However he soon turned to fiction to present his ideas to a wider public. *Last and First Men* was very successful and prompted him to become a full-time writer. He wrote a sequel, and followed it up with many more books on subjects associated with what is now called Transhumanism. In 1940 the family built and moved into Simon's Field, in Caldy. After 1945 Stapledon travelled widely on lecture tours, visiting the Netherlands, Sweden and France, and in 1948 he spoke at the Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wroclaw, Poland. He attended the Conference for World Peace held in New York in 1949, the only Briton to be granted a visa to do so. In 1950 he became involved with the anti-apartheid movement; after a week of lectures in Paris, he cancelled a projected trip to Yugoslavia and returned to his home in Caldy, where he died very suddenly of a heart attack. Olaf Stapledon was cremated at Landican Crematorium; his widow Agnes and their children Mary and John scattered his ashes on the sandy cliffs overlooking the Dee Estuary, a favourite spot of Olaf's, and a location that features in more than one of his books. Source: Wikipedia

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THEY CONFRONTED EACH OTHER ACROSS A TEA TABLE in a cottage garden. Helen was leaning back coldly studying Jim's face. It was an oddly childish, almost foetal face, with its big brow, snub nose, and pouting lips. Childish, yes; but in the round dark eyes there was a gleam of madness. She had to admit that she was in a way drawn to this odd young man partly perhaps by his very childishness and his awkward innocent attempts at lovemaking; but partly by that sinister gleam.

Jim was leaning forward, talking hard. He had been talking for a long time, but she was no longer listening. She was deciding that though she was drawn to him she also disliked him. Why had she come out with him again? He was weedy and self-centered. Yet she had come.

Something he was saying recaptured her attention. He seemed to be annoyed that she had not been listening. He was all worked up about something. She heard him say, "I know you despise me, but you're making a big mistake. I tell you I have powers. I didn't intend to let you into my secret, yet; but, damn it, I will. I'm finding out a lot about the power of mind over matter. I can control matter at a distance, just by willing it. I'm going to be a sort of modern magician. I've even killed things by just willing it."

Helen, who was a medical student, prided herself on her shrewd materialism. She laughed contemptuously.

His face flushed with anger, and he said, "Oh very well! I'll have to show you."

On a bush a robin was singing. The young man's gaze left the girl's face and settled intently on the robin. "Watch that bird," he said. His voice was almost a whisper. Presently the bird stopped singing, and after looking miserable for a while, with its head hunched into its body, it dropped from the tree without opening its wings. It lay on the grass with its legs in the air, dead.

Jim let out a constricted squawk of triumph, staring at his victim. Then he turned his eyes on Helen. Mopping his pasty face with his handkerchief, he said, "That was a good turn. I've never tried it on a bird before, only on flies and beetles and a frog."

The girl stared at him silently, anxious not to seem startled. He set about telling her his secret. She was not bored any more.

He told her that a couple of years earlier he had begun to be interested in "all this paranormal stuff." He had been to séances and read about psychical research. He wouldn't have bothered if he hadn't suspected he had strange powers himself. He was never really interested in spooks and thought transference and so on. What fascinated him was the possibility that a mind might be able to affect matter directly. "Psychokinesis," they called this power; and they knew very little about it. But he didn't care a damn about the theoretical puzzles. All he wanted was power. He told Helen about the queer experiments that had been done in America with dice. You threw the dice time after time, and you willed them to settle with the two sixes uppermost. Generally they didn't; but when you had done a great many experiments you totted up the results and found that there had been more sixes than should have turned up by sheer chance. It certainly looked as though the mind really had some slight influence. This opened up terrific possibilities.

He began to do little experiments on his own, guided by the findings of the researchers, but also by some of his own ideas. The power was fantastically slight, so you had to test it out in situations where the tiniest influence would have detectable results, just tipping the scales.

He didn't have much success with the dice, because (as he explained) he never knew precisely what he had to do. The dice tumbled out too quickly for him. And so he only had the slight effect that the Americans had reported. So he had to think up new tricks that would give him a better opening. He had had a scientific training, so he decided to try to influence chemical reactions and simple physical processes. He did many experiments and learned a lot. He prevented a spot of water from rusting a knife. He stopped a crystal of salt from dissolving in water. He formed a minute crystal of ice in a drop of water and finally froze the whole drop by simply "willing away" all the heat, in fact by stopping all the molecular movement.

He told Helen of his first success at killing, a literally microscopic success. He brewed some very stagnant water and put a drop on a slide. Then through the microscope he watched the

swarm of microorganisms milling about. Mostly they were like stumpy sausages, swimming with wavy tails. They were of many sizes. He thought of them as elephants, cows, sheep, rabbits. His idea was that he might be able to stop the chemical action in one of these little creatures and so kill it. He had read up a lot about their inner workings, and he knew what key process he could best tackle. Well, the damned things kept shifting about so fast he couldn't concentrate on anyone of them for long enough. He kept losing his victim in the crowd. However, at last one of the "rabbits" swam into a less populous part of the slide, and he fixed his attention on it long enough to do the trick. He willed the crucial chemical process to stop, and it did stop. The creature stopped moving and stayed still indefinitely. It was almost certainly dead. His success, he said, made him "feel like God."

Later he learned to kill flies and beetles by freezing their brains. Then he tried a frog, but had no success. He didn't know enough physiology to find a minute key process to check. However, he read up a lot of stuff, and at last he succeeded. He simply stopped the nerve current in certain fibres in the spinal cord that controlled the heartbeat. It was this method also that he had used on the robin.

"That's just the beginning," he said. "Soon I shall have the world at my feet. And if you join up with me, it will be at your feet too."

Throughout this monologue the girl had listened intently, torn between revulsion and fascination. There was a kind of bad smell about it all, but one couldn't afford to be too squeamish in these days. Besides, there was probably nothing in morality, anyhow. All the same, Jim was playing with fire. Strange, though, how he seemed to have grown up while he was talking. Somehow he didn't look gawky and babyish anymore. His excitement, and her knowledge that his power was real, had made him look thrillingly sinister. But she decided to be cautious and aloof.

When at last Jim was silent, she staged a concealed yawn and said, "You're clever, aren't you! That was a good trick you did, though a horrid one. If you go much further, you'll end on the gallows."

He snorted and said, "It's not like you to be a coward."

The taunt stung her. Indignantly she answered, "Don't be ridiculous! Why should I join with you, as you call it, merely because you can kill a bird by some low trick or other?"

In Jim's life there had been certain events which he had not mentioned. They seemed to him irrelevant to the matter in hand, but they were not really so at all. He had always been a weakling. His father, a professional footballer, despised him and blamed the frail mother. The couple had lived a cat-and-dog life almost since their honeymoon. At school Jim had been thoroughly bullied; and in consequence he had conceived a deep hatred of the strong and at the same time an obsessive yearning to be strong himself. He was a bright lad and had secured a scholarship at a provincial university. As an undergraduate, he kept to himself, worked hard for a scientific degree, and aimed at a career of research in atomic physics. Already his dominant passion was physical power, so he chose its most spectacular field. But somehow his plans went awry. In spite of his reasonably good academic qualifications, he found himself stuck in a low-grade job in an industrial lab, a job which he had taken on as a stopgap till he could capture a post in one of the great institutions devoted to atomic physics. In this backwater, his naturally sour disposition became embittered. He felt he was not getting a fair chance. Inferior men were outstripping him. Fate was against him. In fact he developed something like a persecution mania. But the truth was that he was a bad cooperator. He never developed the team spirit which is so necessary in the immensely complex work of fundamental physical research. Also, he had no genuine interest in physical theory and was impatient of the necessity of advanced theoretical study. What he wanted was power, power for himself as an individual. He recognized that modern research was a cooperative affair and that in it, though one might gain dazzling prestige, one would not gain any physical power as an individual. Psychokinesis, on the other hand, might perhaps give him his heart's desire. His interest rapidly shifted to the more promising field. Henceforth his work in the lab was a mere means of earning a livelihood.

After the conversation in the cottage garden he concentrated more eagerly than ever on his venture. He must gain even

more spectacular powers to impress Helen. He had decided that for him, at any rate, the promising line was to develop his skill at interfering with small physical and chemical processes, in lifeless and in living things. He learned how to prevent a struck match from lighting. He tried to bypass the whole of atomic research by applying his power of psychokinesis to the release of energy pent up in the atom. But in this exciting venture he had no success at all, perhaps because in spite of his training, he had not sufficient theoretical knowledge of physics, nor access to the right kind of apparatus for setting up the experiment. On the biological side he succeeded in killing a small dog by the same process as he had applied to the robin. He was confident that with practice he would soon be able to kill a man.

He had one alarming experience. He decided to try to stop the sparking of his motorcycle engine. He started up the bike on its stand and set about "willing" the spark to fail. He concentrated his attention on the points of the sparking plug and the leaping spark and "willed" the space between the points to become impenetrable, an insulator. This experiment, of course, involved a far greater interference with physical processes than freezing a nerve fibre or even preventing a match from lighting. Sweat poured from him as he struggled with his task. At last the engine began to misfire. But something queer happened to himself. He had a moment of horrible vertigo and nausea and then he lost consciousness. When he recovered, the engine was once more running normally.

This mishap was a challenge. He had never been seriously interested in the mere theoretical side of his experiments for its own sake, but now he had perforce; to ask himself what exactly was happening when by an "act of will" he interfered with a physical process. The obvious explanation was that in some way the physical energy that should have crossed the gap between the points had been directed into his own body; in fact that he had suffered the electric shock that he would have had if he had touched the points. It may be doubted whether the true explanation was as simple as this, for his symptoms were not those of electric shock. It might be nearer the truth to say that the inhibition of so much physical energy caused some sort of profound psychical disturbance in him; or else, to put

the matter very crudely, that the physical energy was in some way converted into psychical energy in him. This theory is borne out by the fact that, when he recovered consciousness, he was in a state of great excitement and mental vigour, as though he had taken some stimulating drug.

Whatever the truth of the matter, he adopted the simpler theory and set about sidetracking the intruding energy so as to protect himself. After much anxious experimentation, he found that he could do so by concentrating his attention both on the sparking plug and on some other living organism, which then "drew off the electricity" and suffered accordingly. A sparrow sufficed. It died of the shock, while he himself remained conscious long enough to stop the engine. On another occasion he used his neighbour's dog as a "lightning conductor." The animal collapsed, but soon recovered consciousness and careened about the garden barking hilariously.

His next experiment was more exciting, and much, much more reprehensible. He went into the country and took up a position on a knoll, whence he could see a fairly long stretch of road. Presently a car came into sight. He concentrated his attention on the sparking plugs and "willed" the electrical energy to escape into the driver. The car slowed down, vacillated between the two sides of the road, and came to a standstill across the fairway. He could see the driver slumped over the steering wheel. There was no one else in the car. Greatly excited, Jim waited to see what would happen. Presently another car came in the opposite direction, hooted violently, and drew up with screeching brakes. The driver emerged, went to the derelict car, opened a door, and was confronted by the unconscious occupant. While the horrified newcomer was wondering what to do, the other recovered consciousness. There was an anxious conversation, and finally both cars went their separate ways.

Jim now felt ready to impress his girlfriend. Since the killing of the robin, they had occasionally met, and in his awkward and adolescent way he had tried to make love to her. She had always discouraged him; but she was obviously more interested in him since the robin incident. Though she sometimes

affected to despise him, he felt that she was secretly drawn to him.

But one day he had an unpleasant surprise. He had boarded a bus to take him home from his work. He climbed the stairs and settled into a seat. Suddenly he noticed Helen sitting a few seats ahead with a curly-headed young man in a sportscoat. The couple were deep in conversation with their heads bent together. The girl's hair brushed his cheek. Presently she laughed, with a ring of happiness such as he had never before heard from her. She turned her face toward her companion. It was aglow with vitality and love. Or so it seemed to the jealous lover three seats behind.

Irrational fury swept over him. He was so ignorant of the ways of girls, and so indignant that "his girl" (for so he regarded her) should take notice of another man, that jealousy wholly possessed him, to the exclusion of all other considerations. He could think of nothing but destroying his rival. His gaze seized upon the nape of the hated neck before him. He passionately conjured up images of the hidden vertebrae and the enclosed bundle of nerve fibres. The nerve current must cease; must, must cease. Presently the curly head sank on Helen's shoulder, and then the whole body fell forward.

The murderer hurriedly rose from his seat and turned his back on the incipient commotion. He left the bus, as though ignorant of the disaster.

Continuing his journey on foot, he was still so excited that he had no thought but exultation over his triumph. But gradually his frenzy subsided, and he faced the fact that he was a murderer. Urgently he reminded himself that after all there was no point in feeling guilty, since morality was a mere superstition. But alas, he did feel guilty, horribly guilty; the more so since he had no fear of being caught.

As the days passed, Jim alternated between what he regarded as "irrational" guilt and intoxicating triumph. The world was indeed at his feet. But he must play his cards carefully. Unfortunately his guilt gave him no peace. He could not sleep properly; and when he did sleep, he had terrifying dreams. By day his experiments were hampered by the fantasy that he had sold his soul to the devil. This notion infuriated him with its very silliness. Yet he could not rid himself of it. He began

drinking rather heavily. But he soon found that alcohol reduced his psychokinetic power, so he firmly broke himself of the habit.

Another possible form of relief from his obsessive guilt was sex. But somehow he could not bring himself to face Helen. He was irrationally afraid of her. Yet she must be quite ignorant that he had killed her lover.

At last he met her accidentally in the street. There was no possibility of avoiding her. She was rather wan, he thought, but she smiled at him and actually suggested a talk over a cup of coffee. He was torn between fear and desire, but presently they were seated in a cafe. After some trivial remarks, she said.

"Please comfort me! I have had a terrible shock quite recently. I was on the top of a bus with my brother who has been in Africa for three years. While we were talking, he collapsed and died almost instantly. He seemed perfectly fit. They say it was some new virus in the spinal cord." She noticed that Jim's face had turned deadly pale. "What's the matter?" she cried. "Are you going to die on me too?"

He pulled himself together and assured her that sheer sympathy for her had made him feel faint. He loved her so much. How could he help being upset by her misfortune? To his relief Helen was completely taken in by this explanation. She gave him, for the first time, the glowing smile he had formerly seen her turn upon her brother.

Encouraged, he pressed home his advantage. He said, he did so want to comfort her. They must meet again soon. And if she was at all interested in his experiments, he would show her something really exciting some time. They arranged a trip in the country the following Sunday. He privately decided to repeat for her benefit his trick with a passing car.

Sunday was a bright summer day. Sitting together in an empty railway carriage, they talked a good deal about her brother. He was rather bored, but he expressed ardent sympathy. She said she never imagined he had such a warm heart. He took her arm. Their faces drew close together, and they looked into each other's eyes. She felt an overwhelming tenderness for this strange, rather grotesque though boyish face, wherein, she told herself, the innocence of childhood was

blended with an adult consciousness of power. She felt the underlying grimness, and she welcomed it. Jim, for his part, was realizing that she was very desirable. The warm glow of health had returned to her face. (Or was it a glow of love?) The full, sweet lips, the kindly, observant grey eyes, filled him not only with physical desire but a swooning gentleness that was new to him. The recollection of his guilt and present deception tormented him. An expression of misery came over his face. He let go her arm and bowed forward with his head in his hands. Perplexed and compassionate, she put an arm round his shoulders, and kissed his hair. Suddenly he burst into tears and buried his head on her breast. She hugged him and crooned over him as though he were her child. She begged him to tell her what was the matter, but he could only blubber, "Oh, I'm horrible! I'm not good enough for you."

Later in the day, however, he had quite recovered his spirits, and they walked arm in arm through the woods. He told her of his recent successes, culminating with the car incident. She was impressed and amused, but also morally shocked by the irresponsibility of risking a fatal accident merely to test his powers. At the same time she was obviously fascinated by the fanaticism that drove him to such lengths. He was flattered by her interest, and intoxicated by her tenderness and her physical proximity. For they were now resting on the little knoll where he intended to do his trick with the car, and he was lying with his head in her lap, gazing up at her face, where all the love that his life had missed seemed to be gathered. He realized that he was playing the part of an infant rather than a lover. But she seemed to need him to do so, and he was happy in his role. But soon sexual desire began to reassert itself and with it masculine self-respect. He conceived an uncontrollable lust to demonstrate his godlike nature by some formidable display of his powers. He became the primitive savage who must kill an enemy in the presence of the beloved.

Looking up through Helen's fluttering hair, he saw a small object moving. For a moment he took it for a gnat, then realized that it was a distant airplane approaching.

"Watch that plane," he said; and she was startled by the abruptness of his voice. She looked up, and down again at him. His face was contorted with effort. His eyes glared, his nostrils

dilated. She had an impulse to fling him from her, so brutal he looked. But fascination triumphed. "Keep your eyes on the plane," he commanded. She looked up, then down, then up again. She knew she ought to break the devilish spell. (There was something called morality, but a delusion, probably.) Fascination had triumphed.

Presently the advancing plane's four engines hesitated, and ceased one by one to fire. The plane glided for a while, but soon gave evidence of being out of control. It vacillated, staggered, and then was in a nose dive, spiralling. Helen screamed, but did nothing. The plane disappeared behind a distant wood. After a few seconds there was a muffled crash, and smoke began to rise from behind the wood, a leaning black plume.

Jim raised himself from Helen's lap, and turning, pressed her backward to the ground. "That's how I love you," he whispered fiercely. Then he furiously kissed her lips, her neck.

She made a violent effort to pull herself together and resist the impulse of self-abandonment to this lunatic. She struggled to free herself from his grip; and presently the two stood facing each other, panting. "You're mad," she cried. "Think what you have done! You have killed people just to show how clever you are. And then you make love to me." She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

He was still in a state of crazy exaltation, and he laughed. Then he taunted her. "Call yourself a realist! You're squeamish. Well, now you know what I am really like; and what I can do. And see! You're mine. I can kill you at any moment, wherever you are. I shall do whatever I like with you. And if you try to stop me, you'll go the way of the robin and—the man on the bus." Her hands dropped from her tear-stained face. She stared at him in mingled horror—and tenderness. She said quietly, "You're quite mad, you poor boy. And you seemed so gentle. Oh, my dear, what can I do about you?"

There was a long silence. Then suddenly Jim collapsed on the ground, blubbering like a child. She stood over him in perplexity.

While she was wondering what to do, and blaming herself for not breaking the spell before it was too late, he was in an agony of self-loathing. Then he started to use his technique

upon himself, so that no more harm should be done. It was more difficult than he expected; for as soon as he began to lose consciousness he also lost his grip on the operation. But he made a desperate effort of will. When Helen, noticing his stillness, knelt down by him, he was dead.



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