

The Last Journey

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JOURNEY

ON a summer night, in the year of grace nineteen hundred and four, in the age of motor-cars and halfpenny papers, of the Salvation Army and the writings of Professor Metchnikoff, a woman proved to her own, if not to her neighbours', satisfaction that wonders have not ceased, that enchantments still obtain, that the magic of ancient days is still true magic, and that a country stranger than any mentioned by travellers in Fairyland, is close at hand, lies just beyond the world of every day, can be reached easily from Piccadilly. For she drove there on the top of an omnibus.

She thought it would never come, as she stood what seemed an interminable time, near Piccadilly Circus. Omnibus after omnibus passed, but never the one for which she waited.

"Here it is," exclaimed someone behind her when her weariness had grown almost insupportable; "it's the last."

Cecilia noticed vaguely, as it came swinging up, that the horses were white, and with more distinctness that there was just one seat vacant immediately behind the driver. She hurried up the steps, and sank into it with a sigh of exhaustion.

A moment's pause, and then with a jerk and a straining of harness the horses started.

She glanced round her appreciatively as they began to move.

The Circus was very wonderful with its thousand lights. A yellow flood streamed from the Criterion. Great silver globes hung against the front of the Pavilion opposite. Silver globes swung in the darkness of all the radiating streets and thoroughfares. Some of the lamps burnt with a pinkish lilac flame, others with gold, some with a hard white radiance. Everywhere the darkness was stained, flooded, streaked with light, or spotted with points of colour. It was beautiful; more beautiful than usual, surely. "Or am I seeing it better this evening?" she wondered.

Her eyes were so dazzled that it was not till the omnibus had crossed the Circus, that Cecilia first noticed the loveliness of the night. The strip of sky overhead ran, a river of moonlit blue, between the houses, deep, soft, infinitely mysterious. It was, I think, just then that the magic began to work. London was a fairy city. The sudden realization of its beauty left her breathless.

For weeks, of late, a misery, gnawing, insistent, relentless, had wrapped her round, obscuring the blue sky, blotting out the

sun. Now, as though a winding-sheet had fallen, it dropped suddenly away, leaving her an exquisite freedom, an exquisite sense of response to the long unheeded appeal of the senses.

They were passing St James's Street at the moment, and at the end of the avenue she had a moment's vision of the clock tower, dark against a sky suffused with moonlight. She saw the long chain of silvery globes, like beads on a necklace, broken off at the Palace walls, and noticed the confused network of jewels beneath the high-swung chain—jewels of rose and purple and emerald where the hansoms stood, some in ranks, some slowly moving. Now the line of shops and houses on the left of Piccadilly ended, and Green Park, half veiled in summer mist, stretched away to dim shadowy distances. For a moment she thought dreamily that beyond the nearest fringe of trees lay, the sea. All the star-like gleams studding its immensity were lights at the prows of distant ships, sailing on through the night over a waste of soft, dark water. The momentary illusion was so complete that she heard the faint splash of the waves. As a louder one broke upon the shore of Piccadilly, she started, and with an effort pulled herself together.

And yet, would it be so strange after all, since to-night London was a magic city? What a city of lights! And how the lights varied in colour, in tone of radiance, in *character*, as though the spirits which haunt the night had each chosen one for its own visible embodiment.

Swung high above the rest, some embowered in overhanging branches of plane trees, the great incandescent globes shone with a radiance as of milky pearls. Cecilia noticed with a thrill of pleasure how these turned the tree depths into which they plunged their beams, to caverns of uncanny green fire. Beneath them—a lower carcanet of jewels, dipping down the hill, and again rising—other lamps glowed golden as topazes; and lower still, nearer the ground, like flowers springing from some witch's garden, flecks of emerald, of crimson, of deep violet, showed where the hansoms waited outside the clubs.

The horses' hoofs on the road made a rhythmic music, a framework into which Cecilia's half-formed thoughts fitted like designs in colour. She was dreamily content. She had given herself up to the delicious sensation, keen, yet voluptuous, of

mental excitement, combined with a bodily lassitude so complete that the thought of ever moving again seemed a ridiculous impossibility.

London was a city of magic lights, through which, under the spell of some enchantment, she found herself driving, without thought for the past, without care for the future.

A city of lights! And therefore a city of shadows. She began to notice these shadows; idly at first, and then with growing wonder at their beauty.

Beneath the silver moon of each incandescent globe there was a wonderful circle of shadow, or rather an infinite number of concentric shadows, faint, elusive, like the very ghosts of shade. And these gigantic yet faint shadow-circles, one within the other, like the rings which, in still water, spread on the dropping of a pebble, these shadows were ever moving and swaying like phantom cages to imprison intangible things. Cecilia watched them fascinated, and then her eyes were drawn to the tree shadows. Every tree which held a lamp to its green breast had dropped a gigantic etching of itself upon the ground. Plane leaves of enormous size danced a shadow-dance upon the blanched pavement, and swayed and undulated like the giant circles.

Then there were the shadows of the people on the omnibus, her own among them, ever gliding swiftly past and disappearing ahead; shadows always springing afresh, always racing past along the pavement, and—disappearing. "I wonder where they go?" Cecilia found herself thinking with curiosity. And again she pulled herself up with a half smile to realize that for the moment her wonder had been genuine.

It was a strangely silent company that shared her ride through the lamp-lit street. The top of the omnibus was crowded she knew, but only once, and that just as it was starting, had she heard any one speak. She recalled the words:

"Where does this go?" a woman's voice had asked.

"To the World's End," someone had replied.

Cecilia's vagrant attention had been arrested for a moment by the name, till in a half-amused fashion she remembered it was that of a public house.

There had been a long silence, and then the woman's voice had spoken again.

"Can I get down before that?" Cecilia suddenly recalled the tone of the voice, timid, hesitating, full of a painful entreaty.

"If you please." The little dialogue sprang afresh to her mind, and stirred it to a curiosity she had not at the time experienced.

She found herself wondering about the woman to whom that pathetic voice belonged, and still more about the individual who in such a tone of complete detachment had replied. He was something of a brute, she reflected. At any rate the woman was afraid of him. A momentary desire to glance back and look came and passed. It would involve a slight exertion, and she was too comfortable to move. Instead she glanced at her left-hand neighbour, the occupant of the same seat, and saw that he was sitting with downbent head, and coat so pulled up round his throat that she could not see his face. His attitude of dejection struck her with a momentary pity, but her own sense of *bien-être* was too absorbing for the emotion to be more than transitory. The night air flowed round her in waves soft and delicious as the swirl of warm water. The moonlit sky stooped to her with brooding kindness, the lights shone in the empty streets, and the innumerable shadows, a silent bodyguard, leapt and danced, and raced beside her. On and on, while Cecilia, like a lotus-eater, dreamed exquisitely, and prayed that this swift flying through the summer night might be indefinitely prolonged.

She was roused gradually by the sense of silence in the echoing streets. Was it very late, she wondered? Yes. It must be. She remembered that, as she stood waiting for the omnibus, some one had said, "Here it is. The last one."

Evidently it was the last one. There were no others in the deserted streets. She looked about her. There were no cabs either. And—with a start she realized it—there were no people.

Was it so late as that, then? Were all the people within these still rows of houses, between which the lamps burnt steadily, unwearingly in the emptiness?

For a moment she wondered how she should get back. Only for a moment, for she did not want to think of moving. But it was very quiet. This reflection came after another spell of dreaming, from which this time she waked with a start to wonder what part of London they had reached. She did not know these

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wide, white streets, so wide that the houses on either side looked remote and dim, uncertain shapes, rather than houses. But in the broad road the shadows had room to play. They raced madly. Shadows from the lamp-posts, shadows from the opposite houses, the shadow of the omnibus which spread half across the white road, shadows of the people on the top—

Cecilia started violently. What had become of all their shadows? There were only two now, her own and another one, the shadow of a woman whose hands covered her face, who was leaning forward in an attitude of weeping.

She turned her eyes hurriedly to look at her left-hand neighbour. He was gone. Before she had recovered from the slight shock of this discovery, a long sobbing sigh broke the quiet. At the same moment the shadow of the weeping woman lengthened, moved backwards, and disappeared, as she herself presumably descended the steps. The omnibus did not stop; it merely slackened a trifle in its speed, and though Cecilia leant over the rail next her, moved by a pitying curiosity, no one alighted.

Then, for the first time, she forced herself to turn round. All the seats were empty. "When did they get down?" she asked herself in amazement. "I don't believe we have stopped once for hours and hours——" And then once more she pulled herself up. Hours and hours? How could that be? One never drove for hours on any omnibus. And yet it seemed more like days than hours since they started—days, or rather nights, long, long nights, full of light, and full of shadow.

Suddenly, with disconcerting abruptness, the omnibus stopped. The unexpected pause arrested the tide of her confused thoughts, and a voice, clear and incisive, startled her as it cut the stillness.

"*The World's End*," it called, and again Cecilia felt surprise, for it was a strange voice for a conductor: deep, solemn even, and so close that she expected, when she looked over her shoulder, to find the speaker at her elbow. There was no one there, and when, still surprised, she turned back again, she saw that a white mist was gathering in the street at some distance ahead.

She watched it as it deepened and, with an effect curious

and beautiful, swept slowly in her direction. Every moment the moonlit vapour grew denser and more white, till now billowy waves of it, like great summer clouds, came rolling along the street. It was such a strange, unusual sight that she half bent forward as though to utter some exclamation to the driver—and refrained. Sitting with head bent almost upon his breast, his light loose coat, nearly white in the moonlight, pulled in folds about him, he seemed so unapproachable that Cecilia doubted whether he would answer. He was probably half asleep. No wonder; it was so late, and he had been driving so long. She wondered idly why they did not go on. They must soon be at the end of the journey, and from the first she had meant to go as far as the omnibus would take her.

"*The World's End*," repeated the conductor's voice once more.

Another long pause, while Cecilia sat still and watched the strange white clouds, which had stopped advancing, and now remained swaying and billowing a few paces ahead. From the ground along which their skirts trailed, they rose to a great height, but above them the sky was still radiantly suffused with moonlight. Cecilia glanced back. The wide street was in that direction quite clear, the lamps stretching in a never-ending chain back, back as far as the eye could reach; the shadows printed black on the empty road and deserted pavements.

"*The World's End*." This stage of the journey had been called three times, Cecilia reflected, still waiting with impatience now for the moment of starting. She was anxious, with something of a childish feeling of anticipated mystery, half real, half pretence, to drive through the wall of mist—to get *inside* the clouds.

At last! The driver sat suddenly upright, the horses at the touch of the whip started forward; they were off! In another moment they had reached the cloudy rampart, had dashed through it and were speeding on, cleaving a lane through the mist, as the prow of a boat cleaves a lane through the water.

On either hand, in great masses soft as carded wool, the cloud walls towered, white, spectral, gigantic, shutting out all the world behind them. Cecilia glanced from side to side amazed.

This was *really* wonderful. It recalled her childish longing to play among the piled-up summer clouds in the blue fields of sky. It was a fairy tale—come true, she thought, in the first moment of delighted wonder—before she noticed the shadows. How did they come here? There were hundreds, thousands of them, all racing past on the skirts of the cloud mountains! For a moment she watched them, dazed, confused with the swiftness of their flight, with their innumerability, as they followed in endless succession on one another's heels. Then with a thrill of some violent unclassified emotion she made a discovery. *They were going the wrong way.* They were coming *towards* her, flying past her, back, back to where in imagination she could see the lamps stretching in a jewel-studded chain, back to the world of people, of houses, of theatres, of business, of a thousand trivial preoccupations. She had lost the end of that chain. It was gone; shut out by a rampart of clouds. She fell to watching the shadows intently. Their procession reminded her of a toy she had possessed as a child. Was it called the *Wheel of Life*? At any rate the plaything was lighted by a candle, and, round the white circle which the light enclosed, phantom shapes raced endlessly. She remembered how she had laughed to see them flying past. Here were the phantom shapes again, but now she did not laugh. For these were all grief-stricken shapes, these phantom men and women and children. There were many children. They came weeping, terrified, shivering; some of them—and then Cecilia covered her own—with despair in their eyes. For, as she looked, the shapes took tangible form; frail and ghostly form indeed, yet actual shape of human beings, all stricken with one malady in many guises.

"Where do their joys go?" thought Cecilia, as she bent her head low. "This is the country of their griefs."

When she raised herself again, there was a new shadow thrown upon the cloud mountains, a shadow of gigantic wings, rising and falling upon their white background as they winnowed the air; and between them fell the shadow of a hooded figure, with reins tight-gathered in one hand.

The wings sweeping onwards made a mighty arch, from beneath which came all the shadows as they fled past.

On and on they drove, and still the shadows came, innumer-

able as the sand on the sea-shore, as the waves of the sea, as the leaves of a forest.

On and on, and suddenly she held her breath, for a face she knew, came flying towards her. It was her own face as a child. Swiftly the little form glided past. In its arms it held a tiny creature, a kitten perhaps, over which it bent sobbing. Cecilia remembered. Then the ghostly shape grew a little older, and now Cecilia sat with clenched hands. And presently she covered her face, for these were griefs of yesterday, and she dared not look.

And still, in the ravine between the glimmering cloud-mountains, under the moon-lit sky, issuing from beneath the colossal wings as from a portal, without pause, ceaselessly, for ever, weeping, sullen, writhing, leaping, grotesque in the contortions of their grief, came the shadows. "It is a *danse-macabre*," thought Cecilia. "A dance of dead hopes, dead loves, dead joys, and ever-living pain. Why am I here? What place is this? Who drives?"

And then thought faded, effaced by the increasing speed, as she was whirled under the moonlit sky, between the spectral clouds, on, on, till time also faded, and she was conscious only that the shadows never for one moment ceased to pour from beneath the greater shadow of the out-spread wings.

At last, with a suddenness which set the blood surging in her veins, and her pulses sounding in her ears like the ringing of a thousand bells—as though the driver had pulled up on the edge of a precipice—there came a sudden full stop. There was a film over Cecilia's eyes, but when it cleared she saw that it was even so. An abyss infinite, profound, lay before her; a mighty sea of blue air skirted by the clouds through which she had come. To right and left, as far as sight could reach, clouds ringed the abyss, billowing, surging. She noticed how, at the edge of whatever was the platform they covered, masses of vapour now and then broke away, swirled a little like smoke in the blue immensity, and like a puff of smoke disappeared. Everywhere the gulf was sown with stars. They shone with a liquid radiance as though through deep water: Cecilia did not know whether they were shining deep in the gulf, or overhead in the night sky. There was no above or below; it was all an ocean of dark blue air. She had never

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known till now what silence was. It covered her consciousness like a velvet-soft canopy, shutting out every thought, every mental image but that of star-filled immensity. Silence, the everlasting stars, and a peace so profound that Cecilia closed her eyes, unable to realize the quiet that spread over her heart as a wave spreads over the sand on the sea-shore.

When she opened them, the driver was stooping forward to let the reins fall softly on the horses' necks. Cecilia saw without surprise the mighty white wings which sprang from their shoulders. She saw them, but her whole attention was rivetted on their driver who was rising slowly from his seat. Cecilia caught her breath as she noticed the majesty of his figure against the sky. It blotted out the stars. And when at last he faced her, her heart stopped beating.

Only for a moment: then, in the silence, she heard it thudding like the tones of a deep bell. For an immeasurable time she sat with uplifted face, looking into his. There was no word. The profound silence remained unbroken, but gradually Cecilia understood. Even now she was free to return. She had come far, further than any of the others had dared. But she was still free. Before her was the great leap. Behind, the roar of Piccadilly, the shops, the theatres, the pointless talk, the fever and the fret, the dressing, the dining—all the great cage. To it, like homing birds, all the shadows were hastening, not one of them lost; all of them ready at some moment to confront man, woman and child. The beating of Cecilia's heart grew quieter. Her unwavering glance more trustful. *Als Freund?* she whispered with a half smile. There was no reply. She looked at the steady stars, let her glance travel as far as sight could reach, through plains of air; felt the silence and the calm, and bowed her head. With a fine gesture the driver turned, gathered the reins tight, and after one breathless moment, took the plunge.

There was a foolish, sensational tale in the papers next morning. A tale which for quite three days was discussed at tea-parties by eager, shocked, excited or curious men and women. Cecilia could have told them a stranger story.

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