

**THE
LAND OF DARKNESS**

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THE LAND OF DARKNESS

THE LITTLE PILGRIM

ON THE DARK MOUNTAINS

I

THE LAND OF DARKNESS

I FOUND myself standing on my feet, with the tingling sensation of having come down rapidly upon the ground from a height. There was a similar feeling in my head, as of the whirling and sickening sensation of passing downward through the air, like the description Dante gives of his descent upon Geryon. My mind, curiously enough, was sufficiently disengaged to think of that, or at least to allow swift passage for the recollection through my thoughts. All the aching of wonder, doubt, and fear which I had been conscious of a little while before was gone. There was no distinct interval between the one condition and the other, nor in my fall (as I supposed it must have been) had I any consciousness of change. There was the whirling of the air, resisting my passage, yet giving way under me in giddy circles, and then the sharp shock of once more feeling under my feet something solid, which struck yet sustained. After a little while the giddiness above and the tingling below passed away, and I felt able to look about me and discern where I was. But not all at once: the things immediately about me impressed me first—then the general aspect of the new place.

First of all the light, which was lurid, as if a thunderstorm were coming on. I looked up involuntarily to see if it had begun to rain; but there was nothing of the kind, though what I saw above me was a lowering canopy of cloud, dark, threatening, with a faint reddish tint diffused upon the vaporous darkness. It was, however, quite sufficiently clear to see everything, and there was a good deal to see. I was in a street of what seemed a great and very populous

place. There were shops on either side, full apparently of all sorts of costly wares. There was a continual current of passengers up and down on both sides of the way, and in the middle of the street carriages of every description, humble and splendid. The noise was great and ceaseless, the traffic continual. Some of the shops were most brilliantly lighted, attracting one's eyes in the sombre light outside, which, however, had just enough of day in it to make these spots of illumination look sickly; most of the places thus distinguished were apparently bright with the electric or some other scientific light; and delicate machines of every description, brought to the greatest perfection, were in some windows, as were also many fine productions of art, but mingled with the gaudiest and coarsest in a way which struck me with astonishment. I was also much surprised by the fact that the traffic, which was never stilled for a moment, seemed to have no sort of regulation. Some carriages dashed along, upsetting the smaller vehicles in their way, without the least restraint or order, either, as it seemed, from their own good sense, or from the laws and customs of the place. When an accident happened, there was a great shouting, and sometimes a furious encounter—but nobody seemed to interfere. This was the first impression made upon me. The passengers on the pavement were equally regardless. I was myself pushed out of the way, first to one side, then to another, hustled when I paused for a moment, trodden upon and driven about. I retreated soon to the doorway of a shop, from whence with a little more safety I could see what was going on. The noise made my head ring. It seemed to me that I could not hear myself think. If this were to go on for ever, I said to myself, I should soon go mad.

‘Oh no,’ said some one behind me, ‘not at all; you will get used to it; you will be glad of it. One does not want to hear one’s thoughts; most of them are not worth hearing.’

I turned round and saw it was the master of the shop, who had come to the door on seeing me. He had the usual smile of a man who hoped to sell his wares; but to my horror and astonishment, by some process which I could not understand, I saw that he was saying to himself, ‘What a d—— d fool! here’s another of those cursed wretches, d—— him!’ all with the same smile. I started back, and answered him as hotly, ‘What do you mean by calling me a d——d fool?—fool yourself, and all the rest of it. Is this the way you receive strangers here?’

‘Yes,’ he said, with the same smile, ‘this is the way; and I only describe you as you are, as you will soon see. Will you walk in and look over my shop? Perhaps you will find something to suit you if you are just setting up, as I suppose.’

I looked at him closely, but this time I could not see that he was saying anything beyond what was expressed by his lips, and I followed him into the shop, principally because it was quieter than the street, and without any intention of buying—for what should I buy in a strange place where I had no settled habitation, and which probably I was only passing through?

‘I will look at your things,’ I said, in a way which I believe I had, of perhaps undue pretension. I had never been over-rich, or of very elevated station; but I was believed by my friends (or enemies) to have an inclination to make myself out something more important than I was. ‘I will look at your things, and possibly I may find something that may suit me; but with all the *ateliers* of

Paris and London to draw from, it is scarcely to be expected that in a place like this——’

Here I stopped to draw my breath, with a good deal of confusion; for I was unwilling to let him see that I did not know where I was.

‘A place like this,’ said the shopkeeper, with a little laugh which seemed to me full of mockery, ‘will supply you better, you will find, than—any other place. At least you will find it the only place practicable,’ he added. ‘I perceive you are a stranger here.’

‘Well—I may allow myself to be so—more or less. I have not had time to form much acquaintance with—the place: what—do you call the place?—its formal name, I mean,’ I said, with a great desire to keep up the air of superior information. Except for the first moment I had not experienced that strange power of looking into the man below the surface which had frightened me. Now there occurred another gleam of insight, which gave me once more a sensation of alarm. I seemed to see a light of hatred and contempt below his smile, and I felt that he was not in the least taken in by the air which I assumed.

‘The name of the place,’ he said, ‘is not a pretty one. I hear the gentlemen who come to my shop say that it is not to be named to ears polite; and I am sure your ears are very polite.’ He said this with the most offensive laugh, and I turned upon him and answered him, without mincing matters, with a plainness of speech which startled myself, but did not seem to move him, for he only laughed again. ‘Are you not afraid,’ I said, ‘that I will leave your shop and never enter it more?’

‘Oh, it helps to pass the time,’ he said; and without any further comment began to show me very elaborate and fine articles of furniture. I had always been attracted to this sort of thing, and had longed to buy such articles for my house when I had one, but never had it in my power. Now I had no house, nor any means of paying so far as I knew, but I felt quite at my ease about buying, and inquired into the prices with the greatest composure.

‘They are just the sort of thing I want. I will take these, I think; but you must set them aside for me, for I do not at the present moment exactly know——’

‘You mean you have got no rooms to put them in,’ said the master of the shop. ‘You must get a house directly, that’s all. If you’re only up to it, it is easy enough. Look about until you find something you like, and then—take possession.’

‘Take possession’—I was so much surprised that I stared at him with mingled indignation and surprise—‘of what belongs to another man?’ I said.

I was not conscious of anything ridiculous in my look. I was indignant, which is not a state of mind in which there is any absurdity; but the shopkeeper suddenly burst into a storm of laughter. He laughed till he seemed almost to fall into convulsions, with a harsh mirth which reminded me of the old image of the crackling of thorns, and had neither amusement nor warmth in it; and presently this was echoed all around, and looking up, I saw grinning faces full of derision, bent upon me from every side, from the stairs which led to the upper part of the house and from the depths of the shop behind—faces with pens behind their ears, faces in workmen’s caps, all distended from ear to ear, with a sneer and

a mock and a rage of laughter which nearly sent me mad. I hurled I don't know what imprecations at them as I rushed out, stopping my ears in a paroxysm of fury and mortification. My mind was so distracted by this occurrence that I rushed without knowing it upon some one who was passing, and threw him down with the violence of my exit; upon which I was set on by a party of half a dozen ruffians, apparently his companions, who would, I thought, kill me, but who only flung me, wounded, bleeding, and feeling as if every bone in my body had been broken, down on the pavement—when they went away, laughing too.

I picked myself up from the edge of the causeway, aching and sore from head to foot, scarcely able to move, yet conscious that if I did not get myself out of the way one or other of the vehicles which were dashing along would run over me. It would be impossible to describe the miserable sensations, both of body and mind, with which I dragged myself across the crowded pavement, not without curses and even kicks from the passers-by; and, avoiding the shop from which I still heard those shrieks of devilish laughter, gathered myself up in the shelter of a little projection of a wall, where I was for the moment safe. The pain which I felt was as nothing to the sense of humiliation, the mortification, the rage with which I was possessed. There is nothing in existence more dreadful than rage which is impotent, which cannot punish or avenge, which has to restrain itself and put up with insults showered upon it. I had never known before what that helpless, hideous exasperation was; and I was humiliated beyond description, brought down—I, whose inclination it was to make more of myself than was justifiable—to the aspect of a miserable ruffian beaten in a brawl, soiled, covered with mud and dust, my clothes torn, my face bruised and disfigured: all this within half an hour or

thereabout of my arrival in a strange place where nobody knew me or could do me justice! I kept looking out feverishly for some one with an air of authority to whom I could appeal. Sooner or later somebody must go by, who, seeing me in such a plight, must inquire how it came about, must help me and vindicate me. I sat there for I cannot tell how long, expecting every moment that, were it but a policeman, somebody would notice and help me. But no one came. Crowds seemed to sweep by without a pause—all hurrying, restless: some with anxious faces, as if any delay would be mortal; some in noisy groups intercepting the passage of the others. Sometimes one would pause to point me out to his comrades, with a shout of derision at my miserable plight; or if by a change of posture I got outside the protection of my wall, would kick me back with a coarse injunction to keep out of the way. No one was sorry for me—not a look of compassion, not a word of inquiry was wasted upon me; no representative of authority appeared. I saw a dozen quarrels while I lay there, cries of the weak, and triumphant shouts of the strong; but that was all.

I was drawn after a while from the fierce and burning sense of my own grievances by a querulous voice quite close to me. ‘This is my corner,’ it said. ‘I’ve sat here for years, and I have a right to it. And here you come, you big ruffian, because you know I haven’t got the strength to push you away.’

‘Who are you?’ I said, turning round horror-stricken; for close beside me was a miserable man, apparently in the last stage of disease. He was pale as death, yet eaten up with sores. His body was agitated by a nervous trembling. He seemed to shuffle along on hands and feet, as though the ordinary mode of locomotion was impossible to him, and yet was in possession of all his limbs. Pain was written in his face. I drew away to leave him room, with

mingled pity and horror that this poor wretch should be the partner of the only shelter I could find within so short a time of my arrival. I who—— It was horrible, shameful, humiliating; and yet the suffering in his wretched face was so evident that I could not but feel a pang of pity too. ‘I have nowhere to go,’ I said. ‘I am—a stranger. I have been badly used, and nobody seems to care.’

‘No,’ he said; ‘nobody cares—don’t you look for that. Why should they? Why, you look as if you were sorry for *me*! What a joke!’ he murmured to himself—‘what a joke! Sorry for some one else! What a fool the fellow must be!’

‘You look,’ I said, ‘as if you were suffering horribly; and you say you have come here for years.’

‘Suffering! I should think I was,’ said the sick man; ‘but what is that to you? Yes; I’ve been here for years—oh, years!—that means nothing,—for longer than can be counted. Suffering is not the word—it’s torture—it’s agony. But who cares? Take your leg out of my way.’

I drew myself out of his way from a sort of habit, though against my will, and asked, from habit too, ‘Are you never any better than now?’

He looked at me more closely, and an air of astonishment came over his face. ‘What d’ye want here,’ he said, ‘pitying a man! That’s something new here. No; I’m not always so bad, if you want to know. I get better, and then I go and do what makes me bad again, and that’s how it will go on; and I choose it to be so, and you needn’t bring any of your d——d pity here.’

‘I may ask, at least, why aren’t you looked after? Why don’t you get into some hospital?’ I said.

‘Hospital!’ cried the sick man, and then he too burst out into that furious laugh, the most awful sound I ever had heard. Some of the passers-by stopped to hear what the joke was, and surrounded me with once more a circle of mockers. ‘Hospitals! perhaps you would like a whole Red Cross Society, with ambulances and all arranged?’ cried one. ‘Or the *Misericordia!*’ shouted another. I sprang up to my feet, crying, ‘Why not?’ with an impulse of rage which gave me strength. Was I never to meet with anything but this fiendish laughter? ‘There’s some authority, I suppose,’ I cried in my fury. ‘It is not the rabble that is the only master here, I hope.’ But nobody took the least trouble to hear what I had to say for myself. The last speaker struck me on the mouth, and called me an accursed fool for talking of what I did not understand; and finally they all swept on and passed away.

I had been, as I thought, severely injured when I dragged myself into that corner to save myself from the crowd; but I sprang up now as if nothing had happened to me. My wounds had disappeared, my bruises were gone. I was, as I had been when I dropped, giddy and amazed, upon the same pavement, how long—an hour?—before? It might have been an hour, it might have been a year, I cannot tell. The light was the same as ever, the thunderous atmosphere unchanged. Day, if it was day, had made no progress; night, if it was evening, had come no nearer: all was the same.

As I went on again presently, with a vexed and angry spirit, regarding on every side around me the endless surging of the crowd, and feeling a loneliness, a sense of total abandonment and solitude, which I cannot describe, there came up to me a man of

remarkable appearance. That he was a person of importance, of great knowledge and information, could not be doubted. He was very pale, and of a worn but commanding aspect. The lines of his face were deeply drawn, his eyes were sunk under high arched brows, from which they looked out as from caves, full of a fiery impatient light. His thin lips were never quite without a smile; but it was not a smile in which any pleasure was. He walked slowly, not hurrying, like most of the passengers. He had a reflective look, as if pondering many things. He came up to me suddenly, without introduction or preliminary, and took me by the arm. ‘What object had you in talking of these antiquated institutions?’ he said.

And I saw in his mind the gleam of the thought, which seemed to be the first with all, that I was a fool, and that it was the natural thing to wish me harm,—just as in the earth above it was the natural thing, professed at least, to wish well—to say, Good morning, good day, by habit and without thought. In this strange country the stranger was received with a curse, and it woke an answer not unlike the hasty ‘Curse you, then, also!’ which seemed to come without any will of mine through my mind. But this provoked only a smile from my new friend. He took no notice. He was disposed to examine me—to find some amusement perhaps—how could I tell?—in what I might say.

‘What antiquated things?’

‘Are you still so slow of understanding? What were they? hospitals: the pretences of a world that can still deceive itself. Did you expect to find them here?’

‘I expected to find—how should I know?’ I said, bewildered—‘some shelter for a poor wretch where he could be cared for—not

to be left there to die in the street. Expected! I never thought. I took it for granted——’

‘To die in the street!’ he cried, with a smile, and a shrug of his shoulders. ‘You’ll learn better by and by. And if he did die in the street, what then? What is that to you?’

‘To me!’ I turned and looked at him amazed; but he had somehow shut his soul, so that I could see nothing but the deep eyes in their caves, and the smile upon the close-shut mouth. ‘No more to me than to any one. I only spoke for humanity’s sake, as—a fellow-creature.’

My new acquaintance gave way to a silent laugh within himself, which was not so offensive as the loud laugh of the crowd, but yet was more exasperating than words can say. ‘You think that matters? But it does not hurt you that he should be in pain. It would do you no good if he were to get well. Why should you trouble yourself one way or the other? Let him die—if he can—— That makes no difference to you or me.’

‘I must be dull indeed,’ I cried,—‘slow of understanding, as you say. This is going back to the ideas of times beyond knowledge—before Christianity——’ As soon as I had said this I felt somehow—I could not tell how—as if my voice jarred, as if something false and unnatural was in what I said. My companion gave my arm a twist as if with a shock of surprise, then laughed in his inward way again.

‘We don’t think much of that here; nor of your modern pretences in general. The only thing that touches you and me is what hurts or helps ourselves. To be sure, it all comes to the same

thing—for I suppose it annoys you to see that wretch writhing: it hurts your more delicate, highly-cultivated consciousness.’

‘It has nothing to do with my consciousness,’ I cried, angrily; ‘it is a shame to let a fellow-creature suffer if we can prevent it.’

‘Why shouldn’t he suffer?’ said my companion. We passed as he spoke some other squalid wretched creatures shuffling among the crowd, whom he kicked with his foot, calling forth a yell of pain and curses. This he regarded with a supreme contemptuous calm which stupefied me. Nor did any of the passers-by show the slightest inclination to take the part of the sufferers. They laughed, or shouted out a gibe, or, what was still more wonderful, went on with a complete unaffected indifference, as if all this was natural. I tried to disengage my arm in horror and dismay, but he held me fast, with a pressure that hurt me. ‘That’s the question,’ he said. ‘What have we to do with it? Your fictitious consciousness makes it painful to you. To me, on the contrary, who take the view of nature, it is a pleasurable feeling. It enhances the amount of ease, whatever that may be, which I enjoy. I am in no pain. That brute who is’—and he flicked with a stick he carried the uncovered wound of a wretch upon the roadside—‘makes me more satisfied with my condition. Ah! you think it is I who am the brute? You will change your mind by and by.’

‘Never!’ I cried, wrenching my arm from his with an effort, ‘if I should live a hundred years.’

‘A hundred years—a drop in the bucket!’ he said, with his silent laugh. ‘You will live for ever, and you will come to my view; and we shall meet in the course of ages, from time to time, to compare notes. I would say good-bye after the old fashion, but you

are but newly arrived, and I will not treat you so badly as that.’ With which he parted from me, waving his hand, with his everlasting horrible smile.

‘Good-bye!’ I said to myself, ‘good-bye—why should it be treating me badly to say good-bye——’

I was startled by a buffet on the mouth. ‘Take that!’ cried some one, ‘to teach you how to wish the worst of tortures to people who have done you no harm.’

‘What have I said? I meant no harm I repeated only what is the commonest civility, the merest good manners.’

‘You wished,’ said the man who had struck me,—‘I won’t repeat the words: to me, for it was I only that heard them, the awful company that hurts most—that sets everything before us, both past and to come, and cuts like a sword and burns like fire. I’ll say it to yourself, and see how it feels. God be with you! There! it is said, and we all must bear it, thanks, you fool and accursed, to you.’

And then there came a pause over all the place—an awful stillness—hundreds of men and women standing clutching with desperate movements at their hearts as if to tear them out, moving their heads as if to dash them against the wall, wringing their hands, with a look upon all their convulsed faces which I can never forget. They all turned to me, cursing me, with those horrible eyes of anguish. And everything was still—the noise all stopped for a moment—the air all silent, with a silence that could be felt. And then suddenly out of the crowd there came a great piercing cry; and everything began again exactly as before.

While this pause occurred, and while I stood wondering, bewildered, understanding nothing, there came over me a darkness, a blackness, a sense of misery such as never in all my life, though I have known troubles enough, I had felt before. All that had happened to me throughout my existence seemed to rise pale and terrible in a hundred scenes before me, all momentary, intense, as if each was the present moment. And in each of these scenes I saw what I had never seen before. I saw where I had taken the wrong instead of the right step—in what wantonness, with what self-will it had been done; how God (I shuddered at the name) had spoken and called me, and even entreated, and I had withstood and refused. All the evil I had done came back, and spread itself out before my eyes; and I loathed it, yet knew that I had chosen it, and that it would be with me for ever. I saw it all in the twinkling of an eye, in a moment, while I stood there, and all men with me, in the horror of awful thought. Then it ceased as it had come, instantaneously, and the noise and the laughter, and the quarrels and cries, and all the commotion of this new bewildering place, in a moment began again. I had seen no one while this strange paroxysm lasted. When it disappeared, I came to myself emerging as from a dream, and looked into the face of the man whose words, not careless like mine, had brought it upon us. Our eyes met, and his were surrounded by curves and lines of anguish which were terrible to see.

‘Well,’ he said, with a short laugh, which was forced and harsh, ‘how do you like it? that is what happens when—— If it came often, who could endure it?’ He was not like the rest. There was no sneer upon his face, no gibe at my simplicity. Even now, when all had recovered, he was still quivering with something that looked like a nobler pain. His face was very grave, the lines deeply drawn

in it, and he seemed to be seeking no amusement or distraction, nor to take any part in the noise and tumult which was going on around.

‘Do you know what that cry meant?’ he said. ‘Did you hear that cry? It was some one who saw—even here once in a long time, they say, it can be seen——’

‘What can be seen?’

He shook his head, looking at me with a meaning which I could not interpret. It was beyond the range of my thoughts. I came to know after, or I never could have made this record. But on that subject he said no more. He turned the way I was going, though it mattered nothing what way I went, for all were the same to me. ‘You are one of the new-comers?’ he said; ‘you have not been long here——’

‘Tell me,’ I cried, ‘what you mean by *here*. Where are we? How can one tell who has fallen—he knows not whence or where? What is this place? I have never seen anything like it. It seems to me that I hate it already, though I know not what it is.’

He shook his head once more. ‘You will hate it more and more,’ he said; ‘but of these dreadful streets you will never be free, unless——’ And here he stopped again.

‘Unless—what? If it is possible, I will be free of them, and that before long.’

He smiled at me faintly, as we smile at children, but not with derision.

‘How shall you do that? Between this miserable world and all others there is a great gulf fixed. It is full of all the bitterness and

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