

The Body and the Mind

a story by

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(English translation by Nick White)

Something had been wrong for quite some time. A. Menenio, who was named after one of his glorious Roman ancestors, had realised it. The situation in which he now found himself seriously worried him. In fact, what happened, ever more frequently, was that the mind no longer reacted to the commands coming from the various senses distributed throughout the body and that the body, in its turn, no longer answered to the commands which arrived from the mind. In this way, when the stomach, based on precise signals sent to it from the nose and the salivation, sent the mind a clear message of hunger, the mind declared that it knew nothing about it and that, therefore, it washed its hands of it, because it wasn't its problem. Obviously, in the absence of clear decisive orders from the brain, the seat of the mind, the mouth didn't open in order to swallow the food necessary for material life and the stomach didn't claim its right and duty to be filled, in order to satisfy the legitimate requirements of the gastric juices. Therefore, Menenio was visibly and rapidly wasting away. But, what also happened was that the mind, for its own reasons of survival because without its daily bread not even the brain can survive unaided, transmitted insistent and peremptory orders to the stomach to stock itself up. As a result Menenio was putting on weight in a shameful way. In all this hubbub, from time to time the stomach shrank reducing itself to the size of a tennis ball, or assumed the volume of an Olympic swimming pool. By this time the spasms had become a constant cycle. In parallel, the brain shrank down to the microscopic measurements of a neuron or, on the contrary, occupied the whole space within the cranium, pushing painfully against the bone walls. The mind, then, took turns either not thinking at all or understanding all the knowledge of the world. It was clearly and logically an absurd situation.

The problem was that Menenio, ever since he was little, had been the object of a family education with two variants. The father, an enormous man who had adopted the books of Rabelais

as his own personal and irreplaceable Bible, had taken him eating and drinking to the point of bursting, satisfying however the tastes more than the stomach, which, when it was full up tended to rebel. The father's teachings, however, clashed with those given by the mother, a slight metaphysical figure, dedicated to the development of her son's mental qualities, soaked in healthy philosophical and moral readings from the works of Descartes and Pascal. In a word, his father was and also wanted his son to be all bangers and mash, whilst his mother wanted him to be all reason and religion. It certainly was a fine mess.

Caught in the cross-fire and unable to eliminate the cause of his problems, that is his parents, because for his part his father guaranteed the growth of his body whilst his mother saw to that of his mind, both of them in a constant unstable balance, but each necessary in order to live, Menenio had lived through a childhood and adolescence that were at times exhilarating and at times depressing, depending on the moment; exhilarating when he managed to sate his body's needs without entering into conflict with his mind's dictates, and vice versa; depressing when body and mind entered into conflict over their respective principles. The mind suggested he shouldn't exaggerate with food, because exaggeration ended up also hurting the body, but the body demanded the satisfaction of its desire to discover all the secret pleasures of taste, devastating the mental lucubrations. There was no reason to be happy; but Menenio was young and it was easy for him to overcome even the most difficult of times.

As the years went by, however, things began to get more complicated. After the mysterious disappearance of his parents, who had sorted out all his problems, the mother from a mental point of view, and his father from a bodily point of view, the unlucky man found himself all alone facing a conflict of interests, which he was unable to resolve using his own resources and which, unfortunately, affected in an implacable and devastating way and with equal force both the body and the mind.

One day, when his mind had gone on strike, he arrived at work lacking energy, because he wasn't eating, he didn't manage to do anything and had to put up with a telling-off from his boss; another day, with the lock-out of the stomach, which for revenge gorged itself with food beyond belief, he arrived absolutely lacking ideas, thus risking an immediate sacking.

What also happened, seeing as how it didn't come about in a straightforward way at all, was that there were some days when his stomach fed a certain part of his body leaving the rest to fast, in such a way that his physical aspect became horribly contorted and always in a different way, his right arm enormously bloated and the left one skeletal, the right leg anorexic and the left one bulimic, one buttock like a Hollywood star's and the other belonging to a prisoner from a concentration camp. For its part the mind functioned depending on the circumstances and

eccentricities, either rationally or irrationally. One day, therefore, it was very precise with regard to the calculations necessary for carrying out any project; and the next day it literally went off its head giving out numbers at random, which his work mates rushed out to play at the lottery. If it hadn't been truly dramatic, the situation would have been hilariously funny. Of course, Menenio didn't have any fun at all, when he thought over the situation using his mind, taking advantage of a distraction on the part of the stomach, whereas he enjoyed himself immensely when he set his stomach in motion, in those moments when his mind was sleepy.

At this rate, Menenio had arrived at a dead end. Should he go hungry, in order to allow his mind to think, or should he stop thinking and allow his stomach to satisfy itself? Talk about *I think therefore I am* or *Through the teeth and over the gums look out stomach here it comes!*

Some sort of suitable solution was definitely required. So he went to his general practitioner who, being general, decided it was his duty to refer the patient to a series of specialists. After having taken the bread out of his own mouth in order to save up enough money to pay the doctors' fees, which were certainly steeper than the stairs that Dante, in the past, had gone up and down, Menenio turned up at the consultation, first of all with three leading lights in the field of stomatology. The first of them, with a first class honours degree from Harvard as well as two master's degrees, "My dear boy" he diagnosed "you have an advanced case of gastritis, in a degenerative state. We must take action immediately". The second, who had been awarded two degrees at Cambridge and had six master's degrees, with a superior looking sneer declared: "Gastritis, what gastritis? What we have here is a perforated ulcer as big as the Bermuda triangle. We must operate urgently". The third, who had left Oxford with six degrees and fifteen master's, started guffawing in a most undignified manner, passing judgement thus "My distinguished colleagues we are not dealing with gastritis or an ulcer. It's obviously an advanced and irreversible case of atrophised intestinal villi. The only thing we can do is surgically remove the stomach". For once in a while, the other two also found themselves in agreement. Rather worried by the prospect of what was going to happen, Menenio pointed out to the three illustrious figures that his stomach problems were closely linked with those of the mind. "My dear", exclaimed all three sages in unison, recognising in perfect harmony the fact that they were incompetent in any field outside of that of the digestive tract, "Well then we really don't know what to do. At best, we could remove your brain and see how the stomach functions".

Menenio left the consulting room with many more doubts than when he had entered, but also with a lot less money. Following further indications from his general practitioner he now went to see a psychologist. He was such a clever one that Freud and Jung were nothing in comparison. Obviously, whilst for the stomach it had been necessary to undergo all the classic blood, urine and

faeces tests, with relative magnetic resonance, in order to test the mind the shrink made use of the most sophisticated and up to date tests. Unfortunately, he decided to start the patient's first therapy session by administering the "*patte noire*" projective test, designed by the psychologist Louis Corman. Probably, seeing as how the mind secretes its ideas in the same way as the stomach secretes gastric juices, quoting liberally from a favourite saying of famous French psychologists at the end of the twentieth century- for whom in place of the stomach is the liver which secretes bile – faced with lots of figures of little pigs, Menenio became ravishingly hungry to such a point as to devastate his brain. This was followed by a series of completely unpredictable and uncurbed reactions even for the leading light of the psyche, who was not a little frightened by it all. "Calm down" he said being himself very agitated "Clearly you have problems which need to be analysed more in depth in a neuropsychiatric clinic". Menenio thought it a good idea to inform the genius of the mind that his overexcited outbursts were provoked by the close interconnection between the brain and the stomach. "Why didn't you tell me sooner" asked the great connoisseur of the hidden secrets of the human intellect with a lack of courtesy and scant psychological tact. "It's self-evident that we have to eradicate the stomach in order to allow the brain to function".

The shrewdest of them all was the general practitioner, who took his name from that of his long dead ancestor Pontius Pilate, to whom Menenio presented the doctors' responses in order to examine the possible actions to undertake. But, as happens almost every day, the general practitioner, being general, after a careful analysis of the responses, having first fed them into the computer for the necessary decrypting of the horrible and illegible handwriting of people who would have done better had they taken a degree in English rather than in medicine or psychology, declared: "Well then, my dear Menenio, the solution is really rather simple. Without a doubt the problem will be resolved by removing contemporarily both stomach and brain. That way, your mind will no longer be persecuted by the thought of being hungry or not. I prescribe, therefore, eternal repose for both of them. In short, remove yourself from this world".

Menenio left the doctor's not feeling very convinced. What both the specialists and the general practitioner had proposed was far more irrational than the absurd behaviour of his body and mind.

Taking advantage of a moment of mental lucidity, permitted him by way of a brief nap on the part of his stomach, he tried going over his past looking for any possible reasons that might have remained buried. Digging into his memory he suddenly remembered that one day - it was a Good Friday during his early adulthood -, tired of hearing his father say "Eat, if you want to grow up fit and healthy!" and from his mother "Study, if you want to become intelligent and saintly", following a precise and peremptory order from his mind along with the urgent needs of his stomach, he had

hastily done away with his parents, eating them, having cooked them on the barbecue, accompanied by some peas and boiled carrots. Simply remembering the incident, not prescribed by the doctors, but exactly for this reason miraculous, emptying his stomach after having thrown up even the intestinal villi, he immediately went off to a confessor to empty his soul as well, thus freeing his mind and in that way settling the dispute between the two adversaries, with an action that not even his maternal ancestor, the Roman Menenius Agrippa, could have remotely imagined.