The Path of Later On

“The path of later-on and the road of tomorrow lead only to the castle of nothing-at-all.”

By the wayside, many-coloured flowers delight the eye, red berries gleam on small trees with knotty branches, and in the distance a brilliant sun shines gold upon the ripe corn.

A young traveller is walking briskly along, happily breathing in the pure morning air; he seems joyful, without a care for the future. The way he is following comes to a cross-roads, where innumerable paths branch off in all directions.

Everywhere the young man can see criss-crossing footprints. The sun shines ever bright in the sky; the birds are singing in the trees; the day promises to be very beautiful. Without thinking, the traveller takes the path that is nearest to him, which seems, after all, quite practicable; it occurs to him for a moment that he could have chosen another way; but there will always be time to retrace his steps if the path he has taken leads nowhere. A voice seems to tell him, “Turn back, turn back, you are not on the right road.” But everything around him is charming and delightful. What should he do? He does not know. He goes on without taking any decision; he enjoys the pleasures of the moment. “In a little while,” he replies to the voice, “in a little while I shall think; I have plenty of time.” The wild grasses around him whisper in his ear, “Later.” Later, yes, later. Ah, how pleasant it is to breathe the scented breeze, while the sun warms the air with its fiery rays. Later, later. And the traveller walks on; the path widens. Voices are heard from afar, “Where are you going? Poor fool, don’t you see that you are heading for your ruin? You are young; come, come to us, to the beautiful, the good, the true; do not be misled by indolence
Words of Long Ago

and weakness; do not fall asleep in the present; come to the future.” “Later, later,” the traveller answers these unwelcome voices. The flowers smile at him and echo, “Later.” The path becomes wider and wider. The sun has reached its zenith; it is a glorious day. The path becomes a road.

The road is white and dusty, bordered with slender birch-trees; the soft purling of a little stream is heard; but in vain he looks in every direction, he can see no end to this interminable road.

The young man, feeling a secret unease, cries, “Where am I? Where am I going?... What does it matter? Why think, why act? Let us drift along on this endless road; let us walk on, I shall think tomorrow.”

The small trees have disappeared; oak-trees line the road; a gully runs on either side. The traveller feels no weariness; he is borne along as if in a delirium.

The gully becomes deeper; the oaks give way to fir-trees; the sun begins to go down. In a daze, the traveller looks all around him; he sees human figures rolling into the ravine, clutching at the fir-trees, the sheer rocks, the roots jutting from the ground. Some of them are making great efforts to climb out; but as they come near to the edge, they turn their heads and let themselves fall back.

Hollow voices cry out to the traveller, “Flee this place; go back to the cross-roads; there is still time.” The young man hesitates, then replies, “Tomorrow.” He covers his face with his hands so as not to see the bodies rolling into the ravine, and runs along the road, drawn on by an irresistible urge to go forward. He no longer wonders whether he will find a way out. With furrowed brow and clothes in disorder, he runs on in desperation. At last, thinking himself far away from the accursed place, he opens his eyes: there are no more fir-trees; all around are barren stones and grey dust. The sun has disappeared beyond the horizon; night is coming on. The road has lost itself in an endless desert. The desperate traveller, worn out by his long run, wants
to stop; but he must walk on. All around him is ruin; he hears stifled cries; his feet stumble on skeletons. In the distance, the thick mist takes on terrifying shapes; black forms loom up; something huge and misshapen suggests itself. The traveller flies rather than walks towards the goal he senses and which seems to flee from him; wild cries direct his steps; he brushes against phantoms.

At last he sees before him a huge edifice, dark, desolate, gloomy, a castle to make one say with a shudder: “A haunted castle.” But the young man pays no attention to the bleakness of the place; these great black walls make no impression on him; as he stands on the dusty ground, he hardly trembles at the sight of these formidable towers; he thinks only that the goal is reached, he forgets his weariness and discouragement. As he approaches the castle, he brushes against a wall, and the wall crumbles; instantly everything collapses around him; towers, battlements, walls have vanished, sinking into dust which is added to the dust already covering the ground.

Owls, crows and bats fly out in all directions, screeching and circling around the head of the poor traveller who, dazed, downcast, overwhelmed, stands rooted to the spot, unable to move; suddenly, horror of horrors, he sees rising up before him terrible phantoms who bear the names of Desolation, Despair, Disgust with life, and amidst the ruins he even glimpses Suicide, pallid and dismal above a bottomless gulf. All these malignant spirits surround him, clutch him, propel him towards the yawning chasm. The poor youth tries to resist this irresistible force, he wants to draw back, to flee, to tear himself away from all these invisible arms entwining and clasping him. But it is too late; he moves on towards the fatal abyss. He feels drawn, hypnotized by it. He calls out; no voice answers to his cries. He grasps at the phantoms, everything gives way beneath him. With haggard eyes he scans the void, he calls out, he implores; the macabre laughter of Evil rings out at last.

The traveller is at the edge of the gulf. All his efforts have been in vain. After a supreme struggle he falls... from his bed.
A young student had a long essay to prepare for the following morning. A little tired by his day’s work, he had said to himself as he arrived home, “I shall work later.” Soon afterwards he thought that if he went to bed early, he could get up early the next morning and quickly finish his task. “Let’s go to bed,” he said to himself, “I shall work better tomorrow; I shall sleep on it.” He did not know how truly he spoke. His sleep was troubled by the terrible nightmare we have described, and his fall awoke him with a start. Thinking over what he had dreamt, he exclaimed, “But it’s quite clear: the path is called the path of ‘later on’, the road is the road of ‘tomorrow’ and the great building the castle of ‘nothing at all’.” Elated at his cleverness, he set to work, vowing to himself that he would never put off until tomorrow what he could do today.

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