

In the Valley of the Shadow

by

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The rubber-tyred wheels jolt unevenly over the granite setts. Dimly I recognise the familiar grey streets and garden-centred squares.

We stop, and through the little crowd on the pavement I am carried indoors and up to the high-ceiling ward. Gently they lift me off the stretcher and put me in bed, and I say:

"What queer curtains you have! They have faces worked on the border. Are they those of your friends?"

The matron smiles, and I think what a quaint idea it is. Then

suddenly it strikes me that I have said something foolish, but still the faces are there right enough. (Even when I got well I could sometimes see them in certain lights.)

One of the faces is familiar, and I am just going to ask how they know So-and-so, when I am left alone.

For hours and hours (it seems) no one comes near me. At first I am patient, but gradually a fierce anger seizes me. Did I submit to be brought here merely to die in solitude and in suffocating darkness? I will not stay in this place; far better to go back and die at home!

Suddenly I am borne in a winged machine up, up into the cool air. Far below and infinitesimally small lies the "New Town," half-hid beneath the fluffy smoke; yonder, clear and blue and glittering, is the Firth of Forth; and beyond the sunlit hills of Fife are the advance-guards of the Grampians. A moment only of sheer palpitating ecstasy, then a soul-shattering fall into the black abyss of oblivion. (I hold Mr H. G. Wells partially responsible for this little excursion.)

It is light again, but what is that which prevents my seeing the window? A screen? What does that betoken?

A blackness of despair grips me. It is all over, then! No more mountaineering, no more pleasant holidays. This is the end of all my little ambitions. This is, in truth, the bitterness of death.

Presently a nurse comes with a cooling drink, and, making a tremendous effort to look unconcerned, I ask for the screen to be removed. She laughs and folds it up, when I see another screen opposite partially concealing a bed. So I have company. (This was a comparatively lucid interval.)

What a queer place to have texts! Right round the cornice of the room. And they are constantly changing too. "The Lord is my Shepherd-" "I will arise-" Really this is most irritating. I cannot finish any of them. If the letters would only stay still for a single moment!

But what is that below? It is a wide sandy beach with the blue sea beyond. On the top of a pole in the foreground is a-what is it?-yes, a man's head, of course. (It was really a hanging electric light which by some curious means I must have seen in an inverted position.)

"Sister, I am sure that could be worked up into a splendid story. Please give me some paper and my fountain pen. If I don't write it down now I shall forget it, just as has happened before when I have thought of things during the night." (As a matter of fact, when, I was convalescent I did want to write not only this particular tale, but a complete account of my visions. Of course, I was not permitted, and now, alas! it has gone to join that great company of magnificent-seeming but elusive ideas one has in dreams.)

"Honestly, Sister, I must go out for a few moments. The man is in great danger, and I alone can save him. There is a desperate plot against his life. He lives quite close by in one of the two houses on each side of this."

Sister promises to see about this, and I lie back only half-satisfied.

Presently my bed begins noiselessly to move. It goes through the wall into the next house. Room after room is visited, but my doomed friend is not there. The other houses are then inspected in turn, with no result. I have a feeling that he is being spirited away just in front of me so as to be always in the next house. Sister is at the bottom of this trick, I am sure. (Here began that absurd hatred and suspicion of her which only left me with the delirium.)

"Oh, doctor, I am glad to see you! Really in a free country it is intolerable that a simple request like this cannot be granted me, and to save a man's life, too. You can see for yourself that I am quite sensible and very much in earnest. Try me."

The doctor asks what day of the week it is. I answer, Scots fashion:

"Oh, that's easy! If I am the man who came here on Monday, then it is Wednesday, but if I came on Thursday, then it's Saturday. If you will tell me which man I am, I will tell you what day it is."

Overcome by this logic, the doctor gives in, but suggests a compromise, to which I agree. It is that the four neighbouring houses be brought in and placed before my bed, so that I can make sure of seeing and warning my friend in distress.

"No, I will not drink whisky. Surely you know perfectly well that I am a Mussulman and forbidden to drink spirits? You cannot wish

me to violate the principles of my religion?"

Sister assures me that the draught is not whisky, and puts the glass to my lips.

In horror I dash it to the floor.

"Devil in human form, you tempt me to my destruction. Begone and let me die in the true faith." (Of course it was not whisky, but something of quite an opposite nature. Weeks later, on recounting this incident, I was reminded of having one day casually read a page or two of a novel in which a Mohammedan is tempted to drink wine. It made no impression whatever at the time, but it must have been stored up somewhere.)

Presently Sister returns with three other nurses and a fresh supply of the accursed stuff. All means are tried, from argument, in which they are signally worsted, to persuasion and gentle force.

Suddenly I resolve on flight, and actually reach the door of the room before being overpowered and brought back to bed. Then I am asked to put my finger in the dose and prove to myself that it is not whisky. In this suggestion I see Sister's malicious cunning, so I smell the wet finger, and triumphantly assert that it is whisky.

When they say it is twelve o'clock, and that I am keeping them all out of bed, I answer that they need not stay for me, and, anyway, what is that to the loss of my soul?

At length I am forced down, and the glass put to my clenched teeth. I pray inwardly for help in this dire extremity. Lo! a brilliant idea. I will pretend to be dead. I stiffen myself and hold my breath. (I can remember no further effort, but I was told afterwards the imitation was wonderful. Even the nurses grew alarmed, and the doctor was sent for. I have a dim recollection of his coming, and before I knew where I was he had injected something, which I thought was the whisky, into my arm.)

I sit up in bed, and glare at them all with concentrated hatred, then I fall back, heartbroken at my forced abjuration, sobbing, sobbing.

I am suffering for my sin. Sister is stabbing me in the Shoulder-blade with a red-hot dagger. (It was a fly-blister, and my skin is very sensitive.) I am aching all over.

Suddenly I am alone on a flat desert plain. I am sitting with my back against one of the stone pillars of a huge closed gateway reaching to the sky. In front of me is proceeding a cinematographic entertainment on a stupendous scale. (I cannot now remember much about it, but the series was long and of an appalling character. Below each picture was a placard stating the subject of the next one. I had the feeling that they were not pictures at all, but real events in the process of happening; further that by answering a question put to me by a mysterious voice I could bring the series to an end, but, though I knew the answer, it was quite beyond my power to give it. Immediately following my failure to reply, from somewhere behind me a full organ pealed forth and a choir of voices broke into a mocking ditty, which embodied the proper answer, and also words of scorn directed against myself. Till recently this ditty haunted me occasionally, but I have now, I am glad to say, forgotten both air and words. All I know is that it was like a quick chant, and quite unfamiliar to me. When the horrid song was over I fell into a state of self-condemnation mixed with helpless expectancy, which was so poignant as to move me still when I think of it.)

This picture is one of wars and earthquakes and burning mountains. Underneath it are the words "End of the World." I have a vision of the countless myriads of mankind kneeling in agony on the other side of the gate. A multitudinous murmur swells into an awful shriek for pity.

"Who am I, O God, that this burden is laid on me? Am I the keeper of that countless host? I cannot answer."

Even as I speak a shudder cleaves the air, a cataclysmal mirage comes into view, the organ booms and the impish choir begins its torturing refrain.

Underneath this picture there is no placard.

The dreadful music ceases, and the horrid scene before me works on in silence. It passes, and then there is neither light nor darkness. The desert disappears, the gateway is no more, the infinite host has gone like the dew of the morning, and I am left in presence of nothing.

The realisation is frightful; my brain is whirling; relief must come; human nature cannot bear it. Ah, thank God, I am going mad-when from somewhere, but whence I know not, comes a light scornful laugh,

a Satanic voice says, "Sold again!" the organ swells, the invisible choir sings anew, and the whole series of pictures begins again from the beginning. For a moment the tension is relaxed, "God's in His heaven" after all, when, like the clang of steel, the Voice utters the unanswerable question. Oh, God, I must-I shall speak. The answer, the answer is-

"What time is it, Russell?" (Russell was the male night-nurse, the necessity for whose presence the reader will by this time fully understand!)

"Half-past four, sir."

"Well, I must get up to catch the first train to Glasgow. It is a matter of life and death. Please give me my clothes."

Russell endeavours to soothe me with promises of going tomorrow, and so forth, all of which I see through with merciless clearness. In the end, as I threaten to alarm the whole household, I am wrapped up in blankets, carried to an easy-chair before the fire, and a screen put behind me.

"You can't get a train, sir, before half-past six."

"Excuse me, there is a train at 5.55, and I am going to get it. By the way, are you sure Sister is not about? I thought I saw her round the corner of the screen. No? Then give me some soda and milk, and have you a cigarette anywhere?"

Russell naturally denied having cigarettes, whereupon, as he afterwards told me, I proceeded to curse him, his family, antecedents, and descendants together, with such copiousness and minuteness of diction that I spoke without stopping for an hour and a half! I fancy Mr Kipling is responsible for at least the Indian meticulousness of my comminations. Anyhow, the effort having exhausted me, on Russell saying that I had now missed the train, and had better go back to bed to wait for the next, I sensibly agreed.

That was the climax, and on awaking some hours later from a peaceful sleep I found that the crisis was past, and that I was as sane again as usual. The first book I asked for was the Pilgrim's Progress, and as soon as I was permitted to read I turned to the account of Christian's passage through the Valley

of the Shadow. I had felt before that Bunyan's demons were stage demons, his quagmires and pits merely simulacra, the accessories generally such as Drury Lane would laugh to scorn. Now I am sure of it. The real difficulty, of course, is to do it better.