

THE DOOM OF THE GREAT CITY

BEING

THE NARRATIVE OF A SURVIVOR

WRITTEN A.D. 1942

BY

WILLIAM DELISLE HAY

"— How can I  
Repress the horror of my thoughts, which fly  
The sad remembrance?"  
*Sir J. Denham*

*EPISODE TWO*

On the 1st of February, 1882, I left business early about half-past three in the afternoon, if I remember aright, and went home. The next day being my birthday, I had resolved, with my employer's permission, to make it a holiday; and in order that we might all enjoy it to the best advantage, a little excursion had been planned among us. My mother, my sister, and I, had agreed to accept the invitation of some of our few friends, and to go out to their house on the evening of the 1st remaining with them until late on the following day. As our friends resided in a locality called Lordship Lane, not far from the suburb of Dulwich, we anticipated no little pleasure from the excursion, and it was consequently with feelings of delighted expectation that I hurried home from business that afternoon, to carry off my two dear ones with me on our projected visit. But our plans were overthrown by the horrible state of the weather. For weeks before, London had been stifled in a fog of varying density, but that afternoon it had grown so dense that my mother did not like to venture through it, especially since of late there had been tales about of accidents occurring from this cause, and my sister of coarse could not leave our mother. However, the two dear creatures had prepared everything for my departure, and were determined that I should go off alone; they were also extremely anxious that I should, if invited to do so, remain the second night at the Forresters',

as my intimacy with young Wilton Forrester was likely to be of great service to me, and my good mother was anxious for me to "cultivate the friendship," as she said. I was much disappointed at their determination not to go, and would fain have stopped myself, but maternal counsels prevailed, and I set off. I found my way, not without considerable difficulty, to the railway station at Ludgate Hill. Everything was wrapped in murky gloom, though it wanted quite an hour of sunset, and the gas-lamps that were alight all day were wholly insufficient to penetrate the cloudy atmosphere with their sickly lights. I got into a train that went in my direction, and congratulated myself with the thought that I should soon be out of the worst of the fog, at any rate. I do not remember whether anyone ever attempted to write a history of London fogs, their gradual rise and progress, or gradual increase in duration and density, up to their terrific culmination; but such an essay would form a deeply interesting one. A London fog was no mere mist: it was the heavy mist, in the first place, that we are accustomed to in most latitudes, but it was that mist supercharged with coal smoke, with minute carbonaceous particles, "grits" and "smuts," with certain heavy gases, and with a vast number of other impurities. It was chiefly the result of the huge and reckless consumption of coal carried on over the wide-extending city, the smoke from which, not being re-consumed or filtered off in any way, was caught up and retained by the vapour-laden air. The fog was the most disagreeable and dangerous of all the climatic sufferings that Londoners had to bear. It filled the nostrils and air-passages of those who breathed it with soot, and choked their throats and lungs with black, gritty particles, causing illness and often death to the aged, weakly, and ailing it also caused headaches, and oppression, and all the symptoms that tell of the respiration of vitiated air. Londoners were well accustomed to the inconvenience of these fogs, and looked upon them in the light of a regular institution, not caring to investigate their cause with a view to some means of mitigating them. The fog the city had been known from time immemorial, especially in those districts lying near to the river, or to localities that had originally been marshes; but it was only of late years that the recurrence of fogs during autumn, winter and spring, had assumed such alarming proportions. Even twenty years before the period I am writing of the fog was seldom so thick and foul in character, or it was so only over very limited areas; while if it continued for more than a few hours at a time, that was considered a fact to be severely commented upon. But the plague had increased in severity of late — so much so, that its density turned day into night, and clothed night in impenetrable obscurity; its extent was greater, involving all the districts between Hampstead and the Surrey hills and stretching from Woolwich to Bayswater; its continuance was such that weeks at a time often passed over while the detestable mantle still hung above the streets. The late years of incessant rain and cold had proved conducive to the prevalence of fogs, which now appeared in unwonted seasons with all their worst features. Besides the constant annoyance from impeded traffic, from the want of light, and from the injury to health, there were other reasons for dismay; accidents by river, rail, and road were frequent and disastrous; vessels collided upon the Thames, trains ran off the lines, and their passengers were maimed or killed; while garotters, burglars, and all the guilds of open crime, revelled in contented impunity. Yet still, no one seemed to think the "institution" other than a huge joke, and not a serious evil to be earnestly combated by science, with energy and municipal wealth for helpers.

In the train, as I was journeying through the fog, I was introduced to a new feature of the prevalent affliction — a forerunner of what was so soon to follow. Although it was too murky within the carriage, in spite of the feeble glimmer of an oil-lamp overhead, for the passengers to distinguish one another very clearly, yet conversation was carried on, perhaps all the more volubly on that account. One subject engrossed attention, and from the frequent ejaculations of dismay and manifest terror that it excited, I bent forward to listen to what was said. The principal speaker was sitting at some distance from me, but his voice rose dominant

above the rest, and this is the substance of what I heard:—

"Yes, gentlemen," — he was saying, "the report's true enough, God help us! In fact, there's no doubt about it at all. I was down Thames Street myself to-day, and actually saw some of the bodies being carried along. Down Bermondsey way, in some of those crowded little streets and courts, was where it happened. They say the fog got suddenly so awfully thick that you couldn't see your hand before your face. About midday I should think it was; and I can well believe it, for it was nearly as bad when I was down there, a couple of hours later. Well, they told me that in some of those streets the people were choked with the fog; regularly strangled and killed outright; men, women, and children. Some were in their shops and houses, and some were in the street, but they just dropped where they stood. I was that scared, that when I saw them carrying a couple of bodies into a public-house, I just turned and came away as fast as I could. Some said there was hundreds dead, and others said it was not above a dozen altogether. I don't know, nobody seemed to know, the rights of it; they couldn't, you see, the fog was still so dense. But, good. God! gentlemen, just fancy what it would be if the like was to happen in the City. Some were talking about gas from the sewers; I don't know anything about that, but I know it's made me so nervous that, business or no business, I go out of town to-night, and stop out till the fog clears off."

A moment later we came to a station, and the speaker got out. I set down what he had said as a gross exaggeration, as did most of my fellow travellers; still I could not help a horrid feeling of dread and foreboding coming over me. I suppose there was a good deal more conversation in the carriage, but I remember nothing of it. By-and-by we came to my station, and I left the train. Here the fog was nothing more than a light white mist; indeed, the real London fog never crossed the Surrey hills. I took my way up Lordship Lane, breathing more freely, and seeming to get inspirited at every step, so marked was the change from the heavy atmosphere I had come out of. I need not tell you of the cordial and kindly reception that I found awaiting me. The Forresters were a genial, old-fashioned family, inhabiting a comfortable, old-fashioned house standing in its own walled garden, and looking down upon the trim plastered villas that were springing up all around it. The family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Forrester, three daughters, and the son, Wilton, who was my senior by a few years, and who was a physician, though not in practice. They were in good circumstances, but not what the world then considered rich. I had made Dr. Wilton Forrester's acquaintance some two years before under somewhat singular circumstances, which had led to my introduction to his family, and by degrees to our present intimacy. The family were very hospitable, and subsequent events, of which you are aware, showed them to be kind and warm-hearted in no common degree. On that memorable evening they gave me a most kind welcome, expressing ready disappointment at not seeing my mother and sister with me. It was agreed that in the morning Wilton and I should go into town and fetch them out; nothing short of my promise to that effect would pacify the good people. I will pass over the details of the pleasant evening that followed dinner; it was like all such evenings among an agreeable family circle. I soon saw that no tidings had reached these amiable folk relative to the rumour I had heard in the train, and I forbore to speak on the subject, as the girls were full of jokes about the fog, and well primed with a hundred amusing anecdotes of the strange predicaments that were constantly befalling people in the clouded streets. They might well laugh who were removed beyond the influence of the fog, but such was the fashion in which everyone was accustomed to treat the subject — until that night.

Afterwards, when Mr. Forrester, Wilton, and I were sitting over our pipes in the smoking-room, I told them the story as I had heard it. They were infinitely shocked, as may be imagined, and slightly incredulous the affair was so novel in character, so contrary to all previous experience, that we hesitated to accept it for truth, rather preferring to suppose that some unforeseen accident of a less unheard-of description had been the basis from which the

rumour had sprung. Naturally, we continued to talk of nothing else, and I remember that Wilton gave us the benefit of his scientific acquirements in our various speculations. As our talk bore very much upon the explanation of the subject of my narrative, I shall endeavour to recall the substance of it for you. It began by my observing that I could not understand how the fog — however bad it might be could become sufficiently thick or poisonous as to destroy life. Moreover, we had been accustomed, more or less, to London fogs ever since London existed, and I had never heard that people had been killed by them in that way before; the present fog had lasted since Christmas, and was not so thick to-day as it had been sometimes previously. My argument therefore was, that as the fogs had not before been found directly hostile to life, it was to be presumed they were not so now, since no distinctly new element had been imported into them. You perceive, my children, that, young and unthinking as I was my spirits had risen with my surroundings, and under their influence I was inclined to take the usual Londoner's view, and to scoff at the idea of a time-honoured nuisance turning out an actual danger. But both my companions were of different opinion. The elder Forrester said there was clear evidence that the fog injured health, even to the point of proving very quickly fatal to old people, and to those who were suffering from chest complaints or pulmonary weakness of any kind. There was clear evidence that it already did do so. The statistics of the death-rate showed this to be so beyond dispute. It was also evident to old inhabitants of London that the fogs were becoming aggravated every year, and the injury they did was increasing in due proportion. He did not see that we were justified in supposing the fogs to have attained the worst extent of virulence, although he sincerely trusted they had; and if it was shown that they were at present directly injurious to health, and an immediate cause of death to certain invalids, it could be easily understood how the intensification of the fog - would tend to the detriment of human life. Yet he was not prepared to credit the report I had heard, because it really seemed too much in the nature of a fable, and he thought such an event could scarcely happen under present existing circumstances. Although he saw the possibility of such accidents in some distant period of the future, yet he could not realise to his mind their actual occurrence now. Such was the old gentleman's opinion; meanwhile Wilton had been fidgeting in his seat, occasionally shaking his head, and giving vent to smothered ejaculations. When his father finished speaking, he said somewhat as follows: "The more I come to think of the rumour you have heard, the more I am inclined to admit the possibility of its entire truth. I recollect a case that was brought into hospital during the very severe fogs of a couple of winters ago.\* [\* 1880] It was that of a cabman, who had suddenly pitched headlong off his seat, and was picked up dead. The cause of death was at first supposed to be fracture of the skull, and it was held that the fall had resulted from drunkenness. However, the post-mortem threw an entirely different light upon the case. From it we had reason to conclude that the fall must have taken place after life was extinct, and there was no sign of any organic disease or chronic mischief to account for it. The cause of death was evident from the state of the lungs and air-passages, which were highly congested. The bronchi and tubes ramifying from them were clogged with black, grimy mucus, and death had evidently resulted from a sudden spasm, which would produce suffocation, as the lungs would not have the power in their clogged condition of making a sufficiently forcible expiratory effort to get rid of the accumulated filth that was the instrument of death. That was the only case of actual death from inhalation of London fog that I have seen myself, but there have been many others exactly similar reported."\* [\* Dr. Broadbent, one of the leading physicians of that day in London, also, I believe, had one or two such cases that came under his notice during the same fog.]

After some more cases of the same kind had been quoted, Mr. Forrester began speculating as to the way in which the fog might have acted in destroying life, in the instance of the people in Bermondsey. His theory was, that the air underwent some extraordinary

chemical changes that, loaded with carbon in a finely-divided condition, and with the various products of combustion, there might happen possibly under an electrified condition of the atmosphere a sudden increase of affinity, by which carbonic oxide would be formed in prodigious quantity. As this gas is fatal to life, every breathing thing within the area of its influence would die. But Wilton combated this opinion; he said :—

"If what you were supposing were to be possible, and were actually to happen, there would be a sudden alteration in the volume of the surrounding air; this would be sufficient, I think, to produce formidable air- currents whose progress and agitation would be quite rapid enough to preserve such an admixture of oxygenated air as would prevent the ill effects to life that you are afraid of. No; I see only one way in which the fog is likely to act as a life-destroying agent apart, that is, from its action in carrying poisonous germs and spreading epidemics, which illustrates its slower action but as a rapid and immediate extinguisher of vitality the cause must be bronchial spasm. You see that each inspiration draws into the lungs a quantity of gritty particles; these necessarily inflame and lacerate the structures with which they are brought in contact, besides mechanically choking the passages; hence follows spasm of the bronchi, spasm of the glottis. Usually there exists the power to recover from this rapidly. Prolonged or energetic coughing brings up the cause of obstruction and relieves the muscular contraction, and the asthma or 'choking fit' is over. But suppose," continued Wilton, "such an aggravation of the fog, such an increase in its density, compression and carriage of mechanical impurity, as to make each one inspiration contain the same amount of irritative matter as do, say a score or so of inspirations at present. What would be the effect of that ? There would not be the chance of a recovery; each gasp would. distress, aggravate the distress, suffocation, complete and sudden would be inevitable. That is the way in which the cabman's death was brought about; and that is the way, in my opinion, in which the Bermondsey affair took place."

"The more I study these things in my mind the gloomier become my forebodings. We do not know the laws which govern the fogs of London, because in some measure they are artificial, and so differ from other mists. We only know that they have tended to become 'worse,' as we express it, of late years. How are we to know that this intensifying has reached its limits? May not the loss of life be even more serious from this cause? It is a pity that Government, and private individuals too, have not been readier in striving after some means of abating what we have long known to be an intolerable nuisance, and what seems about to become a very grave evil. Scientists have indeed made suggestions, but no steps have as yet been taken to determine their practical utility. Perhaps this accident in Bermondsey may direct attention to the subject."

I can remember yet the indescribable thrill which passed through me during these conversations. How wonderful it seems to me, looking back upon these events, that the warning never came until too late to be of service, that the cause for alarm so shortly preceded the blow. About the very time that we were sitting talking, scenes were enacting not so far from us that — but I must proceed regularly with my tale.

As you may guess, the horrible rumour which I had heard so circumstantially detailed, together with the conversation arising out of it later in the evening, went with me to my bed, and, impressed deeply on my mind, filled my sleep with all the wild phantasmagoria of frightful dreams. I rose in the morning feeling feverish and unrefreshed, and filled with a weird presentiment of evil that I was powerless to shake off. I drew up the blind, and looked out of the window. The sun was shining in a pale, sickly kind of way through the mist, which, however, seemed to be lightening a good deal. Towards the south one could see for a considerable distance, the mist being light and hazy; but in an opposite direction it deepened into a dense brown fog-bank, which lay along the line of the Surrey hills, completely shutting out all view beyond. I turned away with a shudder as my thoughts flew to my dear ones who

were far in the depths of that hideous obscurity. Downstairs the family party was assembled for breakfast, the ladies light-hearted and full of raillery, the men depressed and anxious. There was a discordant tone in our voices, and an absent-mindedness in our manners which brought down on our heads many a light shaft of feminine wit; for both the Forresters, father and son, were, like me, oppressed with a troubled sense of something wrong, the result of our last night's talk. We were all most eager for the arrival of the morning papers, hoping they might relieve our fears, but neither the post nor the papers made their appearance. This was extraordinary, when ten o'clock came and still no tidings from the outer world had reached us. Our evident uneasiness had extended itself to the ladies, in spite of our efforts to seem cheerful, making dismal attempts at jocularity, saying that the postman must have lost his way in the fog, and so forth. But it was all to no use; a portentous gloom hung over us and refused to be lifted. At length we could bear it no longer, and making some excuse about going to see what had delayed the post we three men sallied out, and took our way down the hill in the direction of East Dulwich. Now up to this time I do not recollect that I had any actual sense of fear. A feeling, indefinable and objectless, of despondency and nervous shrinking I have already confessed to just such an inexplicable sensation of presentiment, of waiting for some unknown, un-thought of horror that was lying ready to appear, but was at present shrouded from view, which everyone knows as an accompaniment to that class of dreams we call nightmare: yet I had in no sense realized the immediate approach of evil to myself or to those I loved. I think I have pretty accurately expressed the nature of my inward feelings up to the moment when the two Forresters and I commenced our walk. But every moment after that brought nearer and nearer to my mind the horrid reality of dread; fixed deeper inwardly a fuller horror as events became known and an agony of unutterable fear gradually filled every sense and thrilled every nerve within me. Aye, my grandchildren, little can you understand the utter intensity of that all-absorbing terror, which even now causes my very soul to quake within me as I write. This is no exaggeration; wait, and read the awful tale, if I can command myself to finish it.

As we came out into the high-road, we overtook a gentleman who was proceeding in the same direction as ourselves. He 'was a neighbour of the Forresters, and was known to them, so we fell into conversation. Like us, he had been much perturbed by the non-appearance of the postman, and he was now on his way to try and obtain tidings of him. From him we gained the first startling piece of intelligence. This gentleman had seen the "special edition" of an evening paper the previous night, 'and in it, he said, was an account of the accident in Bermondsey. The report said that over five hundred lives were certainly lost, but that, owing to the dense fog in the locality, and the difficulty of getting men to enter it, the exact total could not yet be known. It went on to add that although people in the adjacent district asserted the cause of the calamity to have been simply a sudden and overwhelming access of fog, this *could not* have been the true reason, *because it was contrary to all previous experience*; "wherefore," said this sapient journal, "we must suppose that a gush of foul sewer-gas, or some similar poisoning of the thick and heavy air, produced the fatal effect;" a piece of reasoning which almost moved Wilton to laughter. This is a fair illustration of how strangely fixed in the London mind was the notion that their fog was always to be, what it always had been, innocuous to the generality of people — an idea which had served to prevent any steps being taken in the direction of rendering it really so. Now, as we had seen reason to admit the possibility of the mere fog acting as a direct destroyer, we were sadly disheartened by this confirmation of the evil news. It is easy now to follow the train of conclusions which made our vague anxieties assume a more vivid shape.

Firstly, supposing it proved that the fog could kill an individual — and Wilton had proved that — what was to hinder its killing a number of individuals in a certain spot? and *that* was now proved to our minds. Again, if the fog could attain to such virulence over any

special locality, there was no just reason for supposing that its area of destructive maleficence might not be enlarged to an almost indefinite extent. So thinking and talking, we passed on down the road towards East Dulwich.

As we entered that part of Lordship Lane which formed the main street of East Dulwich, and where such shops and public-houses as the suburb boasted were to be found, we became aware of a very great commotion going on. The fog was here somewhat denser than on the higher ground we had left, though it was still only a whitish mist. But the usually quiet street, so far as we could see through the mist, presented a most unaccustomed spectacle. People were rushing wildly to and fro, groups were gathered in the roadway, on the pavement, inside and outside of the public-houses and the shops; all seemed imbued with ungovernable and frantic excitement, and on every face might be traced the same expression, panic, terror, fear! What was the matter?

Hastily we mingled with the throng, anxiously we questioned first one and then another. None seemed to know exactly what had occurred; none were possessed of details, yet the very vagueness of the thousand rumours lent potency to their fears, while all concurred in one frenzied outburst THE FOG! Some told us that all access to town was shut off by an impenetrable wall of fog; others said that no person or vehicle of any kind had come out of town that morning. Some spoke of the entire cutting off of all communication with London as a temporary nuisance and a good joke, but their blanched faces and quivering lips too plainly showed the dread that was at work within them; while others there were who told of men that had essayed to penetrate the vaporous veil, and who had returned, scared and choking to speak of dead men lying in the street whose bodies they had stumbled over, to tell of the suffocating intensity of the dreadful fog. So asking and so answered, we came to Champion Hill railway station, where a large but awestricken crowd was gathered. Here we learnt the fullest details that were yet known. All traffic into and out of London was indeed suspended, or rather, had never commenced. No trains had come out from the London termini, no response had been received to signals or telegrams; while men who had started to walk into town had either never returned, or else had shortly retraced their footsteps, panting and half-strangled. Telegrams from other suburbs and outskirts of town brought intelligence of a precisely similar state of things existing in those localities. No one had come from London, no one had succeeded in entering it. Such public conveyances as were wont to start every morning with their freight of "City men," had made efforts to do so in vain. They had been forced to relinquish the attempt, owing not only to the black obscurity, but also to the unbreathable character that the fog seemed to have assumed. Crowds of men who lived in the suburbs and were employed in the City by day, thronged the stations, a dreadful panic having taken possession of them and altered their usual demeanour. Instead of the accustomed noise, bustle, and brisk hurry, white-faced groups consulted together in whispering tones; and many, utterly demoralized by excess of terror, had gone home to carry off their families to some place of greater safety. All round the "Great City" lay a wide belt of suburban districts, and these were now —so it seemed— given up to confusion, peopled with panic, and invaded with dismay. What were my feelings now? Judge for yourselves. Do you suppose I can tell you? A man came down the station steps, as we terrified wretches cowered together below, loudly exclaiming:—

"I tell you, it's damned nonsense; they CAN'T be all killed in London!"

*You have downloaded this episode from [The Gateway online journal](#). It is also available from other public domain sources. The final episode will be available next month.*

