

RETREAT FROM LONELINESS David Beasley

During the day the oppression of the low cast clouds was suffocating. But now darkness had come with its blessed power to conceal. He felt relief from the heavy greyness of the day. As he walked under the street lamps and passed from one dim circle of light to the next, he felt the clammy cold of a November wind catch at his coat to push him forward. For three days he had suffered the loneliness of a stranger in London. He was a young man with no friends, with no one to talk to, alone in a gigantic maze of brick, steel, and gloom.

He felt the wind flick at the back of his neck and about his knees. It reminded him of early winter in Ontario, when the first cold winds would nip down the main street of the town, and he would hurry home to throw his hands over the grate fire his mother always set when the weather became cold. He loved to feel the heat rush up his arms, the shiver in his back before the warmth would engulf his body. But now it was different. He could not escape from the cold because he needed the garish company of the city lights.

After rounding a bend in the street, he saw the brilliant flashings of neon signs, the white glare of theatre fronts, and the black figures of cars sweeping by the background of lights. Soon he was in Piccadilly Circus. Throngs of people swarming around him caught him in their midst. He felt a sudden thrill of happy excitement as if all these people were including him as one of them until he saw their disinterested faces and realized that no one noticed him. He was a tiny spot amongst a million spots. By becoming a part of the crowd, he could find no solace in his loneliness.

The London crowd, a cosmopolitan collection of people from all ends of the earth, gave him some moments of distraction. Staid-looking couples looked blankly about them as they moved by the store fronts; young people, clicking their heels on the sidewalk, laughed excitedly at a joke, while their thoughts were on the dancing at the Casino; white collars glistened here and there among the sombre masses as theatre-goers rushing to be on time for the first act; and a small, wizened Chinaman, dressed in colourful tribal robes, his hands mysteriously roped in front of him, groped his way among the unfriendly stares of foreigners. Above him a penguin winked a green eye as it drained a bottle of orange coloured beer. A chewing gum sign blinked the lines of a slogan.

As he watched the ghostly faces, lit up in pale colours, flit by him and heard the traffic rustle fiercely through the square, like maple leaves caught in a strong wind, he knew he could

find no comfort there. Licked by the tongues of pale light, flicking through the shadows of the night, he felt more alone than ever.

His loneliness squeezed his chest in a cold grip, and pulled down on the sinews of his mind. He sought some place of refuge from the enclosing gloom of the great black city. Then he remembered receiving a ticket from one of those young people's clubs, which are empty of young people, except for one or two specific functions a week. The theatre was in Leicester Square, and he had time to reach it before the curtain went up.

Through the large glass window fronts of a milk bar across the street, he could see thick red lips sucking on thin white straws, and flirting eyes darting wickedly from man to man. As he passed "The Puritan Maid," some American soldiers stopped to talk to a group of richly-dressed, curvaceous women, one of whom arched her comely leg on a high-heeled shoe, and looked at him appealingly. For a moment, he thought of giving himself to the dark forgetfulness that this woman offered, but, he thought, it would be for too short a time and expensive.

Suddenly, poised on the curb in front of him while the traffic passed her, he saw a young girl. The yellow light from the street lamp shone delicately on her long strands of blonde hair. Impulsively, he caught up with her and asked the direction to the theatre. She and her friend, a girl he had not noticed standing beside her, were going to the same play. He could come with them, she said. The girls were Canadian, too. After several months of traveling in Europe, they were anxious to hear news of home.

Although he lived many miles from them, he knew some of their friends. As they talked, he laughed with an almost delirious pleasure, splintering all the enforced reserve of the past days. The girls laughed, too, and enjoyed his exuberance. He arranged to meet them after the performance.

"A ticket to the dress circle!" the blonde girl raised her eyebrows reverently. "You're lucky. We're way up in the 'gods'."

"Very lucky, when you consider it was given to me."

He liked her laugh; it was short and quiet, more of a smile; and her eyes twinkled.

When they met, they walked with the moving mass of furs and overcoats, sometimes separated but always with the feeling of being together that small groups have when faced with insurmountable numbers. At a cafe, they sipped coffee and talked about London. When he mentioned where he was living, in one of expensive sections of the city, the blonde girl told him

where he could get a room near them, at a much cheaper rate, and she gave him her address.

As they said good-night at the tube station, he arranged to meet the girl the next evening. Although the streets were deserted and his heels sounded hollowly on the cement pavements, he did not feel lonely.

She had a slow smile regulated in its broadness by the humour she was in. At times, it was almost a laugh and it was in this mood that he found her.

That night was to be spent pub-hopping, the traditional introduction of a stranger to London. Down a tiny back street they found a small pub. The lights shining dimly through the lattice windows offered a warm haven from the dampness of the night. At the back of the main room, a short flight of stairs led the way to a smaller room behind and slightly lower than the first. A cosy fire threw warmth from the grate and their muffled figures appeared as grotesque shadows on the walls. Behind the bar sat a middle-aged lady of massive bulk and gentle disposition. She placed the pocket book she was reading face downward on a shelf under the bar and smiled dotingly as the young man approached.

He returned to the girl with two light brown ales. As she gazed at the fire, he saw the winking light enrich her hair and hold it gloriously, so that it compared with the floating gold of the ale impaled in the brightness of the flames. She had unbuttoned her coat, and, as she turned to face him, he could see the round fullness of her figure. Hazily, he felt a sensation of shapely legs and rounded body. An exultant feeling of happiness rose within him. The very compactness of her form suggested security. He wanted to throw his arms about her as a drowning man will clutch frantically at a rock. With her, he was safe from the loneliness gnawing inside him, he would find freedom from the oppressive gloom of the city. As she smiled, she exuded the confidence of experience.

"I like it here," she said.

He was drawn toward her. All his will, his desires seemed to be magnetized to centre about her. His individuality was now connected to her. Like an ostrich hiding its head in the sand to escape a desert storm, so he, in his trusting youth, ran to her for protection from the bleakness of London.

The people whom they were to meet arrived, and soon they were in the black box of an old London cab speeding through wet streets to another pub. With the arrival of her friends, she

paid little attention to him. Feeling the sudden loss of her companionship, he fretted at the intimacy with which she greeted these people. Although he tried to show interest in their conversation, their laughter seemed to push him outside their group and farther away from the girl. While sitting at the bar of one of those ancient "quaint" timber-roofed pubs, he saw a good-looking young man bend down and kiss her cheek. In the laughter that followed, a freezing loneliness clamped his heart. To protect himself from the show of enjoyment that pained him so much, he became sullen and inattentive. Later in the evening she noticed his mood and gave him all her attention.

Angry at himself for giving way to her attempts to cheer him, he could not hide his flattered pleasure. When they left the others and walked arm in arm through deserted streets, the dreaded sombreness of the towering buildings dispersed and they seemed to cut through the darkness with the phosphorous glow of a lighted sailing snip caught deep in the night at sea. Tacking through the winding streets, they made their way to Paddington. When they passed under the yellow lights of Sussex Gardens, they laughed at the ghoulish green colour of their skins. Then, as they turned the corner to walk down a darker street, she threw her arms about him and kissed him in a long embrace. He kept his eyes opened, and glimpsed a passing car load of people, who were laughing at the unexpectedness of the scene. His embarrassment was overwhelmed by a mixture of joy and thankfulness.

The next morning he went to the address where she had told him that he could find a room to rent. It was not far from her boarding house. When he saw the room, he was disappointed at its size. With just a bed, a cabinet, and a chair, it was pushed up against the tall front windows of the first floor. In the manner of Victorian houses the ceilings were high, the floors were draughty, and his tiny room had but one triangular gas heater. He knew he would freeze in that room during the winter. Although the rent was much cheaper than he had been paying, as he looked out the huge window framing one wall at the dull wet day, he doubted if the price was justified. But, because the situation was close to the girl, he rented it.

When he called for her, she was waiting, dressed in a grey, form-fitting suit, cut in the Parisian fashion, and carrying an umbrella. They set out to visit her bank in St. James. Perhaps it was her self-assuredness that made him feel insignificant. When they walked into her bank, a clerk looked at him as if he were a poodle on a leash. He had to stand

in the corner while she conferred with the manager about her additional expenses. She was going to Ireland and suggested that he come along. Having worked hard to pay his passage to England, he could not visit Ireland so soon.

"How can you manage to take so many trips?" he asked.

"My money is in an estate," she shrugged. "One time I sent home for two hundred dollars, and they put another zero on the end."

As they came out of the bank, she said, "Straighten your tie."

Quickly he complied. He did not pause to see if his tie really was crooked. Subconsciously, he had become dependent on her for guidance, not only through the maze of the big city, but now, so he thought, in the cold conservative atmosphere of London finance and fine dressing.

That night they went to the Royal Festival Hall. She was in a sulky mood and seldom spoke.

"What's the matter?" she asked angrily.

He had leaned over in his seat to remark on the music.

"I said that the clarinets carried the melody well in that last piece, didn't you think so?"

"What clarinets? If you could stop talking I might be able to hear those clarinets." Her disagreeableness spoiled his enjoyment for the music.

Disheartened, he listened to the last piece on the program as his eyes wandered about the auditorium. The stone faces of the people, propped up on all sides of him, stared coldly at the black arms of the orchestra conductor, as he swung them violently in the excitement of the music. Although afraid to speak to the girl because of the angry retort she might make, he was glad to have her company.

On the way home he paid her every little attention that she required, and, in deference to her disposition, he spoke only when spoken to. It was while they were descending one of the long elevators in a tube station, that she bent her head back to where he was standing behind her. Tilting her cheek, she said, "Kiss me." Since no one was near them, he bent down and kissed her.

It rained the next day. A London drizzle encamped over the city for an indefinite period. The young man read in his room all morning, but, feeling restless, he visited the girl's house in the afternoon. She and her room-mate were both in. She was in a happier mood and seemed to be glad to see him. The room had the dull look that bedrooms get on dull days: several coats hung suspended from nails hammered

in the back of the door. A few watercolours, that the room-mate painted, were thumb-tacked to the walls. He sat in a chair by the mantelpiece and faced the two girls lying propped up on their beds. The room-mate was in bed with a cold. His friend was dressed in slacks and sweater, and, as she slid down from her pillow, she looked at him.

"Come over here and lie beside me," she smiled.

"Now she asks me," he cried in a mock complaint.

He was glad he had come. When there were people to talk with, the weather could be as gloomy as it liked; it would not bother him. His relationship with the girl seemed to be back in the happy position it was at first. As she smiled slowly at him, narrowing her eyes seductively, he remembered telling her that she was "a home away from home". She had smiled and asked him why he had come to Europe. Feeling foolish, he told the truth. "To get experience." And she had smiled that same slow smile. He asked her to go out with him that night. Her reply, that she had a date already, surprised and hurt him. His surprise numbed the hurt, but when alone again, he was tortured with the fear of losing her to another man.

When he left, she walked behind him part way down the stairs. In the middle of the flight, where there was little light, she stopped him and, placing her hands on his shoulders, turned him toward her. Leaning against the wall, with her eyes closed, and breathing heavily, as if she were in sleep, she drew him against her, and he kissed her. When she was calm again, he left her standing on the stairs.

That night he tried to forget her. Unable to bear the loneliness of his room, he visited a near-by tavern. By watching the actions of other people, he amused himself for a time. But pictures of the girl kept haunting him. Her blonde hair would bounce on the shoulders of her green coat as she walked holding the hand of a tall, good-looking boy. She would be sitting in a low cut evening dress with a rich, dapper-looking fellow, who had costly seats to the most popular play at the time. He was angry with himself because he had gone through the agonies of puppy love several times, and thought he had out-grown that adolescent state. Yet there was more to his grief than the loss of the girl. He felt as if he were losing a part of himself. He had become so dependent on her companionship, that he thought, if she went away, he would be lonelier than ever. With head down, he walked slowly back to his lodgings and closeted himself in the tiny, black corner that was his room.

Early the next morning he set out to look for work and did not return until late in the afternoon. It had been raining, and now the trees hung with wet. The automobiles splashed through puddles on the soaked roads. The window sill of his room was coated with water, and the trans-

parent drops of the liquid had splattered on the floor where the rain landed, after it had blown through a small opening in the window. Even the furniture seemed permeated with wetness. And the clammy air chilled the room.

He shut the window, pulled the curtains, which did not quite cover the large panes, and turned on his yellow light. The five o'clock traffic hummed its way into his room, but with the fall of darkness and silence, his aloneness seemed to intensify.

He stifled a thought to ask the girl to dinner. He thought she would tire of him if he arrived at all hours of the day, and every day. Moreover, his pride was hurt. He would show her that he was not always available, yet he wanted to talk to someone. He wanted release from the silence of himself.

He heard a disturbance coming from the ground floor. Someone knocked on his door and he opened it to the white-smocked housekeeper, who was about to speak, when they were both aware of the girl striding down the hallway.

"It's alright," he said in surprise, "She's a friend."

Frowning disapprovingly, the house-keeper allowed the door to close on the two young people, and English respectability was over-ruled.

She was dressed in a baggy fawn overcoat, grey slacks, and moccasins. As soon as she entered the room, he noticed the place light up cheerfully.,

"I was passing on my way to dinner and I saw your light. That woman told me you were out so I forced my way in. If you haven't eaten, eat with me."

"I'd like to," he said.

Concerned, she said, "It's depressing in a room like this. Put some pictures on the walls."

"Good idea," he smiled, though he hoped to leave it soon.

"What have you been doing all day, anyway?" Her tone was bright, and it showed that she wanted him to forget all the bitterness she had caused between them.

"Looked for work. Without success," he added despondently, as a cue that he wanted her sympathy.

She took him to a small restaurant in a back street where the meals were good and inexpensive. A grand mirror, framed in gold-surfaced ornamentations, hung on one wall, by which he could see the profile of his blonde, sloppily-dressed companion. He was attracted to her, but not in the same way as previously. The magnetism that had drawn him to her, that had allowed her to dominate him, that drawing power had gone. He felt independent

of her. Somehow the knowledge that she had gone out with another man, and then had wanted his company enough to seek it, had set him on a level, on which he had never considered himself since his arrival in London. Subconsciously, for the first time, he realized that his salvation from his loneliness could not be found in the companionship of others; it could only be found in himself. And, armed with this new power of aloofness, he appraised the girl with the confident gaze of an independent young man.

When he took her home, she asked him up to her room.

"It's lucky you have a French landlady," he joked.

When he saw that her room-mate was not there, he suppressed the thought that the field was clear.

While she flung herself on the bed, he walked to the window. It was raining again. A street vendor had drawn his cart under a street lamp and was leaning under the boarded roof of his cart out of the rain. As a couple bought fruit from him, the glare of the street lamp lit up the actions of purchase, as if spot lighting a drama from life.

"You know, you are very young," she said.

He turned to see her stretched out on the bed, her arms doubled behind her head. He did not like being called young.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"The way you can't make a decision. You always have to ask me. When we go any place, I have to take the lead. If you could grow up, you wouldn't find life so hard in London."

As she said this, he sensed a sensual power in the long, languid form of her body stretched out on the bed. Distracted, he lost the meaning of her words, and wanted to go to her.

"Look," she called, waving a paperback book, "if you read things like this, you'll understand about life. You can't always find a mother to look after you, you know."

He told her to put it on the table; he would take it when he left.

She smiled at his stiffness and, raising her hips to unzip her slacks, she remarked that they had eaten a big meal. Feeling uneasy, he glanced out the window. No one was in the street. Even the fruit vendor was gone. The street light caught the streaks of rain.

"I need love like you do. My parents died when I was very young, and I have never had much sympathy from my relatives. I have had to depend on boys for love." Her voice trailed off intimately.

When he first knew her, he was not looking for sexual love. He needed companionship, a sharer of misfortune, a comforter in a storm. Tonight, his feelings changed because of the change in himself.

"Come here," she coaxed, her body arched invitingly and her eyes implored him.

The light from the table lamp fell on her figure, encasing her in feline power. His desire was great, yet he hesitated. His feeling of surrender gave way suddenly to revolt. The sense of independence so lately achieved rebelled at the dominating strength of this woman. Again she was compelling him to her will. If he obeyed her, he would fall back to that level of servitude, in which she hoped to keep him.

"I need you." Still coaxing, her voice whined slightly with impatience.

Mechanically he walked toward her. The knuckles of his clenched hands shone like ivory. Bending down into the glare of the lamp, he kissed her lightly on one cheek.

"Good-bye," he said.

He knew that he was leaving a part of himself behind, as if his loneliness, his fears, his timidity, all his weaknesses were wrapped in brown paper and left with that girl. Confidently, he strode along the wet pavement of the dimly-lit street, free of all those agonies which London ceased to represent.

