

# The Man in the Machine

By J. D. Beresford

The shock had affected my sensibility. I knew that my right arm had suffered in some way, but I did not realise that the humerus was broken. My first impulse was to reassure my wife. I was immensely elated at having escaped death. I sat up and shouted; and then I tried to raise my arm and wave to her.

She had to make a long detour before she could get down the cliff, and during those ten minutes, I was still almost insensible to pain. I was numbed and yet that sense of elation persisted. A bright little trickle of thought ran clearly through my mind. I had had an amazing escape. I had fallen sixty feet on to the rocks, and I was not dead nor likely to die. I was proud of my adventure and of my immunity.

And when my wife came to me, I began to talk with a high, quick eagerness. I wanted to show her at once that I was not seriously hurt.

“But your arm is broken,” she said.

I looked at it stupidly and tried again to raise it. I was annoyed because my control over it was gone. The lever was snapped, and the muscles had no purchase. They had but a single function, and it was dependent upon the rigidity of that lever. I saw that useless arm as something altogether dissociated from me: I saw it as a purely mechanical arrangement of parts.

But even as I turned my mind to the contemplation of the fracture, the arm began to burn me with a white-hot fire. I gasped at the sudden pain, but some controlling sense within me sighed its relief. I was vaguely aware that pain was more endurable than that numbness, that sense of separation.

The nearest doctor lived five miles away. At least an hour must elapse before he could arrive. I had been desperately tried by my walk up to our house. And my wife, who had once been ward-sister at St. Andrew’s Hospital, gave me a strong injection of morphia. .

I slipped so softly and easily out of pain and distress, and all the harassing expectations of my reality, that I can recall no incident of the passing from my bedroom to the Great Hall of my vision. The past had been taken from me by the power of the drug; and I could no longer check present experience by the thought of anticipations based upon old observation. Surprise had been eliminated from my mind until such time as it could be reconstructed from the elements of new knowledge.

I was not surprised, for example, by the indescribable immensity of the Great Hall; nor by the strange appearance of the machine that was working close at hand; nor by the fact that I had an unknown companion with whom I was, apparently, on terms of reasonable intimacy.

“That machine interests me,” I said. We went a few steps nearer.

“What works it?” I asked.

“The man inside,” my companion told me.

I accepted that without demur. The man was invisible, but his existence somewhere in the complicated heart of the machine was a perfectly natural inference.

“It looks an intricate affair,” I said.

“Oh! very!” my companion replied carelessly, and then added as an afterthought: “Of course we understand it much better than we used to. The engineers can effect really wonderful repairs in it, nowadays.”

We were moving on when a new thought occurred to me. "I say!" I said. "Doesn't that chap inside there ever come out?"

My companion yawned, and mumbled something about never having taken much interest in mechanics.

I was suddenly annoyed with him. I wanted to hold his attention, to insist upon an answer to my questions; but he was staring abstractedly into the distance. I had an absurd impression that he was many miles away; that I should have to undertake a long and troublesome journey before I could make him listen to me. . . .

I found myself addressing the machine. "Don't you *want* to get out," I was saying; and the stress I laid upon the important word seemed to imply some earlier, forgotten conversation.

"Why should I?" was the answer I received.

A feeling of profound sadness overtook me. I realised with a deep regret that I could not expect truth from this complicated mechanism. The man inside was so involved in all this fearful arrangement of levers and controls. Both my question and his answer emerged, twisted and altered by the million obstructions through which they had had to trickle. The man himself, invisible and intangible, was so shut out; so hopelessly distant.

I wondered whether if one smashed tremendously through his ingenious machine, one would ultimately find him? Or if with infinite patience one delicately cut and probed . . . ?

I heard an urgent voice calling to me. "Will you come up?" it said.

A hand was clasped about my upper arm; and as I was lifted high in the air, the hand tightened until it gripped me like a ring of iron.

I had a terrifying premonition that I was to be thrust into a machine; to be immured, hidden, cut off from all freedom and immediacy.

I was at once aghast and furious. I began fiercely to explain that the thing was unjust, cruel, utterly undeserved. I tried furiously to struggle but I was so impotent held there, in mid-air, by one arm. And the grip upon me tightened continually, until the pain of it was unendurable.

I shouted with all my strength and heard my own voice wailing feebly down the immensities of the Great Hall.

Far away another voice made a little hushed announcement. "He's coming, too," it said.

I desired with all my soul to combat that statement, but I was faint with the heat of my impotent struggle and the agony of that gripping hand. I saw a rising drift of blackness and knew that there lay the entrance to confinement.

Then my spirit failed me, and I fell horribly through the darkness, down into the deep, hidden heart of the machine.

Presently, I dared to peer out at the light through two little darkened windows.

"I think he has come to," announced the hushed voice of my wife from the far side of the bed.