

The Seat of Consciousness

David Wheldon

He had lived his first eighteen years in complete innocence, but on his eighteenth birthday he found, in a box of papers in his mother's old bedroom, a strange letter from the Director of the Maternity Hospital where he had been born, dated the day of his birth, addressed to his mother and father, telling them in quite formal language that their son had been born without a brain and was therefore unlikely to survive more than a day or two. The infant was, the Director went on, perfectly insensate and incapable of thought. A brainstem and a cerebellum he had; also some basal ganglia, including a claustrum on either side, but above the caudate nucleus there was nothing. "Your son does not have a cerebral cortex, and so is incapable of thought," the letter concluded.

How alarming he found this! He held the ancient letter in his hands: should he try to contact the Director, were he still at the Maternity Hospital? His mother had said that the Director was a very caring man, very assiduous in his duties; he was old, with thick silvery hair and a kind face; he had had a habit, so his mother said, of looking at you over his half-glasses from behind his desk, holding his fingers together and rolling his thumbs one over the other. His mother had added that he, unlike the junior doctors, was always in the habit of wearing white coats made of pure cotton rather than polyester-cotton; she could tell by the way that they hung. At the front of his leather-topped desk there had been a First War bayonet, apparently used as a letter-opener, but psychologically rather worrying nonetheless.

Well, what should he do? Should he try to contact the Director, were he still in post? His name was on the letter: Professor Herbert T A Robb-Smith. No: he would be long retired by now. He turned the letter over in his hands; then he put it back. He felt his head with his hands: was there really no brain inside his skull? Apparently not. He shrugged his shoulders. How could this be confirmed? He booked an appointment with his GP, who he had never met; his health had always been good, except for chronic sinusitis, worse in winter, for which he had never troubled his doctor.

So he sat in the waiting-room, an unpleasant place rather like the world itself, filled with mothers trying to control their ill-behaved children and old people who were coughing and bringing up green phlegm into their handkerchiefs. When his turn came the nurse opened the door; she was a motherly figure in a blue dress, with a flowing nurse's cap and long starched cuffs.

'Mr Crispin Irchester?'

He stood up. 'That is I.'

Crispin Irchester is an unusual name. His parents had adopted the surname from the Northamptonshire village where they had first met. In fact they had met on the down platform of the railway station, a surprisingly ornate building for so small a settlement; his parents were both archaeologists and were about to undertake formal excavations at the nearby Romano-Celtic temple and knew each other by scholarly reputation. By adopting a neutral surname his parents had solved the problem of the marital patronymic.

'Dr Frisby will see you now,' said the nurse, smiling.

He followed her down the corridor; she tapped on the door.

'Come,' sang a woman's voice, rather high in pitch.

He entered, taking in the lofty consulting-room, which was bright and sunny, unlike the waiting-room, which seemed to look out on a much gloomier world.

'Ah, Mr Irchester. A capable looking man. Perhaps you could spare a moment to help me.'

'Certainly, Dr Frisby.'

'I've been trying to unscrew the base of my acanthoscope, but I can't do it: I need to replace the battery. You look as though you have strong hands.'

She passed the instrument over to the man, who took its body in his left hand and the base in his right; he unscrewed it with ease, and passed it back to the doctor.

'Thank you so much,' she said, smiling at him. 'It's good to have a capable man visit you as a patient from time to time. You are looking well. What can I do for you?'

'I found this letter amongst some old papers my mother asked me to clear out,' he said, passing it over to Dr Frisby. 'It is dated the day of my birth, so it must be applicable to me.'

She read it quickly. 'Well, it's not possible,' she said. 'You can't survive without a brain. It's obvious that you are not the same person as the child mentioned in the letter.' Dr Frisby looked puzzled. 'There has to have been a substitution of some kind. Do you resemble your parents?'

'I think so. I have my father's facial features and my mother's analytical temperament.'

'This is strange. H'm.' Her manner preoccupied, Dr Frisby took the old battery from the acanthoscope and dropped it in the waste-paper basket, fitting a new battery in the instrument, screwing up the base, and turning it on to test it. 'I don't think this is a case for medicine,' she said, finally, placing the acanthoscope on the desk in front of her. 'But it all places your identity as a person in doubt.'

As he left that bright, sunny consulting-room and returned to the drab and gloomy waiting-room to collect his coat, he pondered the matter over. Either he was Crispin Irchester, only son of Gregory and Marjorie Irchester, and had no brain, or he had a brain but was not Crispin Irchester. He did not know what to do. He could ask his parents, but to do that would be to stir up the past, and he began to think that there might be something underhand about his origins. Had his mother swapped her brainless child for another woman's baby? That seemed to be the most logical explanation. But, were that the case, he could have no idea of his own identity.

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