

The Memory of Beauty

By Algernon Blackwood

IT began almost imperceptibly—about half-past three o'clock in the afternoon, to be exact—and Lettsart, with his curiously sharpened faculties, noticed it at once. Before any one else, he thinks, was aware of it, this delicate change in his surroundings made itself known to these senses of his, said now to be unreliable, yet so intensely receptive and alert for all their unreliability. No one else, at any rate, gave the smallest sign that something had begun to happen. The throng of people moving about him remained undisturbed apparently.

He turned to his companion, who was also nurse. "Hallo!" he said to her. "There's something up. What is the world in it?"

Obedient to her careful instructions, she made, as a hundred times before, some soothing reply, while her patient—"Jack," she called him—grate that she had not shared his own keen observation, was disappointed, and let the matter drop. He said no more. He went back into his shell, smiling quietly to himself, peaceful in mind, and only vaguely aware that something, he knew not exactly what, was wrong with him, and that his companion harassed him for his own good.

She did this harassing tenderly, and very sweetly, so that he liked it, his occasional disappointment in her raising no shadow of resentment or impatience.

This was his first day in the open air, the first day for weeks that he had left a carefully-shaded room, where the blinds seemed always down, and looked round him upon a world spread in gracious light. Physically, he had recovered health and strength; nursing and good food, rest and sleep, had made him as fit as when he first went out with his draft months ago. Only he did not know that he had gone out, nor what had happened to him when he was out, nor why he was the object now of such ceaseless care, attention and loving tenderness. He remembered nothing; memory, temporarily, had been sponged clean as a new slate. That his nurse was also his sister was unrecognised by his mind. He had forgotten his own name, as well as hers. He had forgotten—everything.

The October day had been overcast, high, uniform clouds obscuring the sun, and moving westwards before a wind that had not come lower. No breeze now stirred the yellow foliage, as he sat with his companion upon a bench by Hampstead Heath,

and took the air that helped to make him whole. In spite of the clouds, however, the day was warm, and calm, as with a touch still of lingering summer. He watched the sea of roofs and spires in blue haze below him; he heard the muffled roar of countless distant streets.

"Big place, that," he mentioned, pointing with his stick. There was an assumed carelessness that did not altogether lose a certain shyness. "Some town—eh?"

"London, yes. It's huge, isn't it?"

"London. . . ." he repeated, turning to look at her quickly. He said no more. The word sounded strange; the way he said it—new. He looked away again. No, he decided she was not inventing just to honour him; that was the real name, right enough. She wasn't "putting his leg." But the name amused him somehow; he rather liked it.

"Mary," he said, "now, that's a nice name too."

"And so is Jack," she answered, whooping the shyness again descended over him, and he said no more. Besides, the change he had noticed a moment ago, was becoming more marked, he thought, and he wished to observe it closely. For in some odd way it thrilled him.

It began, so far as he could judge, somewhere in the air above him, very high indeed, while yet its effect did not stay there, but spread gently downwards, including everything about him. From the sky, at any rate, it first stole downwards; and it was his extreme sensitiveness which made him realise first that it came from a particular quarter of the sky: In the eastern heavens it had its origin. He was sure of this; and the thrill of wonder, faint but marvelously sweet, stirred through his expectant being. He waited and watched in silence for a long time. Since Mary showed no interest, he must enjoy it alone. Indeed, she had not even noticed it at all.

Yet some of these people about him had noticed it either. Some of them were walking a little faster than before, hurrying almost, but no one looked up to see what was happening; there were no signs of surprise anywhere. "Everybody must have forgotten!" he thought to himself, when his mind gave a sudden twitch. Forgotten! Forgotten what? He moved sharply, and the girl's hand stole into his, though she said no word. He was aware that she was watching him closely but a trifle surreptitiously he fancied.

He did not speak, but his wonder deepened. This "something" from the eastern sky descended slowly, yet so slowly that the change from one minute to another was not measurable. It was soft as a dream and very subtle; it was full of mystery. Comfort, and a sense of peace stole over him, his sight was eased, he had mild thoughts of sleep. Like a whisper the imperceptible change came drifting through the air. It was exquisite. But it was the wonder that woke the thrill in him.

"Something is up, you know," he repeated, though more to himself than to his companion. "You can't mistake it. It's all over the place!" He drew a deeper breath, pointing again with his stick over the blue haze where tall chimneys and needle spires pierced. "By Jove," he added, "it's like a veil—gayer. I mean—or something—eh?" And the light drawing itself behind the veil, grew less, while his pulses quickened as he watched it fade.

Her gentle reply that it was time to go home to tea, and something else about the cooling air, again failed to satisfy him, but he was pleased that she slipped her arm into his and made a gesture unambiguously like a caress. She was so pretty, he thought, as he glanced down at her. Only it amazed him more and more that no thrill stirred her blood as it stirred his own, that there was no surprise, and that the stream of passing people hurrying homewards showed no single sign of having noticed what he noticed. For his heart swelled within him as he watched, and the change was so magical that it troubled his breath a little. Hard outlines everywhere melted softly against a pale blue sea that held hints of mother-of-pearl; there was a flush of gold, subdued to amber, a haze, a glow, a burning.

This strange thing stealing out of the east brought a wonder that he could not name, a wonder that was new and fresh and sweet as though experienced for the first time. For his mind qualified the beauty that possessed him, qualified it in this way, because—this puzzled him—it was not quite "experienced for the first time." It was old, old as himself; it was familiar. . . .

"Good Lord!" he thought, "I've got that rummy feeling that I've been through all this before—somewhere," and his mind gave another sudden twitch, which, again, he did not recognise as a memory. A spot was touched, a string was twanged, now here, now there, while Beauty, playing softly on his soul, communicated to his being gradually her secret rhythm, old as the world, but young ever in each heart that answers to it. Below, behind, the thrill, these deeply buried strings began to vibrate. . . .

"The dusk is falling, see," she said quietly. "It's time

we were going back."

"Dusk," he repeated, vaguely, "the dusk . . . falling . . ." It was half a question. A new expression flared into his eyes, then vanished instantly. Tears, he saw, were standing in her eyes. She had left, had noticed, after all, then? The disappointment, and with it the shyness, left him; he was no more ashamed of the depth and strength of this feeling that thrilled through him so imperiously.

But it was after tea that the mysterious change took hold upon his being with a power that could build a theme upon, then set its rightful occupant thereon. By his special wish the lights were not turned on. Before the great windows, opened to the mild autumn air, he sat in his big over-coat and watched.

The change, meanwhile, had ripened. It lay now full-blown upon the earth and heavens. Towards the sky he turned his eyes. The change, whose first delicate advent he had noticed, sat now enthroned above the world. The tops of trees were level with his window-sill, and below lay the countless distant streets, not slumbering, he felt surely, but gazing upwards with him into this deep sea of blackness that had purple for its lining and were ten thousand candles blazing in mid-air. These lights were not turned out; and this time he wondered why he had thought they might be, ought to be, turned out. This question definitely occurred to him a moment, while he watched the great footprints of the searchlights passing over space. . . .

The amazing shafts of white moved like angels lighting up one group of golden points upon another. They lit them and swerved on again. In sheer delight, he lay in his chair and watched them, these rushing footprints, these lit groups of gold. They, the golden points, were motionless, steady; they did not move or change. And his eyes fastened upon one, then, that seemed to burn more brightly than the rest. Though differing from the others in size alone, he thought it more beautiful than all. Below it far, far down in the west, lay a streak of faded fire, as though a curtain with one edge upturned hung above distant terraces. But this trail of the sunset his mind did not recognise. His eye returned to the point of light that seemed every minute increasingly familiar, and more than familiar—most kindly and well-loved. He yearned towards it, he trembled. Sitting forward in his chair, he leaned upon the window-sill, staring with an intensity as if he would rise through the purple dark and touch it. Then, suddenly, it—twinkled.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed aloud, "I know that chap. It's—it's—Now, where the devil did I see it before? Wherever was it. . . . ?"

He sank back, as a scene rose before his inner eye. It must have been, apparently, his "inner" eye, for both his outer eyes were tightly closed as if he slept. But he did not sleep; it was merely that he saw something that was even more familiar though not less wonderful, than these other sights.

Upon a dewy lawn at twilight two children played together, while a white-capped figure, from the window of a big house in the background, called loudly to them that it was time to come in doors and make themselves ready for bed. He saw two Lebanon cedars, the kitchen-garden wall beyond, the elms and bay-trees further still, looming out of the summer dusk. He smelt pinks, sweet-william, roses. He ran full speed to catch his companion, a girl in a short tumbled frock, and knew that he was dressed as a soldier, with a wooden sword and a triangular paper hat that fell off, much to his annoyance, as he ran. But he caught his prisoner. Leading her by the hair towards the house, his G.H.Q., he saw the evening star "simply shining like anything" in the pale glow of the western sky. But in the hall, when reached, the butler's long wax taper, as he slowly lit the big candles, threw a gleam upon his prisoner's laughing face, and it was, he saw, his sister's face.

He opened his eyes again and saw the point of light against the purple curtain that hung above the world. It twinkled. The wonder and the thrill coursed through his heart again, but this time another thing had come to join them, and was rising to his brain. "By Jove, I know that chap!" he repeated. "It's old Venus, or I'm a dug-out!"

And when, a moment later, the door opened and his companion entered, saying something about its being time for bed, because the "night has come"—he looked into her face with a smile: "I'm quite ready, Mary," he said, "but where in the world have you been to all this time?"