

# A Test of Courage

By C. W. Leadbeater

How long I had slept I cannot say; but in a moment, with the suddenness of a flash of lightning, I passed from unconsciousness to complete and vivid consciousness. I gave a quick glance round my chamber; everything was visible clearly enough in the subdued light of my lamp, turned low for the night. All seemed as usual—nothing out of place, nothing to account in any way for that sudden awakening.

But the next moment there thrilled through my soul the well-known voice of that Teacher whom I revere and love above all else in the world. That voice uttered but one word:

“Come!”

Ere I could spring from my couch in glad obedience I was seized with a feeling which it would be hopeless to attempt to describe so as to give any one else an adequate conception of it. Every nerve in my body seemed strained to the breaking-point by some hitherto-unsuspected force within; after a moment of excruciating pain this sensation focussed itself in the upper part of the head, something there seemed to burst, and—I found myself floating in the air! One glance I cast behind me, and saw myself—or my body rather—lying soundly asleep upon the bed; and then I soared out into the open air.

It was a dark tempestuous night, and lowering clouds were driving rapidly across the sky; and it seemed to me as if the whole air were full of living creatures, shadowy and indistinctly seen through the darkness—creatures like wreaths of mist or smoke, and yet somehow living and powerful—creatures which seemed perpetually rushing towards me and yet retired before me; but I swept on unheeding.

The room in which I had been sleeping is on the bank of a river, and across this my flight tended. At this point there is in the centre of the stream a small islet—little more than a sandbank, half-covered when the water is high; and on this islet I alighted. Suddenly I found standing beside me the form of my mother, who had passed from this life some six years before.

“What is this?” I cried in amazement.

“Hush,” said she, “*look there!*”

She pointed to the river whose waves washed almost to our feet. I looked, and saw a sight that might well have made the boldest tremble. Approaching us along the river was a vast army of enormous creatures such as man’s wildest imagination could never conceive. I quite despair of giving any idea of the appearance of this huge mass of advancing horrors; perhaps the prevailing types might be described as resembling the pictures we see of the gigantic monsters of the so-called antediluvian era, and yet were far more fearful than they. Dark as the night was, I could see the hellish host clearly enough, for they had a light of their own; a strange unearthly luminosity seemed to emanate from each of them.

“Do you know what those are?” asked my mother in a voice of terror.

“Elementals, are they not?” said I.

“Yes,” she replied, “terrible elementals of deadly power! Let us fly!”

But even in this crisis of horror I did not forget my Teacher’s instructions, so I answered:

“No; I will never fly from an elemental; besides, it would be quite useless.”

“Come with me,” she cried; “better die a thousand deaths than fall into their power!”

“I will not fly,” I repeated; and she rose hurriedly into the air and vanished.

To say that I was not abjectly frightened would be an untruth, but I certainly had not the courage to turn my back on that appalling army, and moreover I felt that flight from such power would be hopeless; my one chance was to endeavour to stand firm. By this time the advancing host was close at hand; but the first rank, instead of springing upon me as I expected, writhed slowly along in front of me in hideous procession. No such sight, assuredly, has ever been seen by man's physical eye; delirium itself could never give birth to horrors so unutterable as these.

Ichthyosauri, plesiosauri, prodigious batrachians, gigantic cuttlefish, sea-spiders twenty feet high, cobras of the size of the mythical sea-serpent, monsters shaped almost like some huge bird, yet obviously reptilian in character, ghastly bloodless creatures like enormously magnified animalculæ—all these and many more nameless variants defiled before my eyes; and yet no two of the obscene host were alike, and none seemed perfect; each had some peculiar and awful deformity of its own. But through all these diversities of form, each more inconceivably loathsome than the last, there ran a still more frightful likeness; and I soon realised that this likeness was in their *eyes*.

No matter what unclean shape each hateful monstrosity might bear, all alike had fiery, malignant eyes; and in every case in these baleful orbs there dwelt an awful demoniac power of fascination—an expression of bitter unrelenting hostility to the human race. Each noisome abomination, as it writhed slowly past, fixed its fearful eyes on mine, and seemed to be exerting some formidable power against me. How my reason retained its throne under these terrible conditions I shall never know; I felt somehow certain that if I once gave way to my fears I should instantly fall a victim to this demon host, and I concentrated all my being in the one faculty of stubborn resistance.

How long that terrific procession took to pass me I know not, but last of the loathly legion came a *something* which wore partly the semblance of a three-headed snake, though immeasurably greater than any earthly ophidian, and yet—oh horror! its heads and eyes seemed somehow human, or rather diabolical. And this dreadful misshapen THING, instead of gliding slowly past as the others had done, turned aside, and with raised crests and open mouths made straight at me! On it came, its blazing eyes fixed on mine, and blood-red slime or foam dropping from its enormous wide-open jaws, while I summoned up all my willpower for one last stupendous effort.

But that I clenched my hands and set my teeth hard, I moved no muscle, although the pestilent effluvia of its burning breath came full in my face—although in its onward rush it splashed the water over my feet, and even dropped its loathsome slime upon them; for I felt that life, and more than life, depended upon the strength of my will. How long that tremendous strain lasted I cannot say; but just as it seemed that I could hold out no longer I felt the resistance weaken; the fire died out of the fiendish eyes that were held so close to mine, and with a horrible roar of baffled rage the unclean monster fell back into the water! The whole troop had vanished, and I was alone in the dark night as at first.

But before the revulsion of feeling had time to set in, clear and sweet above my head rang the well-known astral bell, and I felt myself rising and moving swiftly through the air. In a moment I was back again in my own room, saw my body still lying in the same position, and with a sort of shock found myself one with it once more. But as I raised myself on my couch, I saw laid upon my bosom a lovely white lotus-blossom freshly plucked, with the dew still on the petals.

With heart throbbing with delight I turned towards the light to examine it more closely, when a puff of cold air drew my attention to the fact that my feet were wet, and looking down at them, I was horror-stricken to see that they were covered with splashes of some viscous red liquid!

Instantly I rushed out to the bathroom and washed them again and again, finding it very difficult to get rid of the filthy treacly fluid, and when at last I was satisfied I went back to my room and sat down to admire my lotus-blossom, marvelling greatly.

Now, before lying down again to sleep, I have thus written this account of what happened to me, lest to-morrow I should fail to recollect any of the points clearly, though indeed there seems little fear of that, for they are burnt into my brain.

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*Later.* My wonderful story is not yet quite finished. After writing thus far I lay down and slept, and was so weary that, contrary to my custom, I did not wake until after sunrise. The first object on which my eye fell was my lotus-blossom in the cup of water in which I had placed it before writing; and by the clearer light of day I discerned some reddish stains at the foot of the sheet on which I had lain. Rising, I determined to plunge into the river and swim across, so as to view by the morning light the scene of this strange nocturnal adventure. There lay the islet—there were the low level banks, just as I had seen them then; and yet by the clear morning sunshine it was difficult to put upon this stage the ghastly *dramatis personæ* that occupied it last night.

I swam out to the sandbank, for it seemed to me that I could identify the very spot where I stood during that terrible trial. Yes, here surely it must be, and—powers above us! what is this? Here are *footprints* in the sand—two deep footprints, side by side, made evidently by one who stood long and firmly in one position; no others leading up to them either from the water or from the other side of the islet only just those two footprints—my footprints undoubtedly, for I try them and they fit exactly. And once more—what is this? Here on the sand, close by the footprints, I find traces still left of the horrible viscous liquid—the foul red slime that fell from the jaws of that elemental dragon!

I have thought over every possible hypothesis, and I cannot escape the conclusion that my experience was a real one. I did not walk in my sleep to make those footprints, for to reach the islet I must have swum some distance, and then not my feet only, but my whole body and clothes, must have been wet; and besides, that theory would hardly account for the slime and the lotus. But what of the female figure which I saw? I can only suppose it to have been a nature-spirit who had either, seized upon the shell of my departed relative or for some reason had assumed her appearance.

Now, immediately on my return from the swim, I have made this addition to my narrative.