



THE MARK.

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One evening in early winter I played under the lamp-post opposite where we lived. These lamp-posts were thick and square at the base, with a slippery ledge about the height of one's hips. By getting on to this ledge and hugging the round part of the post you could pull yourself up to the glass hood, inside which the gas mantle glowed and hissed, and you could swing on a cross-bar that stuck out on one side like a gibbet. I never knew what this cross-bar was for. Perhaps it was for the repairs man to lean his ladder against when he changed the delicate little mantles.

The glow made a rough circle on the pavement, and beyond its area the walls, the evergreen bushes and the iron railings had the appearance of dust that stood still and kept its shape in the breeze. Usually the street was empty, especially on winter evenings. Trams passed at the end, wobbling and scraping, and now and then a train arrived at the station near by, paused for a few moments and then drew off again with a low rising groan as if it were saying something about the nature of its journey.

This evening I was playing alone and in my best clothes. We were going to the theatre, which was very exciting and which I had been thinking about for days. The window upstairs in the house opposite would soon be pulled up and my mother would lean out and call softly, 'Come on, son, get your coat on.' Then she would lower it again so that the sashes made a gentle, chirruping sound that went up and down like the cry of a little animal from a burrow, also making a statement about life.

Near the lamp-post there was the sharp kerb where I had fallen not many weeks before and almost broken my nose. I had

made a pool of blood on the pavement while I was lying unconscious. All I remembered was falling straight onto the sharp part of the kerb, staggering for a few paces, then lowering myself softly, as it seemed, on to the pavement. I woke up for a few seconds and saw a little crowd of children round me and a vast woman called Mrs Richards from the other end of the street who was so fat that she could hardly walk and who stood at her gate all day staring at everyone who passed. She had huge skirts, always black or dark brown, and now she stood over me staring just as she did when she leaned on her gate, summer and winter. Then I lost myself again and woke up in bed, with my mother ringing her hands and crying near by.

She told me afterwards that my brother had rushed to the doctor's house faster than she had ever seen anybody run, with blood all over his shirt and an absolutely terrified expression in his eyes. Then he had carried me over his shoulder up to the bedroom, and a moment later the doctor arrived, expecting something frightful.

The accident was talked about again and again. Visitors were told. People came that evening from other houses and made enquiries. Some of them said they had seen 'young Leslie' rushing up the street as if he'd seen the devil himself. He had come back panting so much that his whole body heaved and shook. For two or three days I felt myself to be precious in the family. I was given almost everything I wanted, but I took care not to ask for the impossible, or for too much, in case the old status quo was restored earlier than necessary.

The pool of blood was only wiped up in a perfunctory way and after a week, when I was allowed out again, it was still clear

on the ground. At first it was a dark red. I looked at it every day, and gradually it lost its clear boundaries and turned a faint rust colour, sinking into the very texture of the pavement, like something from the sea that collects passing colours into its shape and absorbs them through endless tides until they are fixed and hard. Yet, though it had passed, so to speak, into eternity, the mark was mine. I was proud.

I jumped up on the slippery ledge, despite my best clothes, and hugged the round part of the lamp-post, pulling myself up. Then I caught hold of the gibbet-arm and began swinging. There was no one else playing, because it was past bedtime, and only the theatre was keeping me up.

I could see nothing outside the silver glow of the lamp. There were probably lights but like the wall and evergreen bushes they seemed dust, of a dreamy substance. I couldn't conceive that there was another glow in the world, and all the sounds I heard--- the tram, the pausing train, the occasional footsteps that passed in the dark on the other side of the street, a door that closed, either introducing new footsteps to the night or muffling old ones up---seemed to confirm that this was the only glow there was, and to prepare with little preliminary statements the evening I was going to have. I thought to myself that there wouldn't possibly be anyone in the world with such excitement before them, and that any other life must be very poor. I had only been to the theatre once before. The words seemed to be compounded of my own life. It was like touching a life beyond the one people told me about. I sat through the first act with my mouth open so wide that I found a long trickle of dribble down to my collar afterwards. And my eyes felt strained when the lights went up as if they had been looking right inside things with a blinding, stark, selfless

penetration.

Just as the wall and evergreen bushes were like dust, so was the curtain I imagined going up and the shadowy players dressed in very bright colours, passing to and fro, talking a kind of dusty talk, with the black theatre all about, hushed and filled, its darkness as absolute as that beyond the glow of the lamp.

My mother would soon call me, then I would run into the house, clattering up the stairs, my hands would be washed and my overcoat pulled over my shoulders, making me sway for a moment. My father would be walking from the bedroom to the back-room with bustling feet, his lips set, looking for his cuff links or the hard leather glove he wore to cover his missing hand, which had been cut off in a saw mill. Then, with his overcoat on, he would stand tying the laces of this glove with his free hand and his teeth, so that his mouth made a temporary grin, while his eyes gazed into the distance, narrowed, dreamy, with a warm and rich, absorbed expression. Then we would close up the small, sweltering fire in the stove and leave the house. My parents would walk along the street with set and rather abstract faces, as if there were someone extra in them helping to direct their footsteps. And between them I would skip now and then, and feel the hard surfaces of their hands.

I came down from the post and stood looking towards the end of the street. Then I climbed one of the railings and half sat on one of the sharp spikes. I jumped off as hard as I could, trying to reach the kerb. A long time seemed to pass during which no sound came. I watched the upstairs window. Its curtains were quite still, and the glass was shining with the light from my lamp. But nothing happened, so I went up the lamp-post again.

It seemed late. This didn't come into my mind as a clear proposition. It seemed to be asserted by the noises of the even-

ing, or the infrequency of them. They no longer gave support to the glow of the lamp, or made promising statements about the evening to come. A train stopped at the station and paused. But when it groaned away again it seemed to be going anywhere, and to be bearing people quite strange to me. Also a closing door further down the street seemed to shut me out. And the sound of the tram reminded me of long evenings I had spent alone in bed waiting for my parents' sharp footsteps to sound in the street outside, and mistaking them again and again, realising they were footsteps that acknowledged no part in me, and hearing the tram enter the silence again like something intending to bear my body away to strangers and even enemies.

Then the window was really pulled up. A quite overpowering shudder of excitement went through me. I saw my mother lower her head and look out, her hands on the sill. She too was vague, like a shadow moving.

She spoke softly, 'What the devil are you doing up there? Just you get down at once.' But her voice seemed to give me permission to do it. Then she said, 'We'll have to go another night. Your brother couldn't get the tickets.'

There was a pause, while I swung a little more, and she added, as if she were regretfully closing the evening for me, 'Come on now, jump down like a good boy.'

I hugged the post and lowered myself, then dropped to the ground. The shadowy players seemed to go away to the end of the street. Everything was dust as before but it was divided into separate elements now---the wall, the bushes, the lamp and the window opposite. My mother's head disappeared and the sashes made their sad trembling little song. I walked to the edge of

the kerb and was aware of being a child among other children. There were lights which I hadn't noticed before---yellow and plush squares of light from windows with their curtains drawn; and whenever a tram passed at the end of the street it made a sustained flash, like a frightening warship floating in the sky.

As I walked away from the lamp I looked down and saw the dark, rusty blood on the pavement at my feet, like a breath that had made an everlasting mark. I was glad I had mentioned it to no one, lest they should have tried to rub it away.

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