

Mountain Paths

**BY
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THE POWER OF THE DEAD

MOUNTAIN PATHS

I

THE POWER OF THE DEAD

1

IN that curious little masterpiece *A Beleagured City*, Mrs. Oliphant shows us the dead of a provincial town suddenly waxing indignant over the conduct and the morals of those inhabiting the town which they founded. They rise up in rebellion, invest the houses, the streets, the market-places and, by the pressure of their innumerable multitude, all-powerful though invisible, repulse the living, thrust them out of doors and, setting a strict watch, permit them to return to their roof-trees only after a treaty of peace and penitence has purified their hearts, atoned for their offences and ensured a more worthy future.

Undoubtedly a great truth underlies this fiction, which appears to us far-fetched because we perceive only material and ephemeral realities. The dead live and move in our midst far more really and effectually than the most venturesome imagination could depict. It is very doubtful whether they remain in their graves. It even seems increasingly certain that they never allowed themselves to be confined there. Under the tombstones where we believe them to lie imprisoned there are

only a few ashes, which are no longer theirs, which they have abandoned without regret and which in all probability they no longer deign to remember. All that was themselves continues to have its being in our midst. How and under what aspect? After all these thousands, perhaps millions of years, we do not yet know; and no religion has been able to tell us with satisfying certainty, though all have striven to do so; but we may, by means of certain tokens, hope to learn.

2

Without further considering a mighty but obscure truth, which it is for the moment impossible to state precisely or to render palpable, let us concern ourselves with one which cannot be disputed. As I have said elsewhere, whatever our religious faith may be, there is at any rate one place where our dead cannot perish, where they continue to exist as really as when they were in the flesh and often more actively; and this living abiding-place, this consecrated spot, which for those whom we have lost becomes Heaven or Hell according as we draw nearer to or travel farther from their thoughts and their desires, is within ourselves.

And their thoughts and their desires are always higher than our own. It is, therefore, by uplifting ourselves that we approach them. It is we who must take the first steps, for they can no longer descend, whereas it is always possible for us to rise; for the dead, whatever they may have been in life, become better than the best of us. The least worthy of them, in shedding the body, have shed its vices, its littlenesses, its weaknesses, which soon pass from our memory as well; and

the spirit alone remains, which is pure in every man and able to desire only what is good. There are no wicked dead, because there are no wicked souls. This is why, as we purify ourselves, we restore life to those who were no more and transform our memory, which they inhabit, into Heaven.

3

And what was always true of all the dead is far more true to-day, when only the best are chosen for the tomb. In the region which we believe to be under the earth, which we call the Kingdom of the Shades and which in reality is the ethereal region and the Kingdom of Light, there are at this moment disturbances no less profound than those which we have experienced on the surface of the earth. The young dead have invaded it from every side; and since the beginning of this world they have never been so numerous, so full of energy and zeal. Whereas in the customary sequence of the years the dwelling-place of those who leave us receives only weary and exhausted lives, there is not one in this incomparable host who, to borrow Pericles' expression, "has not departed from life at the height of glory." Not one of them but has gone up, not down, to his death clad in the greatest sacrifice that man can make for an idea that cannot die. All that we have hitherto believed, all that we have striven to attain beyond ourselves, all that has lifted us to the level at which we stand, all that has overcome the evil days and the evil instincts of human nature: all this could have been no more than lies and illusions if such men as these, such a mass of merit and of glory, were really annihilated, had for ever disappeared, were for ever useless

and voiceless, for ever without influence in a world to which they have given life.

4

It is hardly possible that this could be so as regards the external survival of the dead; but it is absolutely certain that it is not so as regards their survival in ourselves. Here nothing is lost and no one perishes. Our memories are to-day peopled by a multitude of heroes struck down in the flower of their youth and very different from the pale and languid cohort of the past, composed almost wholly of the sick and the old, who had already ceased to exist before leaving the earth. We must tell ourselves that now, in every one of our homes, both in our cities and in the country-side, both in the palace and in the meanest hovel, there lives and reigns a young dead man in the glory of his strength. He fills the poorest, darkest dwelling with a splendour of which it had never ventured to dream. His constant presence, imperious and inevitable, diffuses and maintains a religion and ideas which it had never known before, hallows everything around it, makes the eyes look higher, prevents the spirit from descending, purifies the air that is breathed and the speech that is held and the thoughts that are mustered there and, little by little, ennobles and uplifts the whole people on a scale of unexampled vastness.

5

Such dead as these have a power as profound, as fruitful as life and less precarious. It is terrible that this experience should have been made, for it is the most pitiless and the first in such

enormous masses that mankind has undergone; but, now that the ordeal is over, we shall soon gather the most unexpected fruits. It will not be long before we see the differences widen and the destinies diverge between the nations which have acquired all these dead and all this glory and those which were deprived of them; and we shall perceive with amazement that the nations which have lost the most are those which have kept their riches and their men. There are losses which are inestimable gains; and there are gains whereby the future is lost. There are dead whom the living cannot replace and the mere thought of whom accomplishes things which our bodies cannot perform. There are dead whose energy surpasses death and recovers life; and we are almost every one of us at this moment the mandataries of a being greater, nobler, graver, wiser and more truly living than ourselves. With all those who accompany him, he will be our judge, if it be true that the dead weigh the soul of the living and that our happiness depends on their verdict. He will be our guide and our protector, for it is the first time, since history has revealed its misfortunes to us, that man has felt so great a host of such mighty dead soaring above his head and speaking within his heart.

We shall live henceforward under their laws, which will be more just but not more severe nor more cheerless than ours; for it is a mistake to suppose that the dead love nothing but gloom: they love only that justice and that truth which are the eternal forms of happiness.

From the depths of this justice and this truth in which they are all immersed, they will help us to destroy the great falsehoods of existence; for war and death, if they sow innumerable

miseries and misfortunes, have at least the merit of destroying as many lives as they occasion evils. And all the sacrifices which they have made for us will have been in vain—and this is not possible—if they do not first of all bring about the fall of the lies on which we live and which it is not necessary to name, for each of us knows his own and is ashamed of them and will be eager to make an end of them.

They will teach us, before all else, from the depths of our hearts which are their living tombs, to love those who outlive them, since it is in them alone that they wholly exist.

**MESSAGES FROM BEYOND THE
GRAVE**

II

MESSAGES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

1

SIR OLIVER LODGE is one of the most distinguished men of learning in our day. He is also one of the oldest, most active and most prominent members of that well-known Society for Psychical Research which, founded in 1882, has ever since striven to study with irreproachable scientific precision all the wonderful, inexplicable, occult and supernatural phenomena which have always baffled and still elude the comprehension of mankind. In addition to his purely scientific works, of which, not being qualified to judge, I do not speak, he is the author of some extremely remarkable books, such as *Man and the Universe*, *The Ether of Space* and *The Survival of Man*, in which the loftiest and most daring metaphysical speculations are constantly controlled by the most prudent, wise and steadfast common sense.

Sir Oliver Lodge, therefore, is at the same time a philosopher and a practical, working scientist, accustomed to scientific methods which do not readily allow him to go astray; he has, in a word, one of the best-balanced brains that we could hope to meet; and he is convinced that the dead do not die and that they are able to communicate with us. He has tried to make us share his conviction in *The Survival of Man*. I am not sure that he has quite succeeded. True, he gives us a certain number of

extraordinary facts, but they are facts which, in the last resort, can be explained by the unconscious intervention of intelligences other than those of the dead. He does not bring us the irrefutable proof, such as we should consider, for instance, the revelation of an incident, a detail, a piece of information so absolutely unknown to any living creature that it could come only from a spirit no longer of this world. We must admit, however, that such a proof is, as he says, as difficult to conceive as to provide.

2

Sir Oliver's youngest son, Raymond, was born in 1889, became an engineer and enlisted for the duration of the war in September, 1914. He was sent out to Flanders early in the spring of 1915; and, on the 14th of September of the same year, before Ypres, while the company under his command was leaving the front-line trench, he was hit in the left side by a splinter of a shell; and he died a few hours later.

He was, as a photograph shows us, one of those admirable young British soldiers who are the perfect type of a robust, fresh, joyous humanity, clean and bright, and whose death seems the more cruel and the more incredible as it annihilates a greater aggregate of strength, hope and beauty.

His father has dedicated to his memory a volume entitled, *Raymond, or Life and Death*; and we are at first somewhat bewildered at seeing that it is not, as one might expect, a book of lamentation, regrets and tears, but the accurate, deliberately impassive and at times almost cheerful report of a man of learning who thrusts aside his sorrow so that he may see

clearly before him, wrestles with the thought of death and beholds the rising dawn of an immense and very strange hope.

3

I will not linger over the first part of the volume, which aims at making us acquainted with Raymond Lodge. It contains some forty letters written in the trenches, the testimony of his brother-officers' devotion to him, details of his death and so on. The letters, I may say in passing, are charmingly vivid and marked by a delicate and delightful humour whose only object is to reassure those who are not themselves in danger. I have not time to dwell upon them; and they are not what most interests us here.

But the second part, which Sir Oliver Lodge calls *Supernormal Portion*, passes from the life that exists on the surface of our earth and introduces us into a very different world.

In the very first lines, the author reminds us that he has "made no secret of his conviction, not merely that personality persists, but that its continued existence is more entwined with the life of every day than has been generally imagined; that there is no real breach of continuity between the dead and the living; and that methods of intercommunion across what has seemed to be a gulf can be set going in response to the urgent demand of affection; that in fact, as Diotima told Socrates (*Symposium*, 202 and 203), 'Love bridges the Chasm.'"

Sir Oliver Lodge, then, is persuaded that his son, though dead, has not ceased to exist and that he has not gone far from those who love him. Raymond, in fact, seeks to communicate with his

father as early as eleven days after his death. We know that these communications or so-called communications from beyond the grave—let us not prejudge the issue for the moment—are made through the agency of a medium who is or believes himself to be inspired or possessed by the deceased or by a familiar spirit speaking in his name and repeating what the latter reveals to him. The medium conveys his information either orally or by automatic writing, or again, although this is very rare in the present instance, by table-turning. But I will pass over these preliminaries, which would carry us too far, and come straight to the communication which is, I think, the most astonishing of all and perhaps the only one that cannot be explained, or at least is exceedingly difficult to explain, by the intervention of the living.

About the end of August, 1915, that is to say, not many days before his death, Raymond, who, as we have seen, was near Ypres, had been photographed with the officers of his battalion by a travelling photographer. On the 27th of September following, in the course of a sitting with the medium Peters, the spirit speaking by Peters' mouth said, suddenly:

“You have several portraits of this boy. Before he went away you had a good portrait of him—two, no, three. Two where he is alone and one where he is in a group of other men. He is particular that I should tell you of this. In one you see his walking-stick.”

Now at that time the members of Sir Oliver Lodge's family did not know of the existence of this group. They attached no great importance, however, to the revelations but in subsequent sittings, notably on the 3rd of December, before the

photographs had arrived, before they were seen, more detailed information was received. According to the spirit's statements, the photograph was of a dozen officers or more, taken out of doors, in front of a sort of shelter (the medium kept drawing vertical lines in the air). Some were sitting down and some were standing up at the back. Raymond was sitting; somebody was leaning on him. There were several photographs taken.

On the 7th of December, the photographs arrived at Mariemont, Sir Oliver's house near Edgbaston. There were three copies, all differing slightly, of the same group of twenty-one officers, those in the back row standing up, the others seated. The group was taken outside a sort of temporary wooden structure, such as might be a hospital shed, with six conspicuous nearly vertical lines on the roof. Raymond was one of those sitting on the ground in front; his walking-stick, mentioned in the first revelation, was lying across his feet. And a striking piece of evidence is that his is the only instance where one man is leaning or resting his hand on the shoulder of another, in two of the photographs, or, in the third, his leg.

This manifestation is one of the most remarkable that have hitherto been obtained, because it eliminates almost entirely any telepathic interference, that is to say, any subconscious intercommunication between the persons present at the sitting, all of whom were absolutely unaware of the existence of the photographs. If we refuse to admit the intervention of the deceased—which should, I agree, be admitted only in the last resort—we must, in order to explain the revelation, suppose that the subconsciousness of the medium or of one of those present entered into communication, through the vast mazes

and deserts of space and amid millions of strange souls, with the subconsciousness of one of the officers or of one of the people who had seen these photographs whose existence there was no reason for suspecting. This is possible; but it is so fortuitous, so prodigious that the survival and intervention of the deceased would, in the circumstances, seem almost less supernatural and more probable.

4

I will not enter into the details of the numerous sittings which preceded or followed this one; nor will I even undertake to summarize them. To share the emotion aroused, we must read the reports which faithfully reproduce these strange dialogues between the living and the dead. We receive the impression that the departed son comes daily closer and closer to life and converses more and more easily, more and more familiarly with all those who loved him before he was overtaken by the shadows of the grave. He recalls to each of them a thousand little forgotten incidents. He remains among his own kindred as though he had never left them. He is always present and prepared to answer. He mingles so completely in their whole life that no one any longer thinks of mourning his loss. They question him about his present state, ask him where he is, what he is, what he is doing. He needs no pressing; he at once declares himself astonished at the incredible reality of that new world. He is very happy there, reforming himself, condensing himself, so to speak, and gradually finding himself again. The existence of the intelligence and of the will, disencumbered of the body, is freer, lighter, of greater range and diffusion, but continues very like what it was in the flesh.

The environment is no longer physical but spiritual; and there is a translation to another plane rather than the break, the complete overthrow, the extraordinary transitions which we are pleased to imagine. After all, is it not fairly plausible? And are we not wrong in believing that death changes everything, from one day to the next, and that there is a sudden and inconceivable abyss between the hour which precedes decease and that which follows it? Is it in conformity with the habits of nature? Is the life-force which we carry within ourselves and which doubtless cannot be extinguished, is that force to so great a degree crippled and cramped by our body that, when it leaves this body, it becomes, then and there, entirely different and unrecognizable?

But I must set a limit to speculation and, lest I exceed the limits of this essay, I must pass by two or three revelations less striking than that of the photograph, but pretty strange notwithstanding. Obviously, it is not the first time that such manifestations have occurred; but these are really of a higher quality than those which crowd several volumes of the *Proceedings*. Do they furnish the proof for which we ask? I do not think so; but will any one ever be able to supply us with that compelling proof? What can the discarnate spirit do when trying to establish that it continues to exist? If it speak to us of the most secret, the most private incidents of a common past, we reply that it is we who are reviving those memories within ourselves. If it aim at convincing us by its description of the world beyond the grave, not all the most glorious and unexpected pictures of that world which it might trace are worth anything as evidence, for they cannot be controlled. If we seek a proof by asking it to foretell the future, it confesses

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