

# The Barrier

By J. D. Beresford

The body seems to have a separate and industrious life of its own. It carries on works of amazing intricacy beyond the reach of consciousness; works, the very existence of which are unknown to us so long as they are being successfully performed. Only when there is some hitch or impediment, is the consciousness crudely signalled by the message of pain. Attention is demanded, but no detail is given of the nature of the trouble, nor of how it may be overcome. All that the message conveys is a plea for rest, for the suspension of those activities within the consciousness which are—may we assume?—using up energy from some additional source that the workers now wish to draw upon themselves.

Can we assume further, that this corporate life of the cells is not entirely mechanical; is not a series of chemico-biological reflexes or reactions, somehow mysteriously initiated at the birth of life and continued by the stimulus of some unknown unconscious force so long as this plastic, suggestible association of cells remains active? For example, it would appear that although strangers from another like community will be accepted and treated as fellow members, some lack of sympathy, or different habit of work mars the perfection of the building. In renewing the bone structure after trephining, for instance, it has been found that a graft from the patient's own body—thin slices from the tibia are now being used—produces better results than can be achieved by the workers with strange material. The graft in this case is only used as a scaffolding. (Our assumed workers with all their ingenuity are not equal to the task of throwing out cantilevers into the void.) But the planks of the scaffolding become an organic part of the new structure, and when the new material used is foreign, we find the marks of divided purpose in plan and construction. The new bone takes longer to form and the work is not so well done.

(Incidentally, it is interesting to notice how impossible our mechanical metaphors become when we are speaking of this work of the cells. I have spoken of throwing out a cantilever, and incorporating the planks of a scaffold in the new structure, but cantilevers and planks are themselves, also, workers! And, indeed, the fact that the process cannot be truly stated or even conceived in mechanical terms may be taken as a contribution to the metaphysical argument.)

Yet astounding and difficult as is this problem of the civic, corporate life that is being lived without our knowledge, a still more inconceivable partnership awaits our investigation. So far, we have touched only on two domains; the first peculiar to those who study the body from a more or less mechanical aspect, such as the surgeon or the histologist; the second to the psychologist. There remains, I believe, a third peculiar to the practical experiments of biology and psychology.

Such reflections as these have often haunted me, and my mind was confusedly feeling for some key to the whole mystery as I stood by the death-bed of old Henry Sturton. He had been fatally injured by a motor omnibus as he stood in the gutter with his pitiful tray of useless twopenny toys. No one else had been hurt; the accident would have been no accident, nothing more than a violent and harmless skidding of the juggernaut, if Henry Sturton had not been standing on that precise spot. A difference of a few inches either way would have saved him. As it was the whole performance seemed to have been fastidiously planned in order to destroy him. And in his pocket they had found a begging letter addressed to me that he had perhaps forgotten to post. Or it may

be that for once he had honestly intended to stamp it? I had egotistically wondered if I was the person for whose benefit this casual killing had been undertaken.

When I reached the hospital, he was either asleep or unconscious, but they allowed me to wait within the loop of the screen that was to hide the spectacle of his passing from the other patients in the ward. And I stood there pondering on the marvel of the bodily functions. I got no further than that until he opened his eyes and I saw my vision.

He had been a gross man. I had always disliked and despised him since a certain occasion on which I had lunched with him at his Club. That was more than twenty years ago. I was young then, full of eagerness for the spiritual adventure of life, and he was a successful business man of nearly fifty, coarse and stupid, drugged by his perpetual indulgence in physical satisfactions. But, indeed, he had always been stupid. He was, I have heard, the typical lout of his school, too lethargic to be vicious, living entirely, as it seemed, for his stomach and his bed. Heaven knows what his life would have been, if he had always been forced to work for his bare living, but Providence always has a habit of pandering to fat men, and he succeeded to his father's business, and let it run itself on its own familiar lines.

He had never married. He was too selfish for that, but he had, so someone told me, bought and mistreated more than one young woman for his own office—his only positive sin in the eyes of the moralists; though I used to feel that his whole existence was one vast overwhelming sin from first to last. That, however, is the common error of judgment of the ascetic, self-immolating type.

He found no friends when his business failed. His intimates were men of the same calibre as himself, and rejected him in those circumstances as he would have rejected them. The failure itself was an unlucky accident. The man who ran the business proved unfaithful; he was the victim of a confidence that begot in him the lust for power. He gambled, lost, and absconded.

Sturton's descent into the gutter was delayed for a few years by a clerical appointment he begged from some firm with whom he had traded before his bankruptcy. The appointment could not have been lucrative. He attended the office every day, but nothing else seemed to have been expected of him. He could have been capable of nothing else. Whatever his potentialities may once have been, they were hopelessly stultified by then. I used to meet him now and again in those days of his clerkship; and let him gorge himself at my expense. That was his single pleasure and desire. Poverty had exaggerated the cravings of his gluttony.

And as I stood respectfully within the fold of the screen and looked down at the flabby coarseness of the horrible old man in the bed, I reflected that his body must in its own way have represented a highly successful community of cells. There had been no distractions of purpose in the entity we knew as Henry Sturton; no rending uncertainties to upset his nerves and interfere with the steady industry of his bodily functions.

I was thinking that when he opened his eyes and I caught a glimpse of the fierce and splendid thing his body had always hidden from us. I saw it then, beyond any shadow of doubt—the spirit that had been imprisoned for seventy years, lying in wait eternally patient and vigilant, for this one brief instant of expression. It looked at me without recognition, yet with an amazing intensity, as if it knew that all its long agony of suppression would find no other compensation than this. So near release, his soul, still longing to touch life at some point, had seized its opportunity when that intolerably gross barrier of his body had been mangled and dislocated by this long-delayed accident.

Then Henry Sturton coughed, and I saw the beautiful eager stare die out of his eyes, and give place to that look of gross desire I had always loathed. Even then, I believe, he craved for food. But the next moment his eyes closed and his lips spurted a stream of blood.

The nurse was with him instantly, pushing me aside. I took advantage of her preoccupation to stay till the end. I hoped for one more sight of his soul. I thought it might take advantage of another intermission before the work of the community was abruptly closed. But I did not see it again.

He spoke once, two minutes before he died.

“God blast,” was what he said.