

The Miracle

By J. D. Beresford

"I'm dead."

She heard the voice, his voice, speaking distinctly, with something of the same fatalism, half-careless, half-resentful, that he had used when he returned to France after their five short days of married life. For one moment she believed that it was actually his voice, that he had come suddenly and wonderfully out of his six weeks' insensibility, to a doubting interrogation of the darkness. But even as she fumbled impatiently for the switch of the electric light, she knew that the voice had not come from the bed on the further side of the room, but had spoken its horrible message close, very close, to her ear—intimately, confidentially, with a touch of swaggering, careless courage.

And as the light, with an effect of servile obedience, disclosed the room at her touch of the switch, she had no least hope that she would be the witness of the longed-for miracle; that she would see him who had lain so long a lax and useless counterfeit of his vigorous self, half raised and questioning the unfamiliar surroundings with his pitiful assertion.

Nevertheless she got out of bed, a slight pathetic figure in the white light that searched out every corner of the room, and crossed to where he lay inert and flaccid.

No, there was no change in him. The enigma that had baffled all the specialists still persisted. He was still the living dead man who had been ejected with just one little sobbing gasp of air out of the narrow tunnel, the bore of his own body, by the premature explosion of the mine he had spent six weeks' labour in laying. On the further side that explosion had blown out the flank of a hill, but he who had stoppered the narrow vent on the hither side, like a plug of damp earth in the mouth of a rifle-barrel, had been softly expelled into the presence of fellow-sappers waiting at the junction of the wider tunnel had bored, with never a mark of injury on him. Even his hair, which had been so near—a paltry twenty feet or so—to the charge that had lifted goodness knows how many toils of earth and stone sky-high—even his hair had not been singed.

His body, almost incredibly, had come unscathed from its open sight of death, but something—his wife thought of it as his spirit—had been instantly shocked into silence. Since that awful experience he had given no sign of consciousness or of volition. His bodily functions continued their offices with a slow, dull persistence—he was fed artificially now and again to remedy the slight waste of tissue—but his spirit gave no least sign of its occupancy.

The specialists had been greatly interested, but he had given them so little material for actual experiment that they had yielded to his wife's urgent request, and yesterday he had been transferred to her immediate care in the reasonably convenient Maida Vale flat in which they had spent their too restricted honeymoon. . . .

She leant over him now and stared into his composed impassive face, every feature of which was steady with the challenging quiet of death. Where was he? she wondered. What could she conceivably do to reach him through that unresponsive instrument on the bed—an instrument that appeared as useless now as an unstrung piano?

And the voice, that had made its immense admission with the desperate gallantry of one who had flung up his arms and acknowledged himself prisoner to the great enemy—whence had come the voice? She could remember no antecedent dream. The sound of his speaking had wakened her, and in the act of waking she had heard his surrender made, as clearly as if he had spoken it

with his mouth at her ear. She felt that she could hear it still. That reckless sentence was yet ringing through the room: “*I’m dead.*” Just so, she thought, might he have said “*Kamerad*” in face of some overwhelmingly superior force.

“But you’re *not*; you’re not dead,” she pleaded to that insensible figure; “you’re alive if—if you would but come back.”

She might as well have strummed on the keyboard of a wireless piano for all the reaction she could produce from the lax representative that lay before her, but her own verbal image returned to her with another question.

Come back? From where? Where was *he* now—the individuality she addressed as “you”? Was that essential personality of his buried deep in this spiritless automaton, or was it away somewhere in the void, unaware both of its fleshly anchor and of her? Could she not reach that spirit of his, poised out of time and space, by the powers of her own love and longing, since they, too, surely were able to transcend the limitations of the purely physical? But to do that she must not sit and gaze at this empty replica on the bed; she must think not of his image, but of *him*, not of the representative, but of the spirit.

Nevertheless, when she began to pace the length of the room, she found that when the sight of her husband’s placid face was hidden some stimulus to concentration was removed also. While she stared at him her thought was held and focussed; now she was distracted by her vision of the familiar things that were associated with her past life in his company. She was thinking, not of him, but of the things he had done, the man he had been.

Perhaps darkness might help her, she thought, and she laid herself down on the bed and once more quenched the obedient light.

For a time she lay still, staring into the blackness, clenched in a vivid effort of concentration, and then her eyes closed, and even as she protested that she would not sleep, she had a vision of herself lying inert and pale on her own bed, even as he was lying.

Then she seemed to be rising, baffled and half-unwilling, through wreaths of a palpable darkness that clung about her with a dragging, suffocating weight. And then it seemed to her that she was wandering, lost and perplexed, on a gaunt and arid plain that might once have been the bed of a now vanished sea.

She was not alone. Other figures, wraiths of humanity, also wandered here and there. But none noticed her. They moved as if they were searching for something they could never hope to find. They peered vaguely downwards, passing her with bent heads and eyes that sought the ground with a reluctant determination. . . .

She found herself trembling, not with horror, but with a rapture of expectancy. She had become aware that one among these drifting wraiths was moving definitely towards her, drawn by the power of her longing. And she had command of the power, so that it was ecstasy to wield it. Almost she was tempted to withhold her amazing strength in order to taste again the pleasure of its renewed exercise.

Then with a sense of some lost interval she found herself face to face with him. But he looked at her without a sign of recognition. His eyes, too, were full of that aimless intention, as though he was under an eternal command to search for some unknown thing that was hidden he knew not where.

“Paul!” she cried to him.

He made no reply. He did not seem to have heard her. But still she was conscious of her immense power over him.

“Paul,” she said again. “Come back with me.” He heard her then; but now it was as if he could not see her. He looked about him, half-startled, half-resentful. “There’s no way back from the plains of France,” he said, and a sudden doubt shook her. Her power to hold him was failing. From out of the ground the darkness was rising again like a swelling lake of still, black smoke, clinging about her feet with an awful weight of recall.

She was sinking into the blackness, struggling against its vast strength as it rose, sluggish and irresistible, to her waist, her breast, her neck. She could not fight its immense strength, but her power had returned to her. They might be drowned together in the darkness, but she would compel him to come with her. She could see him no longer, but she was aware of her limitless ability to hold him to her by the power of her longing and her love. . . .

She came slowly out of some remote distance to a realisation of herself lying unaccountably still and dazed on her own bed. She could not move, as yet, but her eyes were open, and she could see the grey outline of the room in the growing daylight.

And then, again, clearly, but more distantly, she heard the sound of Paul’s voice repeating his strange assertion.

“I’m dead,” he said, but in the tone there was now, she thought, the first flicker of a doubt, the statement of wonder.

She made a great effort and raised herself.

He was sitting up in bed, propping his weakened body on his tremulous arms.

“You’re not dead, Paul; you’re *not*, you’re *not*,” she screamed. “I’ve brought you back, and I am going to hold you here.”

In a moment she was kneeling by him, supporting, clasping him.

Her power had become overwhelming, illimitable.

He looked at her with a grin, that was in some way sheepish, a little ashamed.

“Well, if I’m not, I jolly well ought to be,” he said.

It must have seemed to him so boastful to be alive again.