

The Curious Experience of Thomas Dunbar.

BY G. M. BARROWS.

The man who was run down by an automobile, and the manner in which he afterward amazed those who picked him up.

I CAME back into conscious existence with a sighing in my ears like the deep breathing of a great monster; it was everywhere, pervading space, filling my mind to the exclusion of thought.

Just a sound—regular, even soothing in its nature—but it seemed to bear some weird significance to my clouded brain. That was thought trying to force its way in.

Then waves and waves of whispering that washed all thought away—till I grasped again at some confused and wandering idea.

It was the definite sensation of a cool, firm hand laid on my brow that lifted me up at last through that surging ocean of sighs. As a diver from the depths I came up—up—and emerged suddenly, it seemed, into the world.

I opened my eyes wide and looked straight up into the face of a man. A man—but everything was swimming before my eyes, and at first his face seemed no more than part of a lingering dream.

And fantastic visions of the Orient! What a face! It was wrinkled as finely as the palm of a woman's hand, and in as many directions.

It was yellow in hue, and round like a baby's. And the eyes were narrow, and black, and they slanted, shining like a squirrel's.

I thought that of them at first; but sometimes when you just happened to look at him, they seemed to have widened and to be possessed of strange depths and hues.

In height he was not more than four feet five, and, of all contrasts, this little, weazened curiosity with the countenance of a Chinese god was clad in the very careful and appropriate afternoon attire of a very careful and appropriate American gentleman!

The long sighing was still in my ears, but no longer at war with thought. I lay in a neat white bedstead in a plainly furnished room. I lifted my hand (it took an astonishing effort to do it), rubbed my eyes, and stared at the man who sat beside me.

His expression was kind, and in spite of its ugliness there was something in the strange face which encouraged me to friendliness.

"What—what's the matter with me?" I asked, and I was surprised to note the question was a mere whisper.

"Nothing now, except that you are very weak."

His voice was full, strong, and of a peculiar resonant quality. He spoke perfect English, with a kind of clear-cut clip to the words.

"You had an accident—an automobile went over you—but you're all right now, and don't need to think about it."

"What is it—that whispering noise? Are we near the sea?"

He smiled and shook his head. His smile merely accentuated the wrinkles—it could not multiply them.

"You are very near my laboratory—that is all. Here, drink this, and then you must rest."

I obeyed him meekly, like a child, weak of mind and body.

I wondered a little why I was with him instead of at a hospital or with friends, but I soon dropped off. I was really quite weak just then.

Yet before I slept I did ask one more question.

"Would you tell me—if you don't mind—your name?"

"Lawrence."

"Lawrence what?" I whispered. "Just——?"

"Yes," he smiled (and his face ran into a very tempest of wrinkles) "just Lawrence. No more."

Then I slept.

And I did little but sleep, and wake, and eat, and sleep again, for some five days. And during this time I learned marvelously little of my host and his manner of life.

Most questions he evaded cleverly, but he told me that it was his auto which had nearly ruined my earthly tenement; Lawrence had himself taken me from the scene of the accident without waiting for an ambulance, telling the police and bystanders that I was an acquaintance. He had carried me to his own house, because, he said, he felt somewhat responsible for my injuries and wanted to give me a better chance for my life than the doctors would allow me.

He seemed to be possessed of a great scorn for all doctors. I knew long after that he had studied the profession very thoroughly, and in many countries, and truly held the right to the title he contemptuously denied himself.

At the time I considered only that he had cured me up in wonderfully short order, considering the extent of the injuries I had received, and that I had suffered not at all. Therefore I was grateful.

Also he told me, on I forget what occasion, that his mother was a Japanese woman of very ancient descent, his father a scholarly and rather wealthy American. And for some eccentric reason of his own, his dwarfed son had chosen to eschew his family patronym and use merely his Christian name.

During the time I lay in bed I saw no servants; Lawrence did all things necessary. And never, day or night, did the humming and sighing of the machines cease.

Lawrence spoke vaguely of great dynamos, but on this subject, as on most others, he was very reticent. Frequently I saw him in the dress of a mechanic, for he would come in to see me at all hours of the day, and I imagine must have inconvenienced himself considerably for my welfare.

I had no particular friends to worry about my whereabouts, and so I lay quiet and at peace with the world for those five days in inert contentment.

Then an hour came—it was in the

morning, and Lawrence had left me to go to his laboratory—when I became suddenly savagely impatient of the dull round. Weak though I was, I determined to dress and get out into the open air—out into the world.

Mind you, during those five days I had seen no face save that of my dwarfed host, heard no voice but his. And so my impatience overcame my good judgment and his counsels, and I declared to myself that I was well enough to join once more in the rush of life.

Slowly, and with trembling limbs that belied that assertion, I got into my clothes. Very slowly—though in foolish terror lest Lawrence should catch me putting aside his mandates—I hurried my toilet as best I could.

At last I stood, clothed and in my right mind, as I told myself, though I had already begun to regret my sudden resolve.

I opened the door and looked into the bare, narrow hall. No one in sight, up or down.

I made my way, supporting myself, truth to tell, by the wall, toward a door at the far end, which stood slightly ajar.

I had almost reached it when I heard a terrible screaming. It was harsh, rough, tense with some awful agony, and to my startled senses preëminently human.

I stopped, shaking from head to foot with the shock. Then I flung myself on the door, from behind which the noise seemed to issue. It was not locked, and I plunged almost headlong into a great room, shadowy with whirring machinery under great arc lights.

Before a long table, loaded with retorts and the paraphernalia of the laboratory, stood Lawrence. His back was toward me, but he had turned his head angrily at my sudden entrance, and his queer, narrow eyes were blazing with annoyance.

In the room were two or three other men, evidently common mechanics, and none save Lawrence had more than glanced round. The screaming had ceased.

“Well?” his voice was little better than a snarl.

"That—that noise!" I gasped, already wondering if I had not made a fool of myself. "What was it?"

"Eh? Oh, that was nothing—the machinery—why are you——"

He was interrupted by a crash and splash from the far end of the place, followed by an exclamation of terror and horror, and a nice collection of French and English oaths from the men.

Lawrence had been holding in his hand while he spoke to me what looked like a peculiar piece of metal. It was cylindrical in shape, and little shades of color played over its surface continually.

Now he thrust this into my hands with a muttered injunction to be careful of it, and rushed off to the scene of the catastrophe. I followed him, at my best pace, with the thing in my hand.

At the end of the room were two immense vats of enameled iron, their edges flush with the floor, half filled with some livid, seething acid mixture, through which little currents writhed and wriggled.

The farther side of the largest vat sloped up at an angle of about thirty degrees, a smooth, slimy slide of zinc about ten feet from top to bottom and extending the full length of the vat.

The surface of this slide was covered to about half an inch in thickness with some kind of yellowish paste, whose ultimate destination was the mixture in the vat.

Above towered an engine of many wheels and pistons, and this operated two great pestles or stamps, slant-faced to fit the slide; these, running from one end of the zinc to the other, worked the paste with a grinding motion, as an artist mixes his paints with a palette knife.

The grinding motion was quite swift, but the lateral movement was comparatively slow. I should say that it must have taken about four minutes for the two stamps to pass from one end of the fifteen-foot vat to the other.

In the vat floated a plank. On the surface of the slide, almost in the middle, sprawled a man, his arms spread out on either side, not daring to move an inch on the slippery paste, for the

slightest motion meant a slip downward into the hissing acid.

Worst of all, there seemed to be no means of getting across to him. The great engine occupied one side entirely to the wall—on the other the second vat barred passage.

Beyond the vats the room extended some little distance, and there was a door there, open, through which one could see a fenced yard piled high with ashes and cinders.

And the great stamps, twenty cubic feet of solid metal in each, were making their inevitable way toward the man. When they reached him—well, their smooth surface would afford him no finger hold, even if their rapid movement allowed him to clutch them. They must push him down—they might stun him first, but most certainly they would push him down.

I need hardly say that I did not take in the full significance of all this at the time—it was only afterward that I fully understood the details.

Even as Lawrence ran he shouted:

"Stop that engine! Quick, men!"

I saw two stalwart workmen spring at the levers of the stamp machine—saw them twisting at a wheel—heard another crash, and a deep groan from all! The guiding mechanism had slipped a cog, or broken a rod, or something.

In my excitement, shaking so from weakness that I could hardly stand, I had half fallen against a piece of machinery that seemed to be at a standstill. Unconsciously my fingers grasped at a sort of handle.

I heard a whirring noise, felt something like a tremendous shock, and a burning pain. I let go the handle in a hurry, just as Lawrence wheeled on me with the cry, "For God's sake, you fool——"

But I could give no heed either to what I had done or to him. My eyes were still fixed on the unfortunate man on the slide.

The stamps were not more than five feet from his body now, and their low rattle and swish sounded in my ears loud as the tread of an army.

"A rope!" cried Lawrence in despair.

And then, in my horror, and in the

sheer impossibility of standing by quiescent and seeing a fellow-being done to death in this manner, I did a mad thing.

Wild with resentment, as if it were a living thing I could have fought, I flung myself on the great, swiftly revolving fly-wheel of the engine, seized its rim in my fingers, and braced back with all the force in my arms and shoulders.

By all precedent and reason my hands should have been crushed to a jelly in the maze of machinery, but to my intense astonishment the wheel stopped under my grasp with no very great effort on my part.

For a moment I held it so (it seemed to me to pull with no more force than is in the arms of a child), and then there was a loud report somewhere within the intestines of the monster, I saw a guiding rod as thick as my wrist double up and twist like a wire cable, things generally went to smash inside the engine, and the stamps stopped—not three inches from the man's head!

And even as they ceased to grind, men came running in at the door on the farther side of the vats—they had had to go clean round the work-shop to reach it—and were at the top of the slide with a rope which they let down.

In a moment the fellow was drawn to safety out of the reach of as horrible a death as a man can die—death in a bath consisting largely of sulphuric acid!

I stood as one in a stupor, still grasping the eccentric, dazed by the suddenness of it all—hardly able to believe that the danger was over.

A touch on my shoulder roused me, and I turned to look down into the narrow eyes of Lawrence. He was gazing at me with something very like awe in his expression.

"Well," I said, smiling shakily, "I'm afraid I've spoiled your engine."

"Spoiled the engine!" he said slowly, but emphatically. "What kind of a man are you, Mr. Dunbar? Do you know that that is a three hundred horse-power Danbury stamp? That the force required to stop that wheel in the way you did would run a locomotive—pick up the whole mass of that en-

gine itself as easily as I would a pound weight?"

"It stopped very easily," I muttered.

For some ridiculous reason I felt a little ashamed—as if such an exhibition of strength were really a trifle indecent. And I couldn't understand.

Of course, I thought, he exaggerated the power used, but though I am naturally quite strong, still I could, before my accident, boast of nothing abnormal—and was I not just up from a sick bed, only a moment ago barely able to stand or walk without support?

I found that I was nervously clenching and unclenching my hands, and became suddenly conscious that they felt as if they had been burned—the minute I began to think about it the pain became really excruciating.

I glanced at them. They were in a terrible condition—especially my right. They looked as if they had been clasped about a piece of red-hot iron.

"What is it?" asked Lawrence quickly. He bent over my hands, peering at them with his little black eyes.

Then he looked up quickly, and I saw the dawning of a curious expression in his wrinkled face—a strange excitement, a pale flash of triumph, I could have sworn.

Then, "Where is it?" he cried imperatively, his voice sharp and strenuous. "What have you done with it?"

He dropped my hands and fell quickly to his knees on the floor, his head bent, and began searching—feeling about in the shadows of the engines.

"Here—you there!" he cried to one of the men. "A light here! God! If it should be lost now—after all these years—all these years!"

"What?" said I stupidly.

"The new element," he cried impatiently. "Stellarite, I call it. Oh"—glancing up quickly—"of course you don't know. That little piece of metal I gave you to hold—the iridescent cylinder—don't you remember?"

He spoke irritably, as if it was almost impossible for him to restrain himself to civil language.

"Oh, yes—that." I looked around vaguely. "Why, yes, I had it in my hand—of course. I must have dropped

it when I grabbed the fly-wheel. It's on the floor somewhere probably; but, if you don't mind, could I have something for my hands? They hurt pretty badly."

Indeed, the air was full of black, swimming dots before my eyes, and iridescent cylinders had very little interest for me just then.

He almost snapped at me.

"Wait! If it's lost—but it couldn't be! Ah, the light at last. Now we can see something."

Still he was hunting, and now the men were helping him. I looked on dully.

Then an unreasonable anger seized me at their neglect—their indifference to my very real agony. I leaned forward, and, in spite of the added pain the raw flesh of my hand gave me, I took hold of Lawrence's collar and started to shake him.

He felt curiously light—rather like a piece of cork, in fact. I picked him up from the ground as you would a kitten and held him at arm's length.

Then suddenly I realized that what I was doing was somewhat unusual, and let go of his collar. He lit on his feet like a cat.

I expected anger, but he only said impatiently, "Don't do that—help me hunt, can't you?" quite as if it were an ordinary incident.

The queerness of it all came over me in full force; I felt as if I were in a dream.

I stooped down and helped him search. But it was no use. The little cylinder of stellarite seemed to have disappeared.

Suddenly Lawrence rose to his feet, his face, whose multitudinous wrinkles had a moment before been twitching with mingled triumph and despair, wiped clean of emotion, like a blank slate from which all significance has been erased.

"Come, Mr. Dunbar," he said quietly, "it is quite time those hands of yours were seen to. You, Johnson, Duquirke, go on hunting. But I'm afraid it's no use, boys. That vat of acid is too near."

"You think——"

"I'm afraid it rolled in," he said.

I was silent, dimly conscious that I stood, as it were, just inside the ring of some great catastrophe whose influence, barely reaching me, had this little wrinkled man in the grip of its vortex.

I followed him to a small office, opening off the laboratory; fitted up much like a doctor's, it was, with its cabinet of shining instruments. He explained its convenience while he bound up my hands with all the skilled gentleness of an experienced surgeon.

"Accidents are always on view in such a place as mine out there," he observed, with a nod of his head toward the laboratory.

"I wish you'd tell me what I've done," I said at last when the thing was over.

I felt no weakness, nor any desire for rest, which was odd, seeing the excitement I had been through and my recent illness.

"Two things, then, to be brief," he replied, smiling rather sadly, I thought. "You've accidentally stumbled on a magnificent fact, and you've at the same time destroyed, I fear, all results that might have flowed from that fact."

I stared at him, puzzled.

"You lifted me just now like a feather," he said abruptly. "You think, possibly, that I don't weigh much—I'm not a giant. Duquirke," he called, "come here a minute, will you, please?"

Duquirke appeared, a very mountain of a man, all muscle, too. I am up to the six-foot mark myself, and fairly broad in the shoulders, but this fellow could better me by three good inches in any direction.

"You can't use your hands, of course," said Lawrence to me; "but just stoop down and stretch out your arm, will you? Now, Duquirke, just seat yourself on his arm. That's it. Oh, don't be afraid—he can hold you all right. Ah, I thought so!"

We had both obeyed him, I in some doubt, the Canadian with stolid indifference. But what was my amazement to find that this great big man weighed really comparatively nothing.

I rose, still with my arm outstretched, with perfect ease, and there the fellow sat, perched precariously, his

mouth open, his eyes fixed on his master in almost a dog-like appeal.

"What are you all made of?" I gasped. "Cork?"

I let my arm drop, really expecting to see the man fall light as a feather—instead of which he tumbled with a crash that shook the house, and lay for a minute, swearing violently.

Then he got to his feet in a hurry and backed out of the door, his eyes on me to the last, his tongue, really unconsciously I believe, letting go a string of such language as would have done credit to a canal-boat driver.

"What is the matter with you all," I cried, "or"—my voice sank with the thought—"with me?"

"Sit down," said Lawrence. "Don't lose your head."

His eyes had widened, and the strange colors I had sometimes caught a glimpse of were blazing in their depths. His wrinkled face was almost beautiful in its animation—lighted as by a fire from within.

"There's nothing at all astonishing or miraculous about any of it—it's the simple working of a law. Now listen. When we heard La Due fall (the fool had tried to walk across a plank laid over that death trap to save going round the shop—he was well repaid by the fright), I handed you the cylinder of stellarite. I did not lay it on my work-table, because that is made of aluminum, and this cylinder must not come into contact with any other metal, for the simple reason that stellarite has such an affiliation for all other metals that for it to touch one of them means absorption into it. All its separate molecules interpenetrate, or assimilate, molecules, and—stellarite ceases to have its 'individual being.' So I gave it to you, because I wanted my hands free, and ran down to the vats with you at my heels. I confess I would never have been so careless if I had not allowed myself to become unduly excited by a mere matter of life and death."

He paused regretfully.

"However, to continue, you for some reason seized hold of the lever of a dynamo of very great voltage and started the armatage revolving, at the

same time stepping on to the plate of its base. Now, in the ordinary course of things you would probably be at this moment lying on that couch over there—dead!"

I looked at the couch with sudden interest.

"But you are not."

I murmured that such was indeed the case.

"No—instead of that thunderbolt burning the life out of you, like that"—he snapped his fingers melodramatically—"it passed directly through your body into the cylinder of stellarite, which, completing the circuit, sent the current back through your chest, but possessed of a new quality."

"And that quality?"

"Ah, there you have me! What that quality was I fear it is now too late for the world ever to know. Well, you dropped the lever, and, I think, the cylinder, too, when I shouted. A moment after you seized the fly wheel of the stamp machine, stopped it as if it had been the balance of a watch—and, well incidentally you saved La Due's life."

He ceased, the light faded out of his wrinkled face, his eyes darkened and narrowed. His head sank forward on to his chest.

"But to think of it—years—years of effort thrown away just at the moment of conquest!"

"I don't understand," I said, seeming to catch little glimpses of his full meaning, as through a torn veil. "Do you intend to say—"

"I intend to say," he snapped, with a sudden return of irritability, "that in that minute when you held the stellarite and the lever of the dynamo you absorbed enough of the life principle to vivify a herd of elephants. Why, what is strength, man?—Is a muscle strong in itself? Can a mere muscle lift so much as a pin? It's the life principle, I tell you—and I had it under my hand!"

"But this stellarite," I protested. "You can make more, surely?"

"Make!" he scoffed. "It's an element, I say! And it was, so far as I know, all there was in all the world!"

"Maybe it will be found yet," I

argued. "Or—if it went into the acid vat, would it have been absorbed by the metal—or what?"

"No—at the touch of that bath it would evaporate into thin air—an odorless, colorless gas. I have but one hope—that it rolled against some of the iron machinery and was absorbed. In that case I may be able to place it by the increased bulk of the assimilating metal. Well, I can but go to work again, test every particle of machinery in the vicinity of the vats—and work

—and work. If I had but known before that it was electricity and animal magnetism that were needed to complete the combination—but now, it means years of patience at best."

He shook his head dismally.

"And I?" I mused, rather to myself than to him.

"Oh—you!" he smiled, and his face ran into that tempest of wrinkles. "You can pose as Samson, if you like! Your strength is really almost limitless!"