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A Little Pilgrim In the Unseen

Mrs. (Margaret) Oliphant

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The sympathetic reader will easily understand that the following pages were never meant to be connected with any author's name. They sprang out of those thoughts that arise in the heart, when the door of the Unseen has been suddenly opened close by us; and are little more than a wistful attempt to follow a gentle soul which never knew doubt into the New World, and to catch a glimpse of something of its glory through her simple and child-like eyes.

In Memoriam

E.C.

25TH FEBRUARY 1882

A LITTLE PILGRIM

IN THE UNSEEN

She had been talking of dying only the evening before, with a friend, and had described her own sensations after a long illness when she had been at the point of death. "I suppose," she said, "that I was as nearly gone as any one ever was to come back again. There was no pain in it, only a sense of sinking down, down—through the bed as if nothing could hold me or give me support enough—but no pain." And then they had spoken of another friend in the same circumstances, who also had come back from the very verge, and who described her sensations as those of one floating upon a summer sea without pain or suffering, in a lovely nook of the Mediterranean, blue as the sky. These soft and soothing images of the passage which all men dread had been talked over with low voices, yet with smiles and a grateful sense that "the warm precincts of the cheerful day" were once more familiar to both. And very cheerfully she went to rest that night, talking of what was to be done on the morrow, and fell asleep sweetly in her little room, with its shaded light and curtained window, and little pictures on the dim walls. All was quiet in the house: soft breathing of the sleepers, soft murmuring of the spring wind outside, a wintry moon very clear and full in the skies, a little town all hushed and quiet, everything lying defenceless, unconscious, in the safe keeping of God.

How soon she woke no one can tell. She woke and lay quite still, half roused, half hushed, in that soft languor that attends a happy waking. She was happy always in the peace of a heart that was humble and faithful and pure, but yet had been used to wake to a consciousness of little pains and troubles, such as even to her meekness were sometimes hard to bear. But on this morning there were none of these. She lay in a kind of hush of happiness and ease, not caring to make any further movement, lingering over the sweet sensation of that waking. She had no desire to move nor to break the spell of the silence and peace. It was still very early, she supposed, and probably it might be hours yet before any one came to call her. It might even be that she should sleep again. She had no

wish to move, she lay in such luxurious ease and calm. But by and by, as she came to full possession of her waking senses, it appeared to her that there was some change in the atmosphere, in the scene. There began to steal into the air about her the soft dawn as of a summer morning, the lovely blueness of the first opening of daylight before the sun. It could not be the light of the moon which she had seen before she went to bed; and all was so still that it could not be the bustling wintry day which comes at that time of the year late, to find the world awake before it. This was different; it was like the summer dawn, a soft suffusion of light growing every moment. And by and by it occurred to her that she was not in the little room where she had lain down. There were no dim walls or roof, her little pictures were all gone, the curtains at her window. The discovery gave her no uneasiness in that delightful calm. She lay still to think of it all, to wonder, yet undisturbed. It half amused her that these things should be changed, but did not rouse her yet with any shock of alteration. The light grew fuller and fuller round, growing into day, clearing her eyes from the sweet mist of the first waking. Then she raised herself upon her arm. She was not in her room, she was in no scene she knew. Indeed it was scarcely a scene at all—nothing but light, so soft and lovely that it soothed and caressed her eyes. She thought all at once of a summer morning when she was a child, when she had woken in the deep night which yet was day, early—so early that the birds were scarcely astir—and had risen up with a delicious sense of daring, and of being all alone in the mystery of the sunrise, in the unawakened world which lay at her feet to be explored, as if she were Eve just entering upon Eden. It was curious how all those childish sensations, long forgotten, came back to her as she found herself so unexpectedly out of her sleep in the open air and light. In the recollection of that lovely hour, with a smile at herself, so different as she now knew herself to be, she was moved to rise and look a little more closely about her and see where she was.

When I call her a little Pilgrim, I do not mean that she was a child; on the contrary, she was not even young. She was little by nature, with as little flesh and blood as was consistent with mortal life; and she was one of those who are always little for love. The tongue found diminutives for her; the heart kept her in a perpetual youth.

She was so modest and so gentle that she always came last so long as there was any one whom she could put before her. But this little body, and the soul which was not little, and the heart which was big and great, had known all the round of sorrows that fill a woman's life, without knowing any of its warmer blessings. She had nursed the sick, she had entertained the weary, she had consoled the dying. She had gone about the world, which had no prize nor recompense for her, with a smile. Her little presence had been always bright. She was not clever; you might have said she had no mind at all; but so wise and right and tender a heart that it was as good as genius. This is to let you know what this little Pilgrim had been.

She rose up, and it was strange how like she felt to the child she remembered in that still summer morning so many years ago. Her little body, which had been worn and racked with pain, felt as light and unconscious of itself as then. She took her first step forward with the same sense of pleasure, yet of awe, suppressed delight and daring and wild adventure, yet perfect safety. But then the recollection of the little room in which she had fallen asleep came quickly, strangely over her, confusing her mind. "I must be dreaming, I suppose," she said to herself regretfully; for it was all so sweet that she wished it to be true. Her movement called her attention to herself, and she found that she was dressed, not in her night-dress, as she had lain down, but in a dress she did not know. She paused for a moment to look at it and wonder. She had never seen it before; she did not make out how it was made, or what stuff it was; but it fell so pleasantly about her, it was so soft and light, that in her confused state she abandoned that subject with only an additional sense of pleasure. And now the atmosphere became more distinct to her. She saw that under her feet was a greenness as of close velvet turf, both cool and warm, cool and soft to touch, but with no damp in it, as might have been at that early hour, and with flowers showing here and there. She stood looking round her, not able to identify the landscape because she was still confused a little, and then walked softly on, all the time afraid lest she should awake and lose the sweetness of it all, and the sense of rest and happiness. She felt so light, so airy, as if she could skim across the field like any child. It was bliss enough to breathe and move with every organ so free. After more than fifty years of hard service in the world to feel like

this, even in a dream! She smiled to herself at her own pleasure; and then once more, yet more potently, there came back upon her the appearance of her room in which she had fallen asleep. How had she got from there to here? Had she been carried away in her sleep, or was it only a dream, and would she by and by find herself between the four dim walls again? Then this shadow of recollection faded away once more, and she moved forward, walking in a soft rapture over the delicious turf. Presently she came to a little mound upon which she paused to look about her. Every moment she saw a little farther: blue hills far away, extending in long sweet distance, an indefinite landscape, but fair and vast, so that there could be seen no end to it, not even the line of the horizon—save at one side, where there seemed to be a great shadowy gateway, and something dim beyond. She turned from the brightness to look at this, and when she had looked for some time she saw what pleased her still more, though she had been so happy before—people coming in. They were too far off for her to see clearly, but many came, each apart, one figure only at a time. To watch them amused her in the delightful leisure of her mind. Who were they? she wondered; but no doubt soon some of them would come this way, and she would see. Then suddenly she seemed to hear, as if in answer to her question, some one say, "Those who are coming in are the people who have died on earth." "Died!" she said to herself aloud, with a wondering sense of the inappropriateness of the word, which almost came the length of laughter. In this sweet air, with such a sense of life about, to suggest such an idea was almost ludicrous. She was so occupied with this that she did not look round to see who the speaker might be. She thought it over, amused, but with some new confusion of the mind. Then she said, "Perhaps I have died too," with a laugh to herself at the absurdity of the thought.

"Yes," said the other voice, echoing that gentle laugh of hers, "you have died too."

She turned round and saw another standing by her—a woman, younger and fairer and more stately than herself, but of so sweet a countenance that our little Pilgrim felt no shyness, but recognised a friend at once. She was more occupied looking at this new face, and feeling herself at once so much happier (though she had been so happy before) in finding a companion who could tell her what eve-

rything was, than in considering what these words might mean. But just then once more the recollection of the four walls, with their little pictures hanging, and the window with its curtains drawn, seemed to come round her for a moment, so that her whole soul was in a confusion. And as this vision slowly faded away (though she could not tell which was the vision, the darkened room or this lovely light), her attention came back to the words at which she had laughed, and at which the other had laughed as she repeated them. Died? – was it possible that this could be the meaning of it all.

"Died?" she said, looking with wonder in her companion's face, which smiled back to her. "But do you mean – ? You cannot mean – ? I have never been so well. I am so strong. I have no trouble anywhere. I am full of life."

The other nodded her beautiful head with a more beautiful smile, and the little Pilgrim burst out in a great cry of joy, and said –

"Is this all? Is it over? – is it all over? Is it possible that this can be all?"

"Were you afraid of it?" the other said. There was a little agitation for the moment in her heart. She was so glad, so relieved and thankful, that it took away her breath. She could not get over the wonder of it.

"To think one should look forward to it so long, and wonder and be even unhappy trying to divine what it will be – and this all!"

"Ah, but the angel was very gentle with you," said the young woman. "You were so tender and worn that he only smiled and took you sleeping. There are other ways; but it is always wonderful to think it is over, as you say."

The little Pilgrim could do nothing but talk of it, as one does after a very great event. "Are you sure, quite sure, it is so?" she said. "It would be dreadful to find it only a dream, to go to sleep again, and wake up – there –" This thought troubled her for a moment. The vision of the bedchamber came back, but this time she felt it was only a vision. "Were you afraid too?" she said, in a low voice.

"I never thought of it at all," the beautiful stranger said. "I did not think it would come to me; but I was very sorry for the others to

whom it came, and grudged that they should lose the beautiful earth and life, and all that was so sweet."

"My dear!" cried the Pilgrim, as if she had never died, "oh, but this is far sweeter! and the heart is so light, and it is happiness only to breathe. Is it heaven here? It must be heaven."

"I do not know if it is heaven. We have so many things to learn. They cannot tell you everything at once," said the beautiful lady. "I have seen some of the people I was sorry for, and when I told them, we laughed – as you and I laughed just now – for pleasure."

"That makes me think," said the little Pilgrim. "If I have died as you say – which is so strange and me so living – if I have died, they will have found it out. The house will be all dark, and they will be breaking their hearts. Oh, how could I forget them in my selfishness, and be happy! I so lighthearted while they –"

She sat down hastily and covered her face with her hands and wept. The other looked at her for a moment, then kissed her for comfort and cried too. The two happy creatures sat there weeping together, thinking of those they had left behind, with an exquisite grief which was not unhappiness, which was sweet with love and pity. "And oh," said the little Pilgrim, "what can we do to tell them not to grieve? Cannot you send, cannot you speak – cannot one go to tell them?"

The heavenly stranger shook her head.

"It is not well, they all say. Sometimes one has been permitted; but they do not know you," she said, with a pitiful look in her sweet eyes. "My mother told me that her heart was so sick for me, she was allowed to go; and she went and stood by me, and spoke to me, and I did not know her. She came back so sad and sorry that they took her at once to our Father, and there, you know, she found that it was all well. All is well when you are there."

"Ah," said the little Pilgrim, "I have been thinking of other things – of how happy I was, and of *them*, but never of the Father – just as if I had not died."

The other smiled upon her with a wonderful smile.

"Do you think He will be offended—our Father? as if He were one of us?" she said.

And then the little Pilgrim, in her sudden grief to have forgotten Him, became conscious of a new rapture unexplainable in words. She felt His understanding to envelop her little spirit with a soft and clear penetration, and that nothing she did or said could ever be misconceived more. "Will you take me to Him?" she said, trembling yet glad, clasping her hands. And once again the other shook her head.

"They will take us both when it is time," she said. "We do not go at our own will. But I have seen our Brother—"

"Oh, take me to Him!" the little Pilgrim cried. "Let me see His face! I have so many things to say to Him. I want to ask him—Oh, take me to where I can see His face!"

And then once again the heavenly lady smiled.

"I have seen Him," she said. "He is always about—now here, now there. He will come and see you perhaps when you are not thinking—but when He pleases. We do not think here of what we will—"

The little Pilgrim sat very still, wondering at all this. She had thought when a soul left the earth that it went at once to God, and thought of nothing more except worship and singing of praises. But this was different from her thoughts. She sat and pondered and wondered. She was baffled at many points. She was not changed as she expected, but so much like herself still—still perplexed, and feeling herself foolish, not understanding, toiling after a something which she could not grasp. The only difference was that it was no trouble to her now. She smiled at herself, and at her dulness, feeling sure that by and by she would understand.

"And don't you wonder too?" she said to her companion, which was a speech such as she used to make upon the earth where people thought her little remarks disjointed, and did not always see the connection of them. But her friend of heaven knew what she meant.

"I do nothing but wonder," she said, "for it is all so natural—not what we thought."

"Is it long since you have been here?" the Pilgrim said.

"I came before you—but how long or how short I cannot tell, for that is not how we count. We count only by what happens to us. And nothing yet has happened to me, except that I have seen our Brother. My mother sees Him always. That means she has lived here a long time and well—"

"Is it possible to live ill—in heaven?" The little Pilgrim's eyes grew large as if they were going to have tears in them, and a little shadow seemed to come over her. But the other laughed softly and restored her confidence.

"I have told you I do not know if it is heaven or not. No one does ill, but some do little and some do much, just as it used to be. Do you remember in Dante there was a lazy spirit that stayed about the gates and never got farther? but perhaps you never read that."

"I was not clever," said the little Pilgrim, wistfully. "No, I never read it. I wish I had known more."

Upon which the beautiful lady kissed her again to give her courage, and said—

"It does not matter at all. It all comes to you whether you have known it or not."

"Then your mother came here long ago?" said the Pilgrim. "Ah, then I shall see my mother too."

"Oh, very soon—as soon as she can come; but there are so many things to do. Sometimes we can go and meet those who are coming, but it is not always so. I remember that she had a message. She could not leave her business, you may be sure, or she would have been here."

"Then you know my mother? Oh, and my dearest father too?"

"We all know each other," the lady said with a smile.

"And you? did you come to meet me—only out of kindness, though I do not know you?" the little Pilgrim said.

"I am nothing but an idler," said the beautiful lady, "making acquaintance. I am of little use as yet. I was very hard worked before I came here, and they think it well that we should sit in the sun and take a little rest and find things out."

Then the little Pilgrim sat still and mused, and felt in her heart that she had found many things out. What she had heard had been wonderful, and it was more wonderful still to be sitting here all alone save for this lady, yet so happy and at ease. She wanted to sing, she was so happy, but remembered that she was old and had lost her voice, and then remembered again that she was no longer old, and perhaps had found it again. And then it occurred to her to remember how she had learned to sing, and how beautiful her sister's voice was, and how heavenly to hear her, which made her remember that this dear sister would be weeping, not singing, down where she had come from—and immediately the tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh," she said, "I never thought we should cry when we came here. I thought there were no tears in heaven."

"Did you think, then, that we were all turned into stone?" cried the beautiful lady. "It says, God shall wipe away all tears from our faces, which is not like saying there are to be no tears."

Upon which the little Pilgrim, glad that it was permitted to be sorry, though she was so happy, allowed herself to think upon the place she had so lately left. And she seemed to see her little room again with all the pictures hanging as she had left them, and the house darkened, and the dear faces she knew all sad and troubled; and to hear them saying over to each other all the little careless words she had said as if they were out of the Scriptures, and crying if any one but mentioned her name, and putting on crape and black dresses, and lamenting as if that which had happened was something very terrible. She cried at this and yet felt half inclined to laugh, but would not because it would be disrespectful to those she loved. One thing did not occur to her, and that was that they would be carrying her body, which she had left behind her, away to the grave. She did not think of this because she was not aware of the loss, and felt far too much herself to think that there was another part of her being buried in the ground. From this she was aroused by her companion asking her a question.

"Have you left many there?" she said.

"No one," said the little Pilgrim, "to whom I was the first on earth, but they loved me all the same; and if I could only, only let them know —"

"But I left one to whom I was the first on earth," said the other with tears in her beautiful eyes, "and oh, how glad I should be to be less happy if he might be less sad!"

"And you cannot go? you cannot go to him and tell him? Oh, I wish—" cried the little Pilgrim; but then she paused, for the wish died all away in her heart into a tender love for this poor sorrowful man whom she did not know. This gave her the sweetest pang she had ever felt, for she knew that all was well, and yet was so sorry, and would have willingly given up her happiness for his. All this the lady read in her eyes or her heart, and loved her for it; and they took hands and were silent together, thinking of those they had left, as we upon earth think of those who have gone from us, but only with far more understanding, and far greater love. "And have you never been able to do anything for him?" our Pilgrim said.

Then the beautiful lady's face flushed all over with the most heavenly warmth and light. Her smile ran over like the bursting out of the sun. "Oh, I will tell you," she said. "There was a moment when he was very sad and perplexed, not knowing what to think. There was something he could not understand; nor could I understand, nor did I know what it was until it was said to me, 'You may go and tell him.' And I went in the early morning, before he was awake, and kissed him, and said it in his ear. He woke up in a moment and understood, and everything was clear to him. Afterwards I heard him say, 'It is true that the night brings counsel. I had been troubled and distressed all day long, but in the morning it was quite clear to me.' And the other answered, 'Your brain was refreshed, and that made your judgment clear.' But they never knew it was I! That was a great delight. The dear souls! they are so foolish," she cried with the sweetest laughter that ran into tears. "One cries because one is so happy; it is a silly old habit," she said.

"And you were not grieved, it did not hurt you—that he did not know —"

"Oh, not then; not then! I did not go to him for that. When you have been here a little longer you will see the difference. When you

go for yourself, out of impatience, because it still seems to you that you must know best, and they don't know you—then it strikes to your heart; but when you go to help them—ah," she cried, "when he comes how much I shall have to tell him! 'You thought it was sleep when it was I—when you woke so fresh and clear it was I that kissed you; you thought it your duty to me to be sad afterwards and were angry with yourself because you had wronged me of the first thoughts of your waking—when it was all me, all through!'"

"I begin to understand," said the little Pilgrim; "but why should they not see us, and why should not we tell them? It would seem so natural. If they saw us it would make them so happy, and so sure."

Upon this the lady shook her head.

"The worst of it is not that they are not sure—it is the parting. If this makes us sorry here, how can they escape the sorrow of it even if they saw us?—for we must be parted. We cannot go back to live with them, or why should we have died? And then we must all live our lives—they in their way, we in ours. We must not weigh them down, but only help them when it is seen that there is need for it. All this we shall know better by and by."

"You make it so clear, and your face is so bright," said our little Pilgrim gratefully. "You must have known a great deal, and understood even when you were in the world."

"I was as foolish as I could be," said the other, with her laugh that was as sweet as music; "yet thought I knew, and they thought I knew; but all that does not matter now."

"I think it matters, for look how much you have shown me; but tell me one thing more—how was it said to you that you must go and tell him? Was it some one who spoke—was it—"

Her face grew so bright that all the past brightness was as a dull sky to this. It gave out such a light of happiness that the little Pilgrim was dazzled.

"I was wandering about," she said, "to see this new place. My mother had come back between two errands she had, and had come to see me and tell me everything; and I was straying about wonder-

ing what I was to do, when suddenly I saw some one coming along, as it might be now — "

She paused and looked up, and the little Pilgrim looked up too with her heart beating, but there was no one. Then she gave a little sigh, and turned and listened again.

"I had not been looking for Him, or thinking. You know my mind is too light. I am pleased with whatever is before me; and I was so curious, for my mother had told me many things: when suddenly I caught sight of Him passing by. He was going on, and when I saw this a panic seized me, lest He should pass and say nothing. I do not know what I did. I flung myself upon His robe, and got hold of it, or at least I think so. I was in such an agony lest He should pass and never notice me. But that was my folly. He pass! As if that could be!"

"And what did He say to you?" cried the little Pilgrim, her heart almost aching it beat so high with sympathy and expectation.

The lady looked at her for a little without saying anything.

"I cannot tell you," she said, "any more than I can tell if this is heaven. It is a mystery. When you see Him you will know. It will be all you have ever hoped for and more besides, for He understands everything. He knows what is in our hearts about those we have left, and why He sent for us before them. There is no need to tell Him anything; He knows. He will come when it is time; and after you have seen Him you will know what to do."

Then the beautiful lady turned her eyes towards the gate, and, while the little Pilgrim was still gazing, disappeared from her, and went to comfort some other stranger. They were dear friends always, and met often, but not again in the same way.

When she was thus left alone again, the little Pilgrim sat still upon the grassy mound, quite tranquil and happy, without wishing to move. There was such a sense of wellbeing in her that she liked to sit there and look about her, and breathe the delightful air, like the air of a summer morning, without wishing for anything.

"How idle I am!" she said to herself, in the very words she had often used before she died; but then she was idle from weakness, and