

# **THE PURPLE CLOUD**

M. P. SHIEL



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## THE PURPLE CLOUD

### INTRODUCTION

IN May of this year the writer received as noteworthy a packet of papers as it has been his lot to examine—from a friend, Dr. Arthur Lister Browne, M.A., F.R.C.P.—consisting of four note-books, crowded with those giddy shapes of "shorthand", whose ensemble resembles startled swarms hovering on the wing—scribbled in pencil, and without vowels: so that their deciphering has been no holiday. The letter also which accompanied them was pencilled in shorthand; and this, together with the note-book marked "III", I now publish.

The following is Browne's letter:

"DEAR OLD CHAP,—I have just been lying thinking of you, wishing that you were here to give one a last squeeze of the hand before I—'go': for going I am. Four days ago I felt a soreness in the throat, so, passing by old Johnson's surgery at Selbridge, I asked him to have a look at me, and when he muttered something about membranous laryngitis it made me smile, but by the time I reached home I was hoarse, and not smiling: before night I had dyspnoea and laryngeal stridor. So I wired to London for Morgan, and, between him and Johnson, they have been opening my trachea, and singeing my inside with chromic acid and the cautery; but I am too old a hand not to know what's what: the bronchi involved—too far. Morgan is still, I believe, fondly longing to add me to his successful-tracheotomy statistics, but prognosis was always my strong point, and the small consolation of my death will be the beating of a specialist up his own street. So we shall see.

"I have been arranging some of my affairs this morning, and remembered these note-books—intended letting you have them months ago, but you know my habit of putting things off, and, then, the lady was living from whom I took down the statements: now she is dead, and, as a writing man, and a man, you should be interested, if you can contrive to decipher.

"I am under morphia at present, propped up in a nice little state of languor, and, as I am able to write, will tell you something about her: her name Mary Wilson; thirty when I met her, forty-five when she died; fifteen years of her. Do you know much about the philosophy of the hypnotic trance? That was the relation between us—hypnotist and subject. She had been under another man before my time, suffered from tic of the fifth nerve, had had most of her teeth drawn before I saw her, and an attempt had been made to wrench out the nerve on the left side by external scission. But it had made no difference: the clock of hell tick-tacked in that poor woman's jaw, and it was a mercy that ever she dropped across me: my organisation was found to possess easy control over hers, and with a few suggestions I could expel her Legion.

"Well, you never saw anyone so singular as my friend, Miss Wilson: medicine-man as I am, I could never behold her without a sort of shock: she so suggested what we call 'the other world', some odour of the worm, ghost more than woman! And yet I can hardly convey to you the why of this, except by dry details as to the contours of her lofty forehead, meagre lips, pointed chin, ashen cheeks. She was lank and deplorably emaciated, her whole skeleton, except the femurs, being visible, her eyes of the bluish hue of cigarette smoke or quinine solution made fluorescent by X-rays, and they had the strangest, feeble, unearthly gaze, while at thirty-five her wisps of hair was white.

"She was well-to-do, lived alone in old Wooding Manor-house, five miles from Ash Thomas; and I, 'beginning' in these parts at the time, soon took up my residence at the manor, she insisting that I should devote myself to her alone.

"Well, I found that, in the state of trance, Miss Wilson possessed remarkable powers: not peculiar to herself in kind, but so reliable, exact, far-reaching, in degree. Any tyro in psychical science will now sit and discourse about the reporting powers of the mind in the trance-state—a fact which Psychical Research only after endless investigation admits to be scientific, but known to every old crone in the Middle Ages; but I say that Miss Wilson's powers were 'remarkable', because I believe that, in general, the powers manifest themselves more particularly with regard to space, as distinct from time, the spirit roaming in the present, travelling over a plain; but Miss Wilson's gift was special in this, that she travelled all ways, and easily in all but one, east, west, up, down, in the past, the present, and the future.

"This I discovered gradually. She would emit a stream of sounds—I can hardly call it speech—murmurous, guttural, mixed with puffy breath-sounds at the languid lips, this accompanied by an intense contraction of the pupils, absence of the knee-jerk, rigor, a rapt and arrant expression; and I got into the habit of sitting long at her

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bedside, fascinated by her, trying to catch the import of that visionary language which came croaking from her throat, puffing and fluttering from her lips, until in the course of years my ear learned to discern the words; 'the veil was rent' for me, too; and I could follow somewhat the trips of her musing and wandering spirit.

"I heard her one day utter some words which were familiar to me: 'Such were the arts by which the Romans extended their conquests, and attained the palm of victory'—from Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall', which I could guess that she had never read.

"I said in a stern voice: 'Where are you?'

"She replied, 'Us are eight hundred miles above. A man is writing. Us are reading'.

"I may tell you two things: first, that in trance she never spoke of herself as 'I', but, for some reason, in this objective way, as 'us': 'us are', she would say, 'us went', though, of course, she was 'educated'; secondly, when wandering in the past she always represented herself as being 'above' (the earth?), and higher the further back in time she went; in describing present events she felt herself 'on', while, as regards the future, she invariably declared that 'us' were so many miles 'within'.

"To her travels in this last direction, however, there seemed to exist fixed limits: I say seemed, meaning that, in spite of my efforts, she never, in fact, went far in this direction. Three, four thousand 'miles' were common figures on her lips in describing her distance 'above'; but her distance 'within' never got beyond sixty. Usually, she would say twenty, twenty-five, appearing in relation to the future to resemble a diver, who, the deeper he strives, finds a more resistant pressure, until at no great depth resistance becomes prohibition, and he can no deeper strive.

"I am afraid I can't go on, though I could tell you a lot about this lady. For fifteen years, off and on, I sat listening by her dim bedside, until at last my expert ear could detect the sense of her faintest exhalation. I heard the 'Decline and Fall' from beginning to end; and though some of her reports were the most frivolous stuff, over others I have hung in a horror of interest. Certainly, I have heard some amazing words proceed from those spirit lips of Mary Wilson. Sometimes I could hitch her repeatedly to any scene or subject that I chose by the mere use of my will; at other times the flighty waywardness of her foot eluded me: she resisted—she disobeyed; otherwise I might have sent you, not four note-books, but twenty. About the fifth year it struck me that I should do well to jot down her more connected utterances, since I knew shorthand, and I did. . . . Note-book 'III' belongs to the eleventh year, its history being this: I heard her one afternoon murmuring in the intonation used when reading, asked her where she was, and she replied: 'Us are forty-five miles within: us read, another writes'. . . .

"But no more of Mary Wilson now: rather let us think a little of A. L. Browne—with a breathing-tube in his trachea, and Eternity under his pillow. . . ." (Dr. Browne's letter then continues on subjects of no interest here.)

(My transcription of the shorthand book "III" I now proceed to give, merely reminding the reader that the words form the substance of a document to be written, or to be motived (according to Miss Wilson), in that Future, which, no less than the Past, substantially exists in the Present—though, like the Past, we see it not. I need only add that the title, division into paragraphs, have been arbitrarily contrived by myself for convenience.) agreement of these two makes a truth. And to that I now say: Amen, Amen.

For I, Adam Jeffson, parent of a race, hereby lay down, ordain, and decree for all time, perceiving it now: That the one motto and watchword proper to the riot and odyssey of Life in general, and in especial to the race of men, ever was, and remains, even this: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

THE END