

The Unknown Brain

By Elliott O'Donnell

Whether all that constitutes man's spiritual nature, that is to say, ALL his mind, is inseparably amalgamated with the whitish mass of soft matter enclosed in his cranium and called his brain, is a question that must, one supposes, be ever open to debate.

One knows that this whitish substance is the centre of the nervous system and the seat of consciousness and volition, and, from the constant study of character by type or by phrenology, one may even go on to deduce with reason that in this protoplasmic substance—in each of the numerous cells into which it is divided and subdivided—are located the human faculties. Hence, it would seem that one may rationally conclude, that all man's vital force, all that comprises his mind—*i.e.* the power in him that conceives, remembers, reasons, wills—is so wrapped up in the actual matter of his cerebrum as to be incapable of existing apart from it; and that as a natural sequence thereto, on the dissolution of the brain, the mind and everything pertaining to the mind dies with it—there is no future life because there is nothing left to survive.

Such a condition, if complete annihilation can be so named, is the one and only conclusion to the doctrine that mind—crude, undiagnosed mind—is dependent on matter, a doctrine confirmed by the apparent facts that injury to the cranium is accompanied by unconsciousness and protracted loss of memory, and that the sanity of the individual is entirely contingent upon the state of his cerebral matter—a clot of blood in one of the cerebral veins, or the unhealthy condition of a cell, being in itself sufficient to bring about a complete mental metamorphose, and, in common parlance, to produce madness.

In the deepest of sleeps, too, when there is less blood in the cerebral veins, and the muscles are generally relaxed, and the pulse is slower, and the respiratory movements are fewer in number, consciousness departs, and man apparently lapses into a state of absolute nothingness which materialists, not unreasonably, presume must be akin to death. It would appear, then, that our mental faculties are entirely regulated by, and consequently, entirely dependent on, the material within our brain cells, and that, granted certain conditions of that material, we have consciousness, and that, without those conditions, we have no consciousness—in other words, “our minds cease to exist.” Hence, there is no such thing as separate spiritual existence; mind is merely an eventuality of matter, and, when the latter perishes, the former perishes too. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can exist apart from the physical.

This is an assertion—unquestionably dogmatic—that exponents of materialism hold to be logically unassailable. To disprove it may not be an easy task at present; but I am, nevertheless, convinced. there is a world apart from matter—a superphysical plane with which part of us, at least, is in some way connected, and I discredit the materialist's dogma, partly because something in my nature compels me to an opposite conclusion, and partly because certain phenomena I have experienced, cannot, I am certain, have been produced by any physical agency.

In support of my theory that we are not solely material, but partly physical and partly super-physical, I maintain that consciousness is never wholly lost; that even in swoons and dreams, when all sensations would seem to be swallowed up in the blackness of darkness, there is SOME consciousness left—the consciousness of existence, of impression. We recover from a faint, or awake from the most profound of slumbers, and remember not that we have dreamed. Yet, if we

think with sufficient concentration, our memory suddenly returns to us, and we recollect that, during the swoon or sleep, ALL thought was not obliterated, but, that we were Conscious of being somewhere and of experiencing SOMETHING.

It is only in our lighter sleeps, when the spirit traverses superphysical planes more closely connected with the material, that we remember ALL that occurred. Most of us will agree that there are two distinct forms of mental existence—the one in which we are conscious of the purely superphysical, and the one wherein we are only cognisant of the physical. In the first-named of these two mental existences—i.e. in swoons, sleep, and even death, consciousness is never entirely lost; we still think—we think with our spiritual or unknown brain; and when in the last-named state, *i.e.* in our physical wakefulness and life, we think with our material or known brain.

Unknown brains exist on all sides of us. Many of them are the earth-bound spirits of those whose spiritual or unknown brains, when on the earth, were starved to feed their material or known brains; or, in other words, the earth-bound spirits of those whose cravings, when in carnal form, were entirely animal. It is they, together with a variety of elementary forms of superphysical life (*i.e.* phantasms that have never inhabited any kind of earthly body), that constantly surround us, and, with their occult brains, suggest to our known brains every kind of base and impure thought.

Something, it is difficult to say what, usually warns me of the presence of these occult brains, and at certain times (and in certain places) I can feel, with my superphysical mind, their subtle hypnotic influences.

It is the unknown brain that produces those manifestations usually attributed to ghosts, and it is, more often than not, the possessors of the unknown brain in constant activity, *i.e.* the denizens of the superphysical world, who convey to our organs of hearing, either by suggestion or actual presentation, the sensations of uncanny knocks, crashes, shrieks, etc.; and to our organs of sight, all kinds of uncanny, visual phenomena.

All the phenomena we see are not objective; but the agents who “will” that we should see them are objective—they are the unknown brains. It is a mistake to think that these unknown brains can only exert their influence on a few of us. We are all subject to them, though we do not all see their manifestations. Were it not for the lower order of spirit brains, there would be comparatively few drunkards, gamblers, adulterers, fornicators, murderers, and suicides. It is they who excite man’s animal senses, by conjuring up alluring pictures of drink, and gold, and sexual happiness. By the aid of the higher type of spirit brains (who, contending for ever with the lower forms of spirit brains, are indeed our “guardian angels”) I have been enabled to perceive the atmosphere surrounding drinking-dens and brothels full of all kinds of bestial influences, from elementals, who allure men by presenting to their minds all kinds of attractive tableaux, to the earth-bound spirits of drunkards and libertines, transformed into horrors of the sub-human, sub-animal order of phantasms—things with bloated, nude bodies and pigs’ faces, shaggy bears with fulsome, watery eyes; mangy dogs, etc. I have watched these things that still possess—and possess in a far greater degree—all the passions of their life incarnate, sniffing the foul and vitiated atmosphere of the public-houses and brothels, and chafing in the most hideous manner at their inability to gratify their lustful cravings in a more substantial way. A man advances along the road at a swinging pace, with no thought, as yet, of deviating from his course and entering a public-house. He comes within the radius of the sinister influences, which I can see and feel hanging around the saloon. Their shadowy, silent brain power at once comes into play and gains ascendancy over his weaker will. He halts because he is “willed” to do so. A tempting tableau of

drink rises before him and he at once imagines he is thirsty. Soft and fascinating elemental hands close over his and draw him gently aside. A look of beastly satisfaction suffuses his eyes. He smacks his lips, hastens his steps, the bar-room door closes behind him, and, for the remaining hours of the day, he wallows in drink.

But the unknown brain does not confine itself to the neighbourhood of a public-house—it may be anywhere. I have, intuitively, felt its presence on the deserted moors of Cornwall, between St Ives and the Land's End; in the grey Cornish churches and chapels (very much in the latter); around the cold and dismal mouths of disused mine-shafts; all along the rocky North Cornish coast; on the sea; at various spots on different railway lines, both in the United Kingdom and abroad; and, of course, in multitudinous places in London.

A year or so ago, I called on Mrs de B—, a well-known society lady, at that time residing in Cadogan Gardens. The moment I entered her drawing-room, I became aware of an occult presence that seemed to be hovering around her. Wherever she moved, it moved with her, and I FELT that its strange, fathomless, enigmatical eyes were fixed on her, noting and guiding her innermost thoughts and her every action with inexorable persistence.

Some six months later, I met Lady D—, a friend in common, and in answer to my inquiries concerning Mrs de B—, was informed that she had just been divorced. “Dorothy” (*i.e.* Mrs de B—), Lady D— went on to explain, “had been all right till she took up spiritualism, but directly she began to attend séances everything seemed to go wrong with her. At last she quarrelled with her husband, the climax being reached when she became violently infatuated with an officer in the Guards. The result was a decree *nisi* with heavy costs.” I exhibited, perhaps, more surprise than I felt. But the fact of Mrs de B— having attended séances explained everything. She was obviously a woman with a naturally weak will, and had fallen under the influence of one of the lowest, and most dangerous types of earth-bound spirits, the type that so often attends seances. This occult brain had attached itself to her, and, accompanying her home, had deliberately wrecked her domestic happiness. It would doubtless remain with her now *ad infinitum*. Indeed, it is next to impossible to shake off these superphysical cerebrums. They cling to one with such leech-like tenacity, and can rarely be made to depart till they have accomplished their purposes.

Burial-grounds appear to have great attractions for this class of spirit. A man, whom I once met at Boulogne, told me a remarkable story, the veracity of which I have no reason to doubt.

“I have,” he began, “undergone an experience which, though, unfortunately, by no means unique, is one that is rarer nowadays than formerly. I was once all but buried alive. It happened at a little village, a most charming spot, near Maestel in the valley of the Rhone. I had been stopping at the only inn the place possessed, and, cycling out one morning, met with an accident—my machine skidded violently as I was descending a steep hill, with the result that I was pitched head first against a brick wall. The latter being considerably harder than my skull, concussion followed. Some villagers picked me up insensible, I was taken to the inn, and the nearest doctor—an uncertificated wretch—was summoned. He knew little of trepanning; besides, I was a foreigner, a German, and it did not matter. He bled me, it is true, and performed other of the ordinary means of relief; but these producing no apparent effect, he pronounced me dead, and preparations were at once made for my burial. As strangers kept coming to the inn and the accommodation was strictly limited, the landlord was considerably incensed at having to waste a room on a corpse. Accordingly, he had me screwed down in my coffin without delay, and placed in the cemetery among the tombs, till the public gravedigger could conveniently spare a few minutes to inter me. The shaking I received during my transit (for the yokels were exceedingly

rough and clumsy), together with the cold night air which, luckily for me, found an easy means of access through the innumerable chinks and cracks in the ill-fitting coffin-lid, acting like a restorative tonic, I gradually revived, and the horror I felt in realising my position is better, perhaps, imagined than described. When consciousness first began to reassert itself, I simply fancied I was awakening from a particularly deep sleep. I then struggled hard to remember where I was and what had taken place. At first nothing came back to me, all was blank and void; but as I continued to persevere, gradually, very gradually, a recollection of my accident and of the subsequent events returned to me. I remembered with the utmost distinctness striking my head against the wall, and of SEEING myself carried, head first, by two rustics the one with a shock head of red hair, the other swarthy as a Dago—to the inn. I recollected seeing the almost humorous look of horror in the chambermaid's face, as she rushed to inform the landlord, and the consternation of one and all during the discussion as to what ought to be done. The landlady suggested one thing, her husband another, the chambermaid another; and they all united in ransacking my pockets—much to my dismay—to see if they could discover a card-case or letter that might give them a clue as to my home address. I saw them do all this; and it seemed as if I were standing beside by own body, looking down at it, and that on all sides of me, and apparently invisible to the rest of the company, were strange, inscrutable pale eyes, set in the midst of grey, shapeless, shadowy substances.

“Then the doctor—a little slim, narrow-chested man, with a pointed beard and big ears—came and held a mirror to my mouth, and opened one of my veins, and talked a great deal of gibberish, whilst he made countless covert sheep's eyes at the pretty chambermaid, who had taken advantage of his arrival to overhaul my knapsack and help herself from my purse. I distinctly heard the arrangements made for my funeral, and the voice of the landlord saying: ‘Yes, of course, doctor, that is only fair; you have taken no end of trouble with him. I will keep his watch’ (the watch was of solid gold, and cost me £25) ‘and clothes to defray the expenses of the funeral and pay for his recent board’ (I had only settled my account with him that morning). And the shrill voice of the landlady echoed: ‘Yes, that is only fair, only right!’ Then they all left the room, and I remained alone with my body. What followed was more or less blurred. The innumerable and ever-watchful grey eyes impressed me most. I recollected, however, the advent of the men—the same two who had brought me to the inn—to take me away in my coffin, and I had vivid recollections of tramping along the dark and silent road beside them, and wishing I could liberate my body. Then we halted at the iron gate leading into the cemetery, the coffin was dropped on the ground with a bang, and—the rest was a blank. Nothing, nothing came back to me. At first I was inclined to attribute my memory to a dream. Absurd!’ I said to myself. ‘Such things cannot have occurred. I am in bed; I know I am!’ Then I endeavoured to move my arms to feel the counterpane; I could not; my arms were bound, tightly bound to my side. A cold sweat burst out all over me. Good God! was it true? I tried again; and the same thing happened—I could not stir. Again and again I tried, straining and tugging at my sides till the muscles on my arms were on the verge of bursting, and I had to desist through utter exhaustion. I lay still and listened to the beating of my heart. Then, I clenched my toes and tried to kick. I could not; my feet were ruthlessly fastened together.

“Death garments! A winding-sheet! I could feel it clinging to me all over. It compressed the air in my lungs, it retarded the circulation, and gave me the most excruciating cramp, and pins and needles. My sufferings were so acute that I groaned, and, on attempting to stretch my jaws, found that they were encased in tight, clammy bandages. By prodigious efforts I eventually managed to gain a certain amount of liberty for my head, and this gave me the consolation that if I could do

nothing else I could at least howl—howl! How utterly futile, for who, in God's name, would hear me? The thought of all there was above me, of all the piles of earth and grass—for the idea that I was not actually buried never entered my mind—filled me with the most abject sorrow and despair. The utter helplessness of my position came home to me with damning force. Rescue was absolutely out of the question, because the only persons, who knew where I was, believed me dead. To my friends and relations, my fate would ever remain a mystery. The knowledge that they would, at once, have come to my assistance, had I only been able to communicate with them, was cruel in the extreme; and tears of mortification poured down my cheeks when I realised how blissfully unconscious they were of my fate. The most vivid and alluring visions of home, of my parents, and brothers, and sisters, flitted tantalisingly before me. I saw them all sitting on their accustomed seats, in the parlour, my father smoking his meerschaum, my mother knitting, my eldest sister describing an opera she had been to that afternoon, my youngest sister listening to her with mouth half open and absorbing interest in her blue eyes, my brother examining the works of a clockwork engine which he had just taken to pieces; whilst from the room overhead, inhabited by a Count, a veteran who had won distinction in the campaigns of '64 and '66, came strains of 'The Watch on the Rhine.' Every now and then my mother would lean back in her chair and close her eyes, and I knew intuitively she was thinking of me. Mein Gott! If she had only known the truth. These tableaux faded away, and the gruesome awfulness of my surroundings thrust themselves upon me. A damp, foetid smell, suggestive of the rottenness of decay, assailed my nostrils and made me sneeze. I choked; the saliva streamed in torrents down my chin and throat! My recumbent position and ligaments made it difficult for me to recover my breath; I grew black in the face; I imagined I was dying. I abruptly, miraculously recovered, and all was silent as before. Silent! Good heavens! There is no silence compared with that of the grave.

"I longed for a sound, for any sound, the creaking of a board, the snapping of a twig, the ticking of an insect—there was none—the silence was the silence of stone. I thought of worms; I imagined countless legions of them making their way to me from the surrounding mouldering coffins. Every now and then I uttered a shriek as something cold and slimy touched my skin, and my stomach heaved within me as a whiff of something particularly offensive fanned my face.

"Suddenly I saw eyes—the same grey, inscrutable eyes that I had seen before—immediately above my own. I tried to fathom them, to discover some trace of expression. I could not—they were insoluble. I instinctively felt there was a subtle brain behind them, a brain that was stealthily analysing me, and I tried to assure myself its intentions were not hostile. Above, and on either side of the eyes, I saw the shadow of something white, soft, and spongy, in which I fancied I could detect a distinct likeness to a human brain, only on a large scale. There were the cerebral lobes, or largest part of the forebrain, enormously developed and overhanging the cerebellum, or great lobe of the hindbrain, and completely covering the lobes of the midbrain. On the cerebrum I even thought I could detect—for I have a smattering of anatomy—the usual convolutions, and the grooves dividing the cerebrum into two hemispheres. But there was something I had never seen before, and which I could not account for—two things like antenna~, one on either side of the cerebrum. As I gazed at them, they lengthened and shortened in such quick Succession that I grew giddy and had to remove my eyes. What they were I cannot think; but then, of course the brain, being occult, doubtless possessed properties of a nature wholly unsuspected by me. The moment I averted my glance, I experienced—this time on my forehead—the same cold, slimy sensation I had felt before, and I at once associated it with the cerebral tentacles. Soon after this I was touched in a similar manner on my right thigh, then on my left, and simultaneously on both

legs; then in a half a dozen places at the same time. I looked out of the corner of my eyes, first on one side of me and then the other, and encountered the shadowy semblance to brains in each direction. I was therefore forced to conclude that the atmosphere in the coffin was literally impregnated with psychic cerebrums, and that every internal organ I possessed was being subjected to the most minute inspection. My mind rapidly became filled with every vile and lustful desire, and I cried aloud to be permitted five minutes' freedom to put into operation the basest and filthiest of actions. My thoughts were thus occupied when, to my amazement, I suddenly heard the sound of voices—human voices. At first I listened with incredulity, thinking that it must be merely a trick of my imagination or some further ingenious, devilish device, on the part of the ghostly brains, to torture me. But the voices continued, and drew nearer and nearer, until I could at length distinguish what they were saying. The speakers were two men, François and Jacques, and they were discussing the task that brought them thither—the task of burying me. Burying me! So, then, I was not yet under the earth! The revulsion of my feelings on discovering that there was still a spark of hope is indescribable; the blood surged through my veins in waves of fire, my eyes danced, my heart thumped, and—I laughed! Laughed! There was no stopping me—peal followed peal, louder and louder, until cobblestones and tombstones reverberated and thundered back the sound.

“The effect on François and Jacques was the reverse of what I wished. When first they heard me, they became suddenly and deathly silent. Then their pent-up feelings of horror could stand it no longer, and with the wildest of yells they dropped their pick and shovel, and fled. My laughter ceased, and, half drowned in tears of anguish, I listened to their sabots pounding along the gravel walk and on to the hard highroad, till the noises ceased and there was, once again, universal and awe-inspiring silence. Again the eyes and tentacles, again the yearnings for base and shameful deeds, and again—oh, blissful interruption! the sound of human voices—François and Jacques returning with a crowd of people, all greatly excited, all talking at once.

“‘I call God as my witness I heard it, and Jacques too. Isn't that so, Jacques?’ a voice, which I identified as that of François, shrieked. And Jacques, doubtless as eager to be heard—for it was not once in a lifetime anyone in his position had such an opportunity for notoriety—as he was to come to his companion's rescue, bawled out; ‘Ay! There was no mistaking the sounds. May I never live to eat my supper again if it was not laughter. Listen!’ And everyone, at once, grew quiet.

“Now was my opportunity—my only opportunity. A single sound, however slight, however trivial, and I should be saved! A cry rose in my throat; another instant and it would have escaped my lips, when a dozen tentacles shot forward and I was silent. Despair, such as no soul experienced more acutely, even when on the threshold of hell, now seized me, and bid me make my last, convulsive effort. Collecting, nay, even dragging together every atom of will-power that still remained within my enfeebled frame, I swelled my lungs to their utmost. A kind of rusty, vibratory movement ran through my parched tongue; my jaws creaked, creaked and strained on their hinges, my lips puffed and assumed the dimensions of bladders and—that was all. No sound came. A weight, soft, sticky, pungent, and overwhelming, cloaked my brain, and spreading weed-like, with numbing coldness, stifled the cry ere it left the precincts of my larynx. Hope died within me—I was irretrievably lost. A babel of voices now arose together. François, Jacques, the village curé, gendarme, doctor, chambermaid, mine host and hostess, and others, whose tones I did not recognise, clamoured to be heard. Some, foremost amongst whom were François, Jacques, and a boy, were in favour of the coffin being opened; whilst others, notably the doctor and chambermaid (who pertly declared she had seen quite enough of my ugly face),

ridiculed the notion and said the sooner I was buried the better it would be. The weather been more than usually hot that day, and corpse, which was very much swollen—for, all gourmands, I had had chronic disease of liver—had, in their opinion, already become insanitary. The boy then burst out crying. It had always been the height of his ambition, he said, to see someone dead, and he thought it a dastardly shame on the part of the doctor and chambermaid to wish to deny him this opportunity.

“The gendarme thinking, no doubt, he ought to have a say in the matter, muttered something to the effect that children were a great deal too forward nowadays, and that it would be time enough for the boy to see a corpse when he broke his mother’s heart—which, following the precedence of all spout boys, he was certain to do sooner or later; and this opinion found ready endorsement. The boy suppressed, my case began to look hopeless, and the poignancy of my suspense became such that I thought I should have gone mad. François was already persuaded into setting to work with his pick, and, I should most certainly have been speedily interred, had it not been for the timely arrival of a village wag, who, planking himself unobserved behind a tombstone close to my coffin, burst out laughing in the most sepulchral fashion. The effect on the company was electrical; the majority, including the women, fled precipitately, and the rest, overcoming the feeble protests of the doctor, wrenched off the lid of the coffin. The spell, cast over me by the occult brains, was now by a merciful Providence broken, and I was able to explain my condition to the flabbergasted faces around me.

“I need only say, in conclusion, that the discomfiture of the doctor was complete, and that I took good care to express my opinion of him everywhere I went. Doubtless, many poor wretches have been less fortunate than I, and, being pronounced dead by unskilled physicians, have been prematurely interred. Apart from all the agony consequent to asphyxiation, they must have suffered hellish tortures through the agency of spirit brains.”

This is the anecdote as related to me, and it serves as an illustration of my theory that the unknown brain is objective, and that it can, under given circumstances—*i.e.* when physical life is, so to speak, in abeyance—be both seen and felt by the known brain. At birth, and more particularly at death, the presence of the unknown brain is most marked. And here it may not be inappropriate to remark that, in my experience at least, the hour of midnight is by no means the time most favourable to occult phenomena. I have seen far more manifestations at twilight, and between two and four a.m., than at any other period of the day—times, I think, according with those when human vitality is at its lowest and death most frequently takes place. It is, doubtless, the ebb of human vitality and the possibility of death that attracts the earthbound brains and other varying types of elemental harpies. They scent death with ten times the acuteness of sharks and vultures, and hie with all haste to the spot, so as to be there in good time to get their final suck, vampire fashion, at the spiritual brain of the dying; substituting in the place of what they extract, substance—in the shape of foul and lustful thoughts—for the material or known brain to feed upon. The food they have stolen, these vampires vainly imagine will enable them to rise to a higher spiritual plane.

In connection with this subject of the two brains, the question arises: What forms the connecting link between the material or known brain, and the spiritual or unknown brain? If the unknown brain has a separate existence, and can detach itself at times (as in “projection “), why must it wait for death to set it entirely free? My answer to that question is: That the connecting link consists of a magnetic force, at present indefinable, the scope, or pale, of which varies according to the relative dimensions of the two brains. In a case, for example, where the physical or known brain is far more developed than the spiritual or unknown brain, the radius of attraction

would be limited and the connecting link strong; on the other hand, in a case where the spiritual or unknown brain is more developed than the physical or known brain, the magnetic pale is proportionately wide, and the connecting link would be weak.

Thus, in the swoon or profound sleep of a person possessing a greater preponderance of physical than spiritual brain, the conscious self would still be concerned with purely material matters, such as eating and drinking, petty disputes, money, sexual desires, etc., though, owing to the lack of concentration, which is a marked feature of those who possess the grossly material brain, little or nothing of this conscious self would be remembered. But in the swoon, or deep sleep of a person possessing the spiritual brain in excess, the unknown brain is partially freed from the known brain, and the conscious self is consequently far away from the material body, on the confines of an entirely spiritual plane. Of course, the experiences of this conscious self may or may not be remembered, but there is, in its case, always the possibility, owing to the capacity for concentration which is invariably the property of all who have developed their spiritual or unknown brain, of subsequent recollection.

At death, and at death only, the magnetic link is actually broken. The unknown brain is then entirely freed from the known brain, and the latter, together with the rest of the material body, perishes from natural decay; whilst the former, no longer restricted within the limits of its earthly pale, is at liberty to soar *ad infinitum*.