THE TRAVEL TALES OF MR JOSEPH JORKENS

BY LORD DUNSANY

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BY LORD DUNSANY

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Fifty-One Tales

Tales of Wonder

Plays of Gods and Men

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If

Plays of Near and Far

The King of Elfland's Daughter

Alexander and Three Small Plays

The Charwoman's Shadow

The Blessing of Pan

Seven Modern Comedies

Fifty Poems

The Travel Tales of Mr. Joseph Jorkens

By
Lord Dunsany

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PREFACE

In recording these tales that I have had from Mr. Jorkens, as nearly verbatim as I am able to remember them, I trust that I may have filled a gap here and there amongst the experience of travellers. I even hope for these tales that they may at certain points advance the progress of Science, and establish our knowledge upon a firmer basis; yet should they fail to do so, I feel that they may at least be so fortunate as to add something of strangeness to parts of our planet, just as it was tending to grow too familiar, and so help to put our knowledge back on to a foundation on which it rested once, so airily shaky as to possess some interest for all that find any charm in the queer and elusive. If I have at any time appeared to imply that Mr. Jorkens exaggerates, such implication is illusory, and I wish my readers to be most solemnly assured that I have nowhere intended to cast any aspersions at all upon his veracity, such being entirely remote from my intention. To have implied that he is a bit fond of a drink is quite a different matter. This I have done because I know that it will cause no pain to Mr. Jorkens. On the contrary he likes it to be known that he needs an occasional stimulant, and values highly the offer of whiskey now and then from a friend. It is not so much the value of the whiskey itself that he thinks of, as the kind thought that prompts the offer of one. This he values equally with one other thing, that he holds to be just as much due to him from his friends, an absolute belief in his statements.

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Chapter 1

THE TALE OF THE ABU LAHEEB

WHEN I met my friend Murcote in London he talked much of his Club. I had seldom heard of it, and the name of the street in which Murcote told me it stood was quite unknown to me, though I think I had driven through it in a taxi, and remembered the houses as being mean and small. And Murcote admitted that it was not very large, and had no billiard-table and very few rooms; and yet there seemed something about the place that entirely filled his mind and made that trivial street for him the centre of London. And when he wanted me to come and see it, I suggested the following day; but he put me off, and again when I suggested the next one. There was evidently nothing much to see, no pictures, no particular wines, nothing that other Clubs boast of; but one heard tales there, he said; very odd ones sometimes; and if I cared to come and see the Club, it would be a good thing to come some evening when old Jorkens was there. I asked who Jorkens was; and he said he had seen a lot of the world. And then we parted, and I forgot about Jorkens, and saw nothing more of Murcote for some days. And then one day Murcote rang me up, and asked me if I'd come to the Club that evening.

I had agreed to come; but before I left my house Murcote surprised me by coming round to see me. There was something he wanted to tell me about Jorkens. He sat and talked to me for some time about Jorkens before we started, though all he said of him might be expressed by one word. Jorkens was a good-hearted fellow, he said, and would always tell a story in the evening to anyone who offered him a small drink; whiskey and soda was what he preferred; and he really had seen a good deal of the world, and the Club relied on stories in the evening; it was quite a feature of it; and the Club wouldn't be the Club without them, and it helped the evening to pass, anyway; but one thing he must warn me, and that was never to believe a word he said. It wasn't Jorkens' fault; he didn't mean to be inaccurate; he merely wished to interest his fellow-members and to make the evening pass pleasantly; he had nothing to gain by any inaccuracies, and had no intention to deceive; he just did his best to entertain the Club, and all the members were grateful to him. But once more Murcote warned me never to believe

one of his tales nor any part of them, not even the smallest detail of local colour.

"I see," I said, "a bit of a liar."

"Oh, poor old Jorkens," said Murcote, "that's rather hard. But still, I've warned you, haven't I?"

And, with that quite clearly understood, we went down and hailed a taxi.

It was after dinner that we arrived at the Club; and we went straight up into a small room, in which a group of members was sitting about near the fire, and I was introduced to Jorkens, who was sitting gazing into the glow, with a small table at his right hand. And then he turned to Murcote to pour out what he had probably already said to all the other members.

"A most unpleasant episode occurred here last evening," he said, "a thing I have never known before, and shouldn't have thought possible in any decent club, shouldn't have thought possible."

"Oh, really," said Murcote. "What happened?"

"A young fellow came in yesterday," said Jorkens. "They tell me he's called Carter. He came in here after dinner, and I happened to be speaking about a curious experience I had once had in Africa, over the watershed of the Congo, somewhere about latitude six, a long time ago. Well, never mind the experience, but I had no sooner finished speaking about it when the young fellow, Carter or whatever he is, said simply he didn't believe me, simply and unmistakably that he disbelieved my story; claimed to know something of geography or zoology which did not tally in his impudent mind with the actual experience that I had had on the Congo side of the watershed. Now, what are you to do when a young fellow has the effrontery, the brazen-faced audacity . . ."

"Oh, but we must have him turned out," said Murcote. "A case like that should come before the Committee at once. Don't you think so?"

And his eye turned to the other members, roving till it fell on a weary and weak individual who was evidently one of the Committee.

"Oh, er, yes," said he unconvincingly.

"Well, Mr. Jorkens," said Murcote, "we'll get that done at once."

And one or two more members muttered Yes, and Jorkens' indignation sank now to minor mutterings, and to occasional ejaculations that shot out

petulantly, but in an undertone. The waters of his imagination were troubled still, though the storm was partly abated.

"It seems to me outrageous," I said, but hardly liked to say any more, being a guest in the Club.

"Outrageous!" the old man replied, and we seemed no nearer to getting any story.

"I wonder if I might ask for a whiskey and soda?" I said to Murcote, for a silence had fallen; and at the same time I nodded sideways towards Jorkens to suggest the destination of the whiskey. I had waited for Murcote to do this without being asked, and now he ordered three whiskies and sodas listlessly, as though he thought there weren't much good in it. And when the whiskey drew near the lonely table that waited desolate at Jorkens' right hand, Jorkens said, "Not for me."

I thought I saw surprise for a moment pass like a ghost through that room, although no one said anything.

"No," said old Jorkens, "I never drink whiskey. Now and then I use it in order to stimulate my memory. It has a wonderful effect on the memory. But as a drink I never touch it. I dislike the taste of it."

So his whiskey went away. We seemed no nearer that story.

I took my glass with very little soda, sitting in a chair near Jorkens. I had nowhere to put it down.

"Might I put my glass on your table?" I said to Jorkens.

"Certainly," he said, with the utmost indifference in his voice, but not entirely in his eye, which caught the deep yellow flavour as I put it close to his elbow.

We sat for a long time in silence; everyone wanted to hear him talk. And at last his right hand opened wide enough to take a glass, and then closed again. And a while later it opened once more, and moved a little along the table and then drew back, as though for a moment he had thought the drink was his and then had realised his mistake. It was a mere movement of the hand, and yet it showed that here was a man who would not consciously take another man's drink. And, that being clearly established, a dreamy look came over his face as though he thought of far-off things, and his hand moved very absently. It reached the glass unguided by his eye and brought it to his lips, and he drained it, thinking of far other things.

"Dear me," he said suddenly, "I hope I haven't drunk your whiskey."

“Not at all,” I said.

“I was thinking of a very curious thing,” he said, “and hardly noticed what I was doing.”

“Might I ask what it was you were thinking of?” I said.

“I really hardly like to tell you,” he said, “to tell anyone, after the most unpleasant incident that occurred yesterday.”

As I looked at Murcote he seemed to divine my thoughts, and ordered three more whiskies.

It was wonderful how the whiskey did brighten old Jorkens’ memory, for he spoke with a vividness of little details that could only have been memory; imagination could not have done it. I leave out the details and give the main points of his story for its zoological interest; for it touches upon a gap in zoology which I believe is probably there, and if the story is true it bridges it.

Here then is the story: “One that you won’t often hear in London,” said Jorkens, “but in towns at the Empire’s edge it’s told of often. There’s probably not a mess out there in which it’s not been discussed, scarcely a bungalow where it’s not been talked of, and always with derision. In places like Malakal there’s not a white man that hasn’t heard of it, and not one that believes it. But the last white man that you meet on lonely journeys, the last white man that there is before the swamps begin and you see nothing for weeks but papyrus, he believes in it.

“I have noticed that more than once. Where a lot of men get together, all knowing equally little, and this subject comes up, one will laugh, and they will all laugh at it, and none will trust his imagination to study the rumour; and it remains a rumour, no more. But when a man gets all alone by himself, somewhere on the fringe of that country out of which the rumour arises, and there’s no silly laughter to scare his imagination—why, then he can study the thing and develop it, and get much nearer to facts than mere incredulity will ever get him. I find a touch of fever helps in working out problems like that.

“Well, the problem is a very simple one; it is simply the question whether man with his wisdom and curiosity has discovered all the animals that there are in the world, or whether there’s one, and a very curious one too, hidden amongst the papyrus, that white men have never seen. And that’s not quite what I mean, for there are white men that have seen things that not every young whipper-snapper will believe. I should rather have said an animal that our civilisation has not yet taken cognisance of. At Kosti, more

than twenty years ago, I first heard two men definitely speak of it, the abu laheeb they called it, and I think they both believed in it too; but Khartoum was only a hundred and fifty miles off, and they had evening clothes with them, and used to wear them at dinner, and they had china plates and silver forks, and ornaments on their mantelpiece, and one thing and another; and all these things seemed to appal their imagination, and they wouldn't honestly let themselves believe it. 'Had three or four fires round his tent,' said one of them, telling of someone, 'and says that the abu laheeb came down about two a.m., and he saw it clear in the firelight.' 'Did it get what it wanted?' said the other. 'Yes, went away hugging it.'

"And one of them said in a rather wandering tone: 'The only animal that uses . . .' He was lowering his voice, and looking round, and he saw me, and said no more. They turned it all away at once with a laugh or two, as Columbus might have turned away from the long low line of land and refused to believe a new continent. I questioned them, but got no information that could be of any use; they seemed to like laughter more than imagination, so I got jokes instead of truth.

"It was weeks later and far southwards that I found a man who was ready to approach this most interesting point of zoology in the proper spirit of a scientist, a white man all alone in a hut that he had near the mouth of the Bahr el Zeraf. There are things in Africa that you couldn't believe, and the Bahr el Zeraf is one of them. It rises out of the marshes of the White Nile, and flows forty or fifty miles, and into the White Nile again. And one can't easily believe in a white man living all alone in such a place as that, but somebody has to be the last white man you see as you go through the final fringes of civilisation, and it was him. He had had full opportunities of studying the whole question of the abu laheeb, he had had years of leisure to compare all the stories the natives brought him, which they shyly told when he had won their confidence, though what he won it with he never told. He had sifted the evidence and knew all that was told about it; and in long malarial nights, with no one and nothing to care for him but quinine, he had pictured the beast so clearly that he could make me a very good drawing of it. I have that drawing to this very day, a beast on his hind legs something like a South American sloth that I once saw, stuffed, in a museum; built rather on the lines of a kangaroo, but much stouter and bigger, and with nothing pointed about his face; it was square and blunt, with great teeth. He had hand-like paws on shortish arms or forelegs.

"I must tell you that I was in a small dahabeeyah going up those great rivers, any great rivers I might meet, leaving civilisation because I was tired

of it, and looking for wonders in Africa. And I came to this lonely man, Lindon his name was, full of curiosity aroused by those words that I had heard in Malakal. And talking to Lindon like two old friends that have spent all their schooldays together, as white men will who meet in that part of Africa, I soon came to the abu laheeb, thinking he would know more of it than they knew in Malakal. And I found a man grown sensitive, as you only can grow in loneliness: he feared I would disbelieve him, and would scarcely say a word. Yes, the natives believed in some such animal, but his own opinion he would not expose to the possibility of my ridicule. The more questions I asked, the shorter the answers became. And then I drew him by saying, 'Well, there's one thing he uses that no other animal ever did,' the one mysterious thing about this beast that had haunted my mind for weeks, though I did not know what on earth the mystery was. And that got him talking. He saw that I was committed to belief in the beast, and was no longer shy of his own. He told me that the upper reaches of the Bahr el Zeraf were a god-forsaken place: 'And if God forsook the Zeraf,' he said, 'He certainly didn't go to the Jebel,' for the Bahr el Jebel was worse. And somewhere between those two rivers in the desolation of papyrus the abu laheeb certainly lived. He very reasonably said that there were beasts in the plains, beasts in the forests, and beasts in the sea; why not in the huge area of the papyrus into which no man had ever penetrated? If I chose to go to these god-forsaken places I could see the abu laheeb, he said. 'But, of course,' he added, 'you must never go up wind on him.' 'Down wind?' I said.

" 'No, nor down wind either,' he answered. 'He can smell as well as a rhino. That's the difficulty; you have to go just between up wind and down wind; and you always find the north wind blowing there.'

"It was some while before I discovered why one can't go up wind on him. I didn't like to over-question Lindon, for questions are akin to criticism, and you cannot apply criticism and cross-examination to the patient work of imagination upon rumour; it is liable to destroy the whole fabric, and one loses valuable scientific data. Nor was Lindon in the mood for the superior disbelief of a traveller only just come from civilisation; he had had malaria too recently to put up with that sort of thing. It was as he was giving me various clear proofs of the existence of some such animal that I suddenly realised what it all meant. He was telling me how more than once he had seen fires in the reeds, not only earlier in the year than the Dinkas light their fires, but in marshes where no Dinka would ever come, nor a Shillook either, or any kind of man, marshes utterly desolate and for

ever shut to humanity. It was then that the truth flashed on me; truth, sir, that I have since verified with my own eyes: that the abu laheeb plays with fire.

"Well, I needn't tell you how the idea flared up in my mind to be the first white man that had ever seen the abu laheeb, and to shoot him and bring his huge skin home, and have something to show for all that lonely wandering. It was a fascinating idea. I asked Lindon if he thought my rifle was big enough, I only had a .350, and whether to use soft-nosed or solid bullets. 'Soft,' he said. I sat up late and asked him many questions. And he warned me about those marshes. I needn't tell you of all the things he warned me against, because you see me alive before you; but they were there all right, they were there. And I went down the little path he'd made from his house to the bank of the river, and went on board my sailing boat under huge white bands of stars, and lay down on board and looked up at them from under my blankets until I fell asleep, while the Arabs cast off and the north wind held good. And when the sun blazed on me at dawn I woke to the Bahr el Zeraf. Scarlet trees with green foliage at first; we were not yet come to those marshes.

"Well, for days we went up the Zeraf, past the white fish-eagles, haughty and silent and watchful on queer trees, with birds sailing over us that I daren't describe to you for fear you should think I exaggerate the brilliancy of their colours. And so we came to those marshes where anything might hide, and be utterly hidden by those miles of rushes, and be well enough protected from explorers by a region of monotony more dismal than any other desolate land I've seen. And all the while the sailors were talking a language I did not know, till my imagination, brooding in that monotony, seemed to hear clear English phrases now and then starting suddenly out of their talk, commonest phrases of our daily affairs, on the other side of the earth. I would swear that I heard one of them say one evening, 'Stop the bus a moment.' But it couldn't have been, for they were talking Dinka talk, and not one of them knew a single word of English; I used to talk Arabic of a sort to the reis.

"Well, at last we came on fires in the reeds, burning at different points. Who lit them I couldn't say; there were no men there, black, white, or grey (the Dinkas are grey, you know). But I wanted absolute proof; and then one day I found his tracks in the rushes. He bounds through the rushes, you know, often breaking several of them where he takes off, and sometimes scattering mud on the tips of them as he springs through; then alighting and taking off again, leaving another huge mark.

“I examined the rushes carefully, till I was sure that I had his tracks. And then I followed them, always watching the wind. It was a dreadful walk. I went alone so as to make less noise. I wanted to get quite close and make sure of my shot. I had a haversack tied close round my neck, and my cartridges were in that. Even then it got wet sometimes. The water was always up to my waist, and often it came higher. I had to hold up my rifle in one hand all the time. The reeds were far over my head.

“Sometimes one came to open spaces of water, with huge blue water-lilies floating on them. And it was always deeper there. Sometimes one walked upon the roots of the rushes, and all the rushes trembled round one for yards, and sometimes one found a bottom of good hard clay and knew one could sink no further. And all the while I was tracking the abu laheeb.

“The north wind blew as usual. I was too old a shikari to be walking down wind, but I was not always able to act strictly on Lindon’s advice about never going up wind on the abu laheeb, because his tracks sometimes led that way. At any rate, that was better than the other direction, for he would have been off at once. You wouldn’t believe how tired one can be of blue water-lilies. At any rate the water was not cold, but the weariness of lifting each foot was terrible. Each foot, as one lifted it for every step, one would rather have left just where it was for ever. I don’t know how many hours I tracked that beast, I don’t know what time was doing while I walked in those marshes. But in all that weariness of spirit and utter fatigue of limb I suddenly saw a scrap of quite fresh mud on the tip of one of the reeds, and knew that I was getting near him at last. I put the safety catch of my rifle over, and suddenly saw in my mind what I was so nearly doing for Science. Of all the steps Science had taken from out of the early darkness toward that distant point of which we cannot guess, which shall be full of revelations to man, one of her footsteps would be due to me. I could, as it were, write my name on that one footprint, and no one would question my right to.

“I got nearer and nearer, I was no longer weary now; and suddenly, closer than I had dared to hope, was a little puff of smoke above the rushes. I stopped for one moment to steady my breath, and got my rifle ready. In that moment I named him; yes, I called him Prometheus Jorkensi. There was a patch of dry land ahead, and the rushes still protected me. I moved with ten-inch paces so as to make no ripple, but I couldn’t keep the rushes quiet; perhaps the north wind blew stronger than I thought, for he never seemed to hear me. And then, oh so close that it couldn’t have been ten yards, I saw the little fire on a patch of earth; and the rushes still hid me completely. I saw a patch of brown fur and a huge body crouching. I could only guess what part

of the body I saw, but a vital part I thought, and I raised my rifle. Still it had no idea I was anywhere near it. And then I saw its hands stretched out to the fire, warming themselves by the edge of those bleak marshes. I don't cut much ice, you know; I didn't then; no one had ever heard my name, or, if they had, it meant nothing; and here was I on the verge of this discovery, with the proof of it ten yards away just waiting for a rifle bullet. I'd shoot a monkey, I'd shoot an ape, I'd shoot a poor old hippo; I wouldn't mind shooting a horse if it had to be killed, though lots of men can't bear that; but those black hands stretched out over the fire were the one thing I couldn't destroy. The idea that flashed on me standing amongst those reeds I have been turning over in my mind for years, and it always seemed sound to me, and it does even now. You see, of all the links in the world that there are between us, and of all the barriers against those that are not as us, it seems to me that there is one link, one barrier, more outstanding than any other you could possibly name. We talk of our human reason, that may or may not be superior to the dream of the dog or the elephant: we say it is; that is all. We say that we alone have belief in an after-life, and that the lion has not: we say so; that's all. Some of them are stronger, some live longer than us, many may be more cunning. But there is one thing, gentlemen, one thing they haven't got, and that is the knowledge of fire. That seems to me the great link, the great bond between all who have it and the barrier against all who have not. Look what we've done with it: look at those fire-irons, that fender, the bricks of which this house is made, and the steel structure of it; look at this whole city. That's our one great possession, knowledge of fire. And, when I saw those dark hands stretched out to that fire on the edge of the marshes, that is what I thought of all at once, not at such length as I have told you of course; it flashed all through my mind in a moment; but during that moment I hesitated, and the abu laheeb saw the sun on the tip of my rifle or heard me breathing there, for he suddenly craned his great neck over the rushes, then stooped again and scattered the fire with his forepaws with one swift jerk into the reeds all round me. They were alight at once, and through the flame and smoke I only dimly caught sight of him leaping away, but, above the crackle of the burning reeds and the thump of his hind legs leaping, I heard him uttering gusts of human-like laughter."

He paused a moment. We were all quite silent, thinking what he had lost. He had lost a famous name. He shook his head, and seemed full of the same thoughts as the rest of us.

"I never went after him again," he said. "I had seen him, but who'll believe that? I have never quite been able to bring myself any more to try to shoot a creature that shared that great secret with us."

There was silence again; we were wondering, I think, whether his scruples should have prevented him from doing so much for Science. I suppose that the too-sensitive and over-scrupulous seldom make famous names. A man leaning forward, and smoking a pipe, took his pipe out of his mouth and broke the silence at last.

"Mightn't you have photographed him?" he said.

"Photographed him!" said Mr. Jorkens, straightening himself up in his chair. "Photographed him! Aren't half the photographs fakes? Here, look at the *Evening Picture*; look at that, now. There's a child handing a bouquet to someone with its left hand, so that both of them may expose as much of their surface as possible to the camera. And here's a man welcoming his brother from abroad. Welcoming indeed! They are both of them being photographed, and that's obviously all that they're doing."

We looked at the paper and it was so; they were almost turning their backs on one another in order to be photographed.

"No," he said, and he looked me straight in the eyes, and flashed that glance of his from face to face. "If Truth cannot stand alone, she scorns the cheap aid of photography."

So dominant was his voice as he said these words, so flashed his eyes in the dim light of the room, that none of us spoke any more. I think we felt that our voices would shock the silence. And we all went quietly away.

Chapter 2

THE KING OF SARAHB

MURCOTE and I came back to the Club next night, and when we arrived Mr. Jorkens had already begun to talk.

"The man with the shining turban," he said, "was losing the game.

"It was in one of those towns in which East and West meet constantly, each at its very worst, each depraved by the other. They meet there in purest sunlight and mutual contempt; absurd guides touting, disgusting boys begging, silly women scattering cheap coins and smiles: they meet there at the bad end of the town. And only a hundred yards or so away a different people walk with an ancient dignity.

"I stood at a corner by a bougainvillea, a little way off from that meeting of East and West, watching a game of draughts. It was not quite the kind of draughts that we play in Europe; for instance a piece that got to the end of the board developed extraordinary powers, its agility surpassing that of the king in our games, as the jump of the kangaroo surpasses that of the pig. And the capture of any piece by either player was made with a queer violence. The board was on the ground under the bougainvillea; a circle of shrouded figures sat watching the players, an Arab from further south, and a man that I could not place, who had gold thread round his turban. And the man with the gold in his turban was losing the game, and this seemed to breed in him a petulance against the watchers; and his petulance seemed to choose the most prominent target; and that was me, for I was the only European among the group of burnouses.

" 'You needn't think such a darned lot of yourself just because you're white,' he said suddenly.

"I wasn't thinking of myself at all, but people get queer fancies like that sometimes. I made no answer. And then he dropped out, like an afterthought, 'If it comes to that, I'm white myself.'

" 'Yes, yes, I know,' I said.

"Yet that remark had astonished me; it was not merely his brown face that belied his statement, Africa can do that to anyone; it was not merely his clothes; it was a curious, slow, listless way he had that suggested the child of

the East: they seem in their long stay to have come to some arrangement with Fate; we don't know what it is, but belike will come by it some day; meanwhile we struggle frantically, despising the calm of the East, and the East looks on and thinks—no, I don't know what it thinks. But this man claimed to be white, and had no right to that calm.

"Then I left that game of queer draughts, and presently I met an Arab I knew, who was seated drinking coffee.

" 'Who is that man?' I asked, pointing down the street, where the golden threads in the turban shone under the bougainvillea.

" 'He's the King of Sarahb,' he said.

" 'A king?' I said incredulously. And others were seated near, and one or two said, 'Oh yes, the King of Sarahb.'

"And then I think that the man I knew said, 'Would you like to have a talk with him?'

"As likely as not I said 'Yes.'

"But the conversation was in Arabic, and at this point my little stock of it gave out. At any rate he offered me coffee, and I sat down at his table, and I noticed an urchin slip away, going towards the draughts-players. We talked for a while of the mountains. And then the strange man appeared, walking listlessly, not carefully shaved, wearing the whitish garment that Arabs commonly wear, and his turban and old slippers.

" 'The King of Sarahb,' said the Arab. And this man sat down at our table.

"Coffee was brought, and we talked. And for a long long while neither of us said anything worth saying, and many coffees were brought, and the afternoon wore away; and often I rose to go, yet never went, for I knew I should leave a mystery: and still he sat on there. And at last he spoke as the daylight hovered to go; and the holy men were calling from their balconies, sentence by sentence floating clear through the air; and eastwards a wonder of colour glowed upon cliffs of far mountains, and westwards the hills grew dark, whence an orange light flowed upwards, and in narrow lanes by mud houses here and there there showed an electric light. Before he finished the minarets were long silent and all the mountains dark; the stars were shining, and cigarettes moved glowing through the streets. This was his story:

"It was a long long time ago, he said, since he came to Africa, and he had never left it since. He did not like the way, he said, that they were doing

things in Europe; so he left it, and more than this he would not tell me. How he lived he did not say, nor even where he lived, nor why he left one day and took the desert road, and then strayed from that alone into the wide desert. All he told me was that when he first saw he was lost, for that is what it amounted to, though he only thought he was not sure of his way, when first he was lost he knew he was just three days from water if he could find the road. The road, he said, was a perfectly good one. It seemed to amount to a certain tidying of the bare surface of the desert between two rows of pebbles, which had been merely swept off the space that thereby became a road. A most remarkable sight, he told me, if you came on it suddenly; in the savage waste this sudden evidence of civilisation, this relic of the labour of man, went perfectly straight as far as you could see to the left and as far as you could see to the right; you crossed it, and in a few yards you were back again where nothing had altered since Creation was ended. Baked earth, he said, rather than sand, and sprinkled with little rocks, as though colossal spadefuls of gravel had been thrown at it from a far planet; and very occasional tufts of dwarfed bushes growing. The whole desert he described as being like a gravelled drive carelessly weeded, of infinite breadth and leading to nowhere. In this place he realised he was three days from water, riding a camel alone, and carrying a certain amount of water in skins. He did not grow uneasy at first, because he knew that the road was roughly to the right of him, and as it was five hundred miles long he had only to travel more or less in the right direction to find it sooner or later. It was not till he had travelled for five days and found no road and finished up his water that a sudden fear came down on him, like the desert rising up, as he put it, and gripping him with a hand. He killed his camel then for the water that it would have inside it, as he had read in books; and got very little. Then he went on on foot, still looking for his road, and hurrying more and more as the day wore on. I don't know how he had missed it if it lay the whole of one side of him; perhaps by not starting in the right direction in that land where all sides are so much alike, more likely by wavering and twisting when he thought he was going straight, for I take it that any landmarks there are change with every mood of the desert; or else he rode quietly across it while he looked for something far more noticeable than that road actually was. When night came he stopped his search reluctantly enough, but went to sleep with a conviction that early the next day he was sure to find that road. When he woke he was thirstier than he thought he would be, and understood then that he would have to find the road almost at once, and then to travel down it very fast, if he was to escape the desert and live. And the heat of the day came, and he gave up looking for the road and began chasing mirages. This is probably done at the last by everybody who dies lost in the desert;

the temptation of the million-to-one chance of them being real water would be irresistible at the end. Of course he knew they were mirages, because he knew that there was no water in that part of Africa, but still he went after them; his eyes no doubt were clearer by now than his reason, and whenever they saw water he went for it. So he chased mirages desperately all the morning. And at last he found one that did not recede from him.

"That it was a mirage he knew, from the way that the sky came in and out of it, slipping under the bases of hills, a sure sign of mirage. And yet it did not move further off or disappear as he neared it. So that soon he saw the waters of its lakes lapping on the sand that shone very golden all round it, except at the back where ruddy brown mountains all mixed up with sky stood very sheer and rocky, shutting it off from the world. Amongst the lakes was a city all of white marble, with a flush of pink in it as faint as late sunlight, wandering amongst the towers, and here and there the flash of thin veins of gold. And the beauty of that city shining in the soft water, in a light all of its own, that had nothing to do with the wild glare of the desert, touched his heart as neither dawn nor music nor memory had ever touched it before; and he stood before its battlements by the edge of its lakes and wept.

"And as he stood there weeping, all the people that dwelt in the city came down to the edge of their mirage with garlands of northern flowers, dressed in the silks of holiday attire, and called to him in tones of earnest welcome. And still the tears ran on through the grime of his face; and one in authority, standing before the rest, called out to him that theirs was the city of Sarahb, and their king was long since dead; and now he was king and should reign in the dead king's stead, and should enter into their city and be crowned King of Sarahb, and there, if he so desired, should be immortal.

"And the lost man looked up wondering, and they beckoned him eagerly; and all in the weakness of his will their beckoning drew him on, so that he tottered towards them and came to their outer rampart. And they opened their gateway that was towards the desert, and thronged about it and still beckoned him on, though none came through the gateway; and he passed through and the gates shut, and the lakes of illusion shone clear all about him, and a shout went up through all the ways of the city. And gathering about him they told him how the banquet of his coronation was being made ready even now in another part of the city. But he leaned towards the waters of the lakes of illusion, and would fain quench his thirst at them and then go on to the banquet. Dear me, dear me, I was thirsty once, and I know.

“Then they told him that at the table of the banquet were wines of no earthly vintage, but drawn from the grapes of valleys on a planet nearer the sun, and perfumed with odours not known by any dwellers here; yet he still leaned towards the waters. And they tried to draw him by a grassy path, that ran fresh by the lakes of illusion, to the long table on the further side, that was spread with its damask in the open air, with flagons shining on it, beneath the triumphant towers that gleamed in that curious light. And drawing away from them he came to the lapping water.

“And there an aged woman dressed in black silk, who appeared to be a witch or the follower of some such calling, approached and said to him: ‘Drink none of the mirage water.’

“And he sighed, ‘I am thirsty.’ And she told him to drink at the banquet, where the wines for him were not as the wines he knew, with the perishable taste of the vineyards of Earth: she gripped his wrist and told him the wonder of them: she pointed across the city to where those flagons sparkled. He could not tell me the wonder of those wines as the old woman told: language, he said, was not framed for it. And behind him all the people of Sarahb called to him gently, almost in the cadence of song, telling him the strange joys of the wine that they culled by magic, at evening from glittering planets that were most near to the sun. And the waters of illusion murmured and whispered and rippled.

“ ‘Drink not at all of these waters,’ said the woman that followed witchcraft.

“Weary and burning he stood by the edge of the mirage water. He knew what he was losing. Then as the woman warned him away with rapid signs of her hand, and as his people called him to come with them, he stooped down to that smiling water to moisten his mouth. He heard one shout from the witch, he heard his people wailing; then as he stooped the lake fell downwards from him; he shot a scooped hand after it, and soon was falling with it. The lake fell and fell before him, a glittering, twinkling light; the voices in the City of Sarahb faded almost at once from hearing; and he fell for miles in silence but for the roar of the air, and the lake grew darker as he fell. Soon it was all darkness.

“When it was light again the lake had left him, and he was back again in the desert. Two Arabs had found him there and given him water in time. To them he told his story; and soon it spread, and all the Arabs in that part of Sahara know it, and the nomads carry it further every year, and it has come to the towns where the markets are in which the Arabs barter, beyond the

mountains in the arable land. And not a man of them doubts he is King of Sarahb, and he is known amongst them by no other name."

Jorkens turned to drink a little whiskey and soda from a glass that stood at his side, and I suppose we all turned over in our minds the strangeness of his story, for the room was still for a long while. Then a man I did not know said:

"I suppose you can be quite sure that he really had entered the mirage?"

"To no man capable of discerning the difference between reality and illusion," answered Jorkens, "was it possible to doubt it. The gulf between these two things is so profound that nothing and no one on one side can be confused with what's on the other. I have seen that man look at a motor, at a newspaper, at a hotel; I have heard him speak about our modern problems. I could not have been mistaken. All of these things were sheer illusion to him. He was away on the other side. That man had entered the mirage and had its point of view. To hold that that point of view is right is quite another matter. Well, well," he added, "I suppose we shall know some day."

Chapter 3

HOW JEMBU PLAYED FOR CAMBRIDGE

THE next time that Murcote brought me again to his Club we arrived a little late. Lunch was over, and nine or ten of them were gathered before that fireplace they have; and that talk of theirs had commenced, the charm of which was that there was no way of predicting upon what topics it would touch. It all depended upon who was there, and who was leading the talk, and what his mood was; and of course on all manner of irrelevant things besides, such as whiskey, and the day's news or rumour.

But to-day they had evidently all been talking of cricket, and the reason of that was clearer than men usually seem to think such reasons are. I seemed to see it almost the moment that I sat down; and nobody told it me, but the air seemed heavy with it. The reason that they talked about cricket was that there was a group there that day that were out of sympathy with Mr. Jorkens; bored perhaps by his long reminiscences, irritated by his lies, or disgusted by the untidy mess that intemperance made of his tie. Whatever it was it was clear enough that they were talking vigorously of cricket because they felt sure that that topic if well adhered to must keep the old fellow away from the trackless lands and the jungles, and that, if he must talk of Africa, it could only be to some tidy trim well-ordered civilised part of it that he could get from the subject of cricket. They felt so sure of this.

They had evidently been talking of cricket for some time, and were resolute to keep on it, when shortly after I sat down amongst them one turned to Jorkens himself and said, "Are you going to watch the match at Lord's?"

"No, no," said Jorkens sadly. "I never watch cricket now."

"But you used to a good deal, didn't you?" said another, determined not to let Jorkens get away from cricket.

"Oh yes," said Jorkens, "once; right up to that time when Cambridge beat Surrey by one run." He sighed heavily and continued: "You remember that?"

"Yes," said someone. "But tell us about it."

They thought they were on safe ground there. And so they started Jorkens upon a story, thinking they had him far from the cactus jungles. But that old wanderer was not kept so easily in English fields, his imagination to-day or his memory or whatever you call it, any more than his body had been in the old days, of which he so often told.

"It's a long story," said Jorkens. "You remember Jembu?"

"Of course," said the cricketers.

"You remember his winning hit," said Jorkens.

"Yes, a two wasn't it?" said someone.

"Yes," said Jorkens, "it was. And you remember how he got it?"

That was too much for the cricketers. None quite remembered. And then Murcote spoke. "Didn't he put it through the slips with his knee?" he said.

"Exactly," said Jorkens. "Exactly. That's what he did. Put it through the slips with his knee. And only a leg-bye. He never hit it. Only a leg-bye." And his voice dropped into mumbles.

"What did you say?" said one of the ruthless cricketers, determined to keep him to cricket.

"Only a leg-bye," said Jorkens. "He never hit it."

"Well he won the match all right," said one, "with that couple of runs. It didn't matter how he got them."

"Didn't it!" said Jorkens. "Didn't it!"

And in the silence that followed the solemnity of his emphasis he looked from face to face. Nobody had any answer. Jorkens had got them.

"I'll tell you whether it mattered or not, that couple of leg-byes," said Jorkens then. And in the silence he told this story:

"I knew Jembu at Cambridge. He was younger than me of course, but I used to go back to Cambridge often to see those towers and the flat fen country, and so I came to know Jembu. He was no cricketer. No no, Jembu was no cricketer. He dressed as white men dress and spoke perfect English, but they could not teach him cricket. He used to play golf and things like that. And sometimes in the evening he would go right away by himself and sit down on the grass and sing. He was like that all his first year. And then one day they seem to have got him to play a bit, and then he got interested, probably because he saw the admiration they had for his marvellous

fielding. But as for batting, as for making a run, well, his average was less than one in something like ten innings.

"And then he came by the ambition to play for Cambridge. You never know with these natives what on earth they will set their hearts on. And I suppose that if he had not fulfilled his ambition he would have died, or committed murder or something. But, as you know, he played for Cambridge at the end of his second year."

"Yes," said someone.

"Yes, but do you know how?" said Jorkens.

"Why by being the best bat of his time I suppose," said Murcote.

"He never made more than fifty," said Jorkens, with a certain sly look in his eye as it seemed to me.

"No," said Murcote, "but within one or two of it whenever he went to the wickets for something like two years."

"One doesn't want more than that," said another.

"No," said Jorkens. "But he did the day that they played Surrey. Well, I'll tell you how he came to play for Cambridge."

"Yes, do," they said.

"When Jembu decided that he must play for Cambridge he practised at the nets for a fortnight, then broke his bat over his knee and disappeared."

"Where did he go to?" said someone a little incredulously.

"He went home," said Jorkens.

"Home?" they said.

"I was on the same boat with him," said Jorkens drawing himself up at the sound of doubt in their voices.

"You were going to tell us how Jembu played for Cambridge," said one called Terbut, a lawyer, who seemed as much out of sympathy with Jorkens and his ways as any of them.

"Wait a moment," said Jorkens. "I told you he could not bat. Now, when one of these African natives wants to do something that he can't, you know what he always does? He goes to a witch doctor. And when Jembu made up his mind to play for Cambridge he put the whole force of his personality into that one object, every atom of will he had inherited from all his ferocious

ancestors. He gave up reading divinity, and everything, and just practised at the nets as I told you, all day long for a fortnight."

"Not an easy thing to break a bat over his knee," said Terbut.

"His strength was enormous," said Jorkens. "I was more interested in cricket in those days than in anything else. I visited Jembu in his rooms just at that time. Into the room where we sat he had put the last touches of tidiness: I never saw anything so neat, all his divinity books put away trim in their shelves, he must have had over a hundred of them, and everything in the room with that air about it that a dog would recognise as foreboding a going away.

" 'I am going home,' he said.

" 'What, giving up cricket?' I asked.

" 'No,' he answered and his gaze looked beyond me as though concerned with some far-off contentment. 'No, but I must make runs.'

" 'You want practice,' I said.

" 'I want prayer,' he answered.

" 'But you can pray here,' I said.

He shook his head.

" 'No, no,' he answered with that far-away look again.

"Well, I only cared for cricket. Nothing else interested me then. And I wanted to see how he would do it. I suppose I shouldn't trouble about it nowadays. But the memory of his perfect fielding, and his keenness for the one thing I cared about, and his tremendous ambition, as it seemed to me then, to play cricket for Cambridge, made the whole thing a quest that I must see the end of.

" 'Where will you pray?' I said.

" 'There's a man that is very good at all that sort of thing,' he answered.

" 'Where does he live?' I said.

" 'Home.'

"Well it turned out he had taken a cabin on one of the Union Castle line. And I decided to go with him. I booked my passage on the same boat; and, when we got into the Mediterranean, deck cricket began, and Jembu was always bowled in the first few balls even at that. I am no cricketer, I

worshipped the great players all the more for that; I don't pretend to have been a cricketer; but I stayed at the wickets longer than Jembu every time, all through the Mediterranean till we got to the Red Sea, and it became too hot to play cricket, or even to think of it for more than a minute or two on end. The equator felt cool and refreshing after that. And then one day we came into Killindini. Jembu had two ponies to meet us there and twenty or thirty men."

"Wired to them I suppose," said Terbut.

"No," said Jorkens. "He had wired to some sort of a missionary who was in touch with Jembu's people. Jembu you know was a pretty important chieftain, and when anyone got word to his people that Jembu wanted them, they had to come. They had tents for us, and mattresses, and they put them on their heads and carried them away through Africa, while we rode. It was before the days of the railway, and it was a long trek, and uphill all the way. We rose eight thousand feet in two hundred miles. We went on day after day into the interior of Africa: you know the country?"

"We have heard you tell of it," said someone.

"Yes, yes," said Jorkens, cutting out, as I thought, a good deal of local colour that he had intended to give us. "And one day Kenya came in sight like a head between two great shoulders; and then Jembu turned northwards. Yes, he turned northwards as far as I could make out; and travelled much more quickly; and we came to nine thousand feet, and forests of cedar. And every evening Jembu and I used to play stump cricket, and I always bowled him out in an over or two; and then the sun would set and we lit our fires."

"Was it cold?" said Terbut.

"To keep off lions," said Jorkens.

"You bowled out Jembu?" said another incredulously, urged to speech by an honest doubt, or else to turn Jorkens away from one of his interminable lion-stories.

"A hundred times," said Jorkens, "if I have done it once."

"Jembu," some of us muttered almost involuntarily, for the fame of his batting lived on, as indeed it does still.

"Wait till I tell you," said Jorkens. "In a day or two we began to leave the high ground: bamboos took the place of cedars; trees I knew nothing of took the place of bamboos; and we came in sight of hideous forests of cactus; when we burned their trunks in our camp-fires, mobs of great insects

rushed out of the shrivelling bark. And one day we came in sight of hills that Jembu knew, with a forest lying dark in the valleys and folds of them, and Jembu's own honey-pots tied to the upper branches.

"These honey-pots were the principal source, I fancy, of Jembu's wealth, narrow wooden pots about three feet long, in which the wild bees lived, and guarded by men that you never see, waiting with bows and arrows. It was the harvest of these in a hundred square miles of forest that sent Jembu to Cambridge to study divinity, and learn our ways and our language. Of course he had cattle too, and plenty of ivory came his way, and raw gold now and then; and, in a quiet way, I should fancy, a good many slaves.

"Jembu's face lighted up when he saw his honey-pots, and the forest that was his home, dark under those hills that were all flashing in sunlight. But no thought of his home or his honey-pots made him forget for a single instant his ambition to play for Cambridge, and that night at the edge of the forest he was handling a bat still, and I was still bowling him out.

"Next day we came to the huts of Jembu's people. Queer people. I should have liked to have shown you a photograph of them. I had a small camera with me. But whenever I put it up they all ran away.

"We came to their odd reed huts.

"Undergrowth had been cleared and the earth stamped hard by bare feet, but they did not ever seem to have thinned the trees, and their huts were in and out among the great trunks. My tent was set up a little way from the huts, while Jembu went to his people. Men came and offered me milk and fruit and chickens, and went away. And in the evening Jembu came to me.

" 'I am going to pray now,' he said.

"I thought he meant there and then, and rose to leave the tent to him.

" 'No,' he said, 'one can't pray by oneself.'

"Then I gathered that by 'pray' he meant some kind of worship, and that the man he had told me of in his rooms at Cambridge would be somewhere near now. I was so keen on cricket in those days that anything affecting it always seemed to me of paramount importance, and I said 'May I come too?'

"Jembu merely beckoned with his hand and walked on.

"We went through the dark of the forest for some few minutes, and saw in the shade a great building standing alone. A sort of cathedral of thatch. Inside, a great space seemed bare. The walls near to the ground were of reed

and ivory: above, it was all a darkness of rafters and thatch. The long thin reeds were vertical, and every foot or so a great tusk of an elephant stood upright in the wall. Nuggets of gold here and there were fastened against the tusks by thin strands of copper. Presently I could make out that a thin line of brushwood was laid in a wide circle on the floor. Inside it Jembu sat down on the hard mud. And I went far away from it and sat in a corner, though not too near to the reeds, because, if anything would make a good home for a cobra, they would. And Jembu said never a word; and I waited.

"Then a man stepped through the reeds in the wall that Jembu was facing, dressed in a girdle of feathers hanging down from his loins, wing feathers they seemed to be, out of a crane. He went to some sort of iron pot that stood on the floor, that I had not noticed before, and lifted the lid and took fire from it, and lit the thin line of brushwood that ran round Jembu. Then he began to dance. He must have been twelve or fifteen feet from Jembu when he began to dance, and he danced round him in circles, or leapt is a better word, for it was too fierce for a dance. He took no notice of me. After he had been dancing some time I saw that his circles were narrowing; and presently he came to the line of brushwood at a point that the fire had not reached, and leapt through it and danced on round Jembu. Jembu sat perfectly still, with his eyes fixed. The weirdest shadows were galloping now round the walls from the waving flames of the brushwood; and any man such as us must have been sick and giddy from the frightful pace of those now narrow circles that he was making round Jembu, but he leapt nimbly on. He was within a few feet of my friend now. What would he do, I was wondering, when he reached him? Still Jembu never stirred, either hand or eyelid. Stray leaves drifting up from the dancing savage's feet were already settling on Jembu. And all of a sudden the black dancer fainted.

"He lay on the ground before Jembu, his feet a yard from him, and one arm flung out away from him, so that that hand lay in the brushwood. The flames were near to the hand, but Jembu never stirred. They reached it and scorched it: Jembu never lifted a finger, and the heathen dancer neither moved nor flinched. I knew then that this swoon that he had gone into was a real swoon, whatever was happening. The flames died down round the hand, died down round the whole circle; till only a glow remained, and the shadow of Jembu was as still on the wall as a black bronze image of Buddha.

"I began to get up then, with the idea of doing something for the unconscious man, but Jembu caught the movement, slight as it was, although he was not looking at me; and, still without giving me a glance of his eye, waved me sharply away with a jerk of his left hand. So I left the

man lying there, as silent as Jembu. And there I sat, while Jembu seemed not to be breathing, and the embers went out and the place seemed dimmer than ever for the light of the fire that was gone. And then the dancing man came to, and got up and bent over Jembu, and spoke to him, and turned; and all at once he was gone through the slit in the reeds by which he had entered the temple. Then Jembu turned his head, and I looked at him.

" 'He has promised,' he said.

" 'Who?' I asked.

" 'Mungo,' said Jembu.

" 'Was that Mungo?' I asked.

" 'He? No! Only his servant.'

" 'Who is Mungo?' I asked.

" 'We don't know,' said Jembu, with so much finality that I said no more of that.

"But I asked what he had promised.

" 'Fifty runs,' replied Jembu.

" 'In one innings?' I asked.

" 'Whenever I bat,' said Jembu.

" 'Whenever you bat!' I said. 'Why! That will get you into any eleven. Once or twice would attract notice, but a steady average of fifty, and always to be relied on, it mayn't be spectacular, but you'd be the prop of any eleven.'

"He seemed so sure of it that I was quite excited; I could not imagine a more valuable man to have in a team than one who could always do that, day after day, against any kind of bowling, on a good wicket or bad.

" 'But I must never make more,' said Jembu.

" 'You'll hardly want to,' I said.

" 'Not a run more,' said Jembu, gazing straight at the wall.

" 'What will happen if you do?' I asked.

" 'You never know with Mungo,' Jembu replied.

" 'Don't you?' I said.

" 'No man knows that,' said Jembu.

" 'You'll be able to play for Cambridge now,' I said.

"Jembu got up from the floor and we came away.

"He spoke to his people that evening in the firelight. Told them he was going back to Cambridge again, told them what he was going to do there, I suppose; though what they made of it, or what they thought Cambridge was, Mungo only knows. But I saw from his face, and from theirs, that he made that higher civilisation, to which he was going back, very beautiful to them, a sort of landmark far far on ahead of them, to which I suppose they thought that they would one day come themselves. Fancy them playing cricket!

"Well, next day we turned round and started back again, hundreds of miles to the sea. The lions . . ."

"We've heard about them," said Terbut.

"Oh well," said Jorkens.

But if they wouldn't hear his lion-stories they wanted to hear how Jembu played for Cambridge: it was the glamour of Jembu's name after all these years that was holding them. And soon he was back with his story of the long trek to the sea from somewhere North of a line between Kenya and the great lake.

He told us of birds that to me seemed quite incredible, birds with horny faces, and voices like organ-notes; and he told us of the cactus-forests again, speaking of cactus as though it could grow to the size of trees; and he told us of the falls of the Guaso Nyero, going down past a forest trailing grey beards of moss; there may be such falls as he told of above some such forest, but we thought more likely he had picked up tales of some queer foreign paradise, and was giving us them as geography, or else that he had smoked opium or some such drug, and had dreamed of them. One never knew with Jorkens.

He told us how they came to the coast again; and apparently there are trees in Mombasa with enormous scarlet flowers, that I have often seen made out of linen in windows of drapers' shops, but according to him they are real.

Well, I will let him tell his own story.

"We had to wait in that oven" (he meant Mombasa) "for several days before we could get a ship, and when we got home the cricket season was over. It was an odd thing, but Jembu went to the nets at once, and began hitting about, as he had been doing in the Red Sea; and there was no doubt

about it that he was an unmistakable batsman. And he always stopped before there was any possibility that he could by any means be supposed to have made fifty.

"I talked to him about Mungo now and then but could get nothing much out of him: he became too serious for that, whenever one mentioned Mungo, and of the dancing man in the temple I got barely a word; indeed I never even knew his name. He read divinity still, but not with the old zest, so far as I could gather whenever I went to see him, and I think that his thoughts were far away with Mungo.

"And as soon as May came round he was back at cricket; and sure enough, as you know, he played for Cambridge. That was the year he played first; and you have only to look at old score books to see that he never made less than forty-six all that year. He always got very shy when he neared fifty: he was too afraid of a four if he passed forty-six, and that was why he always approached it so gingerly, often stopping at forty-seven, though what he liked to do was to get to forty-six and then to hit a four and hear them applauding his fifty. For he was very fond of the good opinion of Englishmen, though the whole of our civilisation was really as nothing to him, compared with the fear of Mungo.

"Well, his average was magnificent; considering how often he was not out, it must have been nearly eighty. And then next year was the year he played against Surrey. All through May and June he went on with his forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine and fifty; and Cambridge played Surrey early in July. I needn't tell you of that match; after Oxford v. Cambridge in 1870, and Eton v. Harrow in 1910, I suppose it's the best-remembered match in history. You remember how Cambridge had two runs to win and Jembu was in with Halket, the last wicket. Halket was their wicket-keeper and hardly able to deal with this situation; at least Jembu thought not, for he had obviously been getting the bowling all to himself for some time. But now he had made fifty. With the whole ground roaring applause at Jembu's fifty, and two runs still to win I laid a pretty large bet at two to one against Cambridge. Most of them knew his peculiarity of not passing fifty, but I was the only man on the ground that knew of his fear of Mungo. I alone had seen his face when the dancing man went round him, I alone knew the terms. The bet was a good deal more than I could afford. A good deal more. Well, Jembu had the bowling, two to win, and the first ball he stopped very carefully, and then one came a little outside the off stump; and Jembu put his leg across the wicket and played the ball neatly through the slips with his knee. They ran two, and the game was over. Jembu's score of course stayed at fifty, no leg-

byes could affect that, as anyone knows who has ever heard of cricket. How could anyone think otherwise? But that damned African spirit knew nothing of cricket. How should he know, if you come to think of it? Born probably ages ago in some tropical marsh, from which he had risen to hang over African villages, haunting old women and travellers lost in the forest, or blessing or cursing the crops with moods that changed with each wind, what should he know of the feelings or rules of a sportsman? Spirits like that keep their word as far as I've known: it was nothing but honest ignorance; and he had credited poor Jembu with fifty-two though not a ball that had touched his bat that day had had any share in more than fifty runs.

"And I've learned this of life, that you must abide by the mistakes of your superiors. Your own you may sometimes atone for, but with the mistakes of your superiors, so far as they affect you, there is nothing to do but to suffer for them.

"There was no appeal for Jembu against Mungo's mistake. Who would have listened to him? Certainly no one here: certainly no one in Africa. Jembu went back to see what Mungo had done, as soon as he found out the view that Mungo had taken. He found out that soon enough, by dropping back to his old score of one and nothing in three consecutive innings. The Cambridge captain assured him that that might happen to anybody, and that he mustn't think of giving up cricket. But Jembu knew. And he went back to his forest beyond Mount Kenya, to see what Mungo had done.

"And only a few years later I came on Jembu again, in a small hotel in Marseilles, where they give you excellent fish. They have them in a little tank of water, swimming about alive, and you choose your fish and they cook it. I went there only three or four years after that match against Surrey, being in Marseilles for a day; and a black waiter led me to the glass tank, and I looked up from the fishes, and it was Jembu. And we had a long talk, and he told me all that had happened because of those two leg-byes that had never been near his bat.

"It seems that a tribe that had never liked Jembu's people had broken into his forest and raided his honey-pots. They had taken his ivory, and burnt his cathedral of thatch, and driven off all his slaves. I knew from speeches that he had made at Cambridge that Jembu in principle was entirely opposed to slavery; but it is altogether another matter to have one's slaves driven away, and not know where they have gone to or whether they will be well cared for. It was that that broke his heart as much as the loss of his honey-pots; and they got his wives too. His people were scattered, and all his cattle gone; there was nothing after that raid left for Jembu in Africa.

“He wandered down to the coast; he tried many jobs; but Mungo was always against him. He drifted to Port Said as a stowaway, to Marseilles as a sailor, and there deserted, and was many things more, before he rose to the position of waiter; and I question if Mungo had even done with him then. A certain fatalistic feeling he had, which he called resignation, seemed to bear him up and to comfort him. The word resignation, I think, came out of his books of divinity; but the feeling came from far back, out of old dark forests of Africa. And, wherever it came from, it cheered him awhile at his work in that inn of Marseilles, and caused him to leave gravy just where it fell, on the starched shirt-front that he wore all day. He was not unhappy, but he looked for nothing better; after all, he had won that match for Cambridge against Surrey, I don’t see what more he could want, and many a man has less. But when I said good-bye to him I felt sure that Mungo would never alter his mind, either to understand, or to pardon, those two leg-byes.”

“Did you ask him,” said Terbut, “how Mungo knew that he got those two leg-byes?”

“No,” said Jorkens, “I didn’t ask him that.”

Chapter 4

THE CHARM AGAINST THIRST

It was a warm sunny day. Summer after many delays had come at last to London, and the heat beat back from the walls and pavement so that the streets were baking. Just after lunch, when it seemed about at its hottest, I was walking down the Strand going eastwards, when whom should I see far off in the clear bright air, but Jorkens coming towards me. If he saw me he has better sight than one would think that he has from the general look of his eyes. Certainly he appeared not to. Instead of any sign of recognition he pulled out the end of his watch-chain and began absently swinging it. As we drew nearer I saw something blue on the watch-chain, some sort of charm flashing round and round. And then we were right opposite each other, within a yard, his eyes still far away from me.

"Hullo, Mr. Jorkens," I said.

I never saw a man look more surprised.

"Hul*lo*," he answered.

"Taking a walk?" I said.

It was quite true. He was.

"Ever seen one of these?" he asked, the charm now hanging still at the end of the watch-chain.

I looked at it, a little wavy thing, all blue and shiny; hard stone, but all cut into ripples; and blue, blue, blue, right down into the deeps of it. It wasn't turquoise and it wasn't labradorite, and it was too opaque for a gem; I don't know what it was; but I never saw any little ornament that so set you thinking of water.

"No. What is it?" I said.

"It's a charm," said Jorkens.

"What does it do?" I asked.

"Oh it doesn't do anything very much," he said. "It keeps you from dying of thirst. I find it handy now and then."

“Come into Moltano’s and tell me about it,” I said. For there is one thing about Jorkens, and that is that he will always tell you a story. Whether you believe it or not is your own affair. But he is always good for a story. Another thing about him is that he likes to be offered a drink.

“You won’t mind Moltano’s?” I asked. “It’s down below the level of the street, but . . .”

“No, not a bit,” said Jorkens. So down we went.

“The trouble about thirst,” said Jorkens, “is that you never know when it’s going to catch you. I don’t very often want a drink, but when I do . . .”

“On a day like this,” I said, “I should think we all want a drink. What shall we have, Mr. Jorkens?”

“On a day like this,” he said, “I should think a whiskey and soda.”

“I expect you’re probably right,” I said. And I ordered two whiskies and sodas.

We sat down, and they arrived.

“You were telling me about that spell,” I began.

“Yes,” said Jorkens. “Yes. It’s a curious thing; but it works, you know. Always did.”

“Does it really?” I said.

“Yes. You wouldn’t think it, you know; but I was almost dying of thirst just now. It’s the unexpected warmth, I expect, coming suddenly like this. And I happened to have run out of change; and there it was.”

I saw that he was grateful to his little blue charm and not to me; but it was his story I wanted, not his gratitude; so I gently guided him back to it.

“Have you had it long?” I said.

“Yes, quite a while,” he answered. “I had it from a friend. He died, died practically penniless, and left me his odds and ends. I came by it that way.”

“He didn’t die of thirst then,” I said.

“No, not of thirst,” said Jorkens. “It was very curious that he didn’t die of thirst, for the whole scene was set for it. Whatever Fates were guiding him must have meant him to die of thirst, but in the end the charm was too strong for them. Yes it works, damn it. It works.”

I made some other of the remarks that may be likened to little dead twigs that one throws down to keep a fire going.

“He got it from a witch in Africa,” said Jorkens. “A long, long way up the Nile, where they worship witches. She had a lot of charms for various purposes, and this was to prevent you from dying of thirst. My friend Blanders bought this one because he was going northwards for a long trip in the Sahara. And he had been there before, and thirst was what he was afraid of. He showed it me once, and I remember him telling me that she had charms against drowning, and against being eaten by crocodiles. But he couldn’t take them all; and as he was leaving the Nile, and could swim, he didn’t want those two.

“He showed it me in London when he got back. And almost at once he was off again, and away he went into the Sahara and was never heard of for months.”

“What happened to him there?” I threw in as another dried twig, while Jorkens sipped his whiskey.

“Well,” said Jorkens, “he went in from the North. Took a few camels and men, as he’d done before; and went in as far as he could, and then turned round and came back again. Merely seeing how far he could go with very little to drink. That was what it amounted to. Might have played that game anywhere. But playing it with the Sahara was like teasing a dog till it bit you. Teasing a tiger I should say. Only he had such infernal trust in this damned blue stone. And I can’t deny it was justified.

“Well, he gets six camels, and I think five Arabs, and starts one day from El Kantara. And there was the desert waiting for him. Of course it has its charm. Who’d go there at all if it hadn’t? Its beauty and its serenity; as though it were part of some planet that knows none of our cares. But, for all that, it was waiting for him. And he must have seen it too, if he wasn’t a fool. And he wasn’t, only that he trusted too much to this damned blue stone. There’s a look on the Sahara that I’ve often seen myself. It isn’t anger exactly; it isn’t even malice; it’s just a quiet, patient, everlasting waiting in the sun for your bones. Well, he must have seen that as he went in from El Kantara.

“He went south for weeks. He went south until the Arabs would go no further, and it was time to turn, charm or no charm. It was one of those Arabs that told me all about it afterwards. If they had let him go any further there would apparently not have been the ghost of a chance of any of them getting back. They hadn’t water enough. But he was a pioneer by birth, and

when the charm against thirst was added to that it seemed to have gone to his head, and he went on till they stopped him. Well, a few days after that, on the way back, the Arabs one evening took a pretty serious view of things. They all made up their minds that they couldn't do it. And it was then that Blanders told them about his charm. They all looked at it and fingered it, and it impressed them enormously. And for the next few days they went on merrily. In fact they remained in high spirits right up to the time that their camels began to die. After that, when only two camels were left, and only as much water as each man had in a bottle, and there were a hundred miles still to go, no one of any sense would have believed in a charm against thirst. And nobody did but Blanders.

"Well, those camels very soon died; and the evening that they all drank the very last drop of their water, Arabs and Blanders alike, they were still fifty miles from the mountains. The next day they began to see the tips of the crags, and the sight heartened them, for they were sure of water there. Old storms have filled those mountains with water-courses and cut them far out into the desert; and, dry though they are, the smooth beds that the torrents have polished are scooped in scores of places into great basins, by boulders that sudden streams have once whirled round and round. In these basins, when they are deep enough, water will lie for months, in fact till the next storm. There would be no missing them if once they could get to the mountains, there would be ten or a dozen such holes in each ravine, with probably a cloud of butterflies hovering above them. But they were fifty miles from the mountains.

"That day they did thirty miles. The crags were clear, and looked near. At sunset they turned the colour of peonies, and from that to translucent blue, the blue coming up from below, till all the mountain was sapphire. Blanders felt they were mocking him, so the Arabs say. Then night came with those enormous stars that hang above the Sahara, all seeming calmly sure that that little company would die of thirst in the desert, the Arabs believing them, and Blanders alone believing in this blue charm. At dawn the mountains went through their tricks again; they leapt out of night into peony, paled into rose, flashed as they always do into briar rose while you looked at them, and all in a matter of moments were pale brown rock.

"The six men started off with twenty miles to do and the mountains looked very close, close at hand as they do before thunder. And sure enough they had only marched an hour, when they saw black rain-clouds heavy along the mountains. But not a drop fell in the desert. And soon they heard the thunder from the storm that was lashing those peaks. They watched it for

moments of hope, then saw that it was certainly moving away from them, and into the interior of the mountains. At some word of despair from Blanders, the Arabs told him that every hollow amongst the crags before him would now be full of water; the first slope they came to would have water in abundance, and it was no more than fifteen miles away. That comforted Blanders little; these men accustomed to the rigours of Ramadan could do it: he could not. And yet he clung still to some queer blind faith in the blue stone. A few more miles he struggled on; certainly he would have lain down and died hours earlier if it had not been for the hope that he got from the stone; and then ten miles from the mountains he gave up. The Arabs pointed to the mountains now just before them, and to the thunderstorm that was still amongst their peaks. But Blanders could go no further.

" 'The charm,' they said. He who had cheered them on with the tale of the charm was now being cheered by them with his own tale. It shows how low his supply of hope had sunk.

" 'The charm,' they said with parched lips. And at that he did indeed rouse himself. He roused himself and went on for a few more miles, till they got amongst the ravines that run out from the mountains, the steep dry rocky beds of lost streams. Here they could no longer go straight, but had to make wide detours until they came to places where they could clamber easily down and up the other side. A walk over the flat Sahara was one thing for a man to do on hope and hope alone, but this rough walking was beyond Blanders's powers. 'If you can go on, go on,' he said. 'I shall stay and dig here. There has been water here once. If I dig deep enough I may find some.'

"There had certainly been water once: it was a river-bed ten feet deep, with boulders in it the size of sheep, that had been smoothed and rounded like marbles by some old torrent. Most of the bed of it was smooth and polished rock, but there were patches of sand too, and in one of these he began to dig with a knife. Once more the Arabs pointed to the mountains, quite near and drenched with rain, but Blanders knew that he could go no further, and perhaps for all his despair about his power to walk, he may have had a confidence in the charm greater than we can guess. Then the Arabs neither left him nor helped him to dig, but sat down and watched him from the bank with their grey bournouses huddled round them. And there was Blanders digging with a knife, and only this blue stone between him and the knowledge that death from thirst was certain. He glanced once at the Arabs' faces, and saw there no flicker of hope that he would find water in that

thirsty sand. They were sitting there parched as he. That look on their faces was a blow to him; and still his faith in the charm kept him working on. Some of the rounded pebbles must have been far bigger than Blanders, huddled there digging. The thunder was rolling further and further off.

"Suddenly the Arabs shouted. Blanders looked up and did not understand. But it would have been too late if he had understood. There never is time on those occasions, when the storms send down the rivers that make those water-courses. It came down round a corner, the old river, the rightful possessor of that watercourse, rolling the boulders along with it like a boy playing marbles. And Blanders was swept away for over a mile. And round his neck on its chain, when they found his body, where Mahommedans carry a verse in a satchel of leather, lay that triumphant amulet."

"Drowned!" I said.

"Drowned," said Jorkens. "He could have had a charm against drowning, for the same price; but one never knows what is in store."

"And they come down like that?" I asked.

"I asked the Arabs that," Jorkens replied, "and they told me that they are forbidden by their religion to camp in one of those water-courses, or even to pray there."

He seemed to brood a moment and added bitterly: "That's the way of all those charms."

"Well, any way," I said, "it's not treating you like that."

I felt the remark was lame as soon as I said it, but I was not prepared for the fury of his rejoinder.

"You think because it got me a drink," he exclaimed, "that it is not packed as full of curses as an African witch can pack it. They're all the same, all these charms, spells and mascots that promise so much. All the same. What has it done for me? All that it promises, and then it gets level. Just as it did with Blanders. It's the same with all these bargains; always was: man is always outwitted.

"What does it do for me? Gets me a drink. And what does the drink do? Why, the little devil promises me strength and health, and activity mental and bodily, and a philosophy to face the drift of things, that is so much against one, my boy. And I believe it, I always believe it. And what has it brought me to? Oh, yes, I know what you'd say. It's very good of you, but

there it is. And all the devilry in that damned blue stone is as strong as when first it was carved by some black devil in Africa. It will take me the same way as Blanders. Slower, that's all. But what is time to these ancient devilries?"

I hardly knew what to say. I was turning over a few phrases of consolation all equally lame, when Jorkens suddenly smiled.

"Well, we've got on to a pretty gloomy topic," he said.

I cannot claim to be a tactful person, and yet sometimes an inner feeling tells me the right thing to do without knowing at all why. It prompted me now.

"Have another drink," I said to that disconsolate figure.

"Thank you," said Jorkens, "I will."

Chapter 5

OUR DISTANT COUSINS

I WAS elected a member of the club to which Jorkens belongs. The Billiards Club it is called, though they don't play much billiards there. I went there many days before I met Jorkens again; and heard many tales after lunch, when we sat round the fire; but somehow there seemed something missing in all of them, to one who was waiting for one of Jorkens's. One heard tales of many lands and of many peoples, some of them strange enough; and yet, just when the story promised to grip one, there was something that was not there. Or perhaps there was too much; too many facts, too impartial a love of truth, that led so many of them to throw everything into their tales, apart from its interest, merely because it was true. I do not mean that Jorkens's tales were not true, as to some extent his biographer I should be the last to suggest that; it would be unfair to a man from whom I have had so much entertainment. I give the words as they fell from his lips, so far as I can remember them, and leave the reader to judge.

Well, about the fifth time I came in, to my great delight there was Jorkens. He was not very talkative at lunch, nor for some time after; and it was not till he had been awhile in his usual arm-chair, with his whiskey and soda at hand on a little table, that he began to mutter. I, who had made a point of sitting beside him, was one of the few that heard him. "There's a lot of loose talk," he was saying, "goes on in clubs. People say things. They don't mean them. But they say things. A lot of loose talk."

"Yes," I said, "I suppose there is rather. There oughtn't to be."

"Of course there oughtn't," said Jorkens. "Now I'll give you an instance. Only to-day; before you came in; but only to-day I heard a man saying to another (they've both gone out now, so never mind who they were) I heard him saying 'There's no one tells taller tales than Jorkens.' Merely because he hasn't travelled, or, if he has, has kept all the time to roads and paths and railways, merely because he has never been off a good wide path he thinks that things that I may have seen hundreds of times merely weren't there."

"Oh, he can't really have meant it," I said.

"No," said Jorkens, "but he shouldn't have said it. Now, just to prove to you, as I happen to be able to do, that his remark is definitely inaccurate, I

can show you a man not a mile from here who tells very much taller stories than I do; and they happen to be perfectly true."

"Oh, I'm sure they are," I said, for Jorkens was distinctly annoyed.

"Care to come and see him?" said Jorkens.

"Well, I'd just as soon hear one of your own stories of things you've seen," I said, "if you'd care to tell me one."

"Not till I've cleared myself," said Jorkens, "of that loose assertion."

"Yes, I'll come," I said.

So we left the club together.

"I'd take a taxi," said Jorkens, "only I happen to have run out of change."

Though Jorkens was once a great traveller I was not sure what training he was in to walk a mile just then. So I hailed a taxi, Jorkens insisting that he must owe me the money, as it was he who was taking me. We went eastwards, and soon arrived at our destination, Jorkens generously placing himself in debt to me for the fare.

It was a small lodging house beyond Charing Cross Road, and we were shown upstairs by a maid to a carpetless room; and there was Jorkens's friend Terner, a man probably still in the thirties, though he obviously smoked too much, and that made him look a bit older; and besides that he had pure-white hair, which gave a queer venerable appearance to a face that seemed somehow unsuited to it.

They greeted each other, and I was introduced.

"He has come to hear your story," said Jorkens.

"You know I never tell it," answered Terner.

"I know," said Jorkens; "not to sneering fools. But he's not one of those. He can tell when a man's speaking the truth."

They looked at each other, but Terner still seemed uncertain, still seemed to cling to the reticence of a man that has often been doubted.

"It's all right," said Jorkens. "I've told him lots of my tales. He's not one of those sneering fools."

"Told him about the Abu Laheeb?" asked Terner suddenly.

"Oh, yes," said Jorkens.

Terner looked at me.

“A very interesting experience,” I said.

“Well,” said Terner, taking another cigarette in his stained fingers, “I don’t mind telling you. Take a chair.”

He lit his cigarette and began.

“It was in 1924; when Mars was about its nearest to the earth. I took off from Ketling aerodrome, and was away two months. Where did they think I was? I certainly hadn’t enough petrol to fly about in our atmosphere for two months. If I came down, where did I come down? It was their business to find out and to prove it; and, if not, to believe my story.”

1924, and Ketling aerodrome. I did remember now. Yes, a man had claimed to have flown to Mars; had been reluctant to say much at first, because of some horror that he had seen, would not give cheery interviews, was too grimly solemn about it, and so encouraged doubts that might otherwise not have been, and was soured by them, and overwhelmed by a rush of them.

“Why, yes, I remember, of course,” I said. “You flew to . . .”

“A thousand letters by one post, calling me a liar,” said Terner. “So after that I refused to tell my story. They wouldn’t have believed it in any case. Mars isn’t quite what we think it.

“Well, this is what happened. I’d thought of it ever since I realised that aeroplanes could do it. But about 1920, with Mars coming nearer and nearer, and 1924 the only year that would be possible, I began my calculations. I worked at them steadily for three years; I have the figures still: I will not ask you to read them, but the whole point of my work was this, that there was only one motive power that could possibly get me to Mars before all my provisions gave out, and that power was the pace of the world. An aeroplane can do over two hundred miles an hour, and mine got up to nearly three hundred by means of the propeller alone; and in addition to that I had a rocket attachment that gradually increased my pace to an enormous extent; but the world, which is ninety-three million miles from the Sun, goes right round it in a year; and nothing we know on its surface has any pace like that. My petrol and my rocket were merely to pull clear of the earth’s attraction, but my journey was made by the force that is moving you in that chair at this moment at something like a thousand miles a minute. One doesn’t lose that pace merely by leaving the earth; it remains with one. But my calculations were to direct it; and I found that the pace of the earth would only carry me

to Mars when Mars was a bit ahead of us. Unfortunately Mars is never straight ahead, but a bit out to the right, and I had to calculate at what angle I was to aim my plane away to the right of our orbit, in order that the combined pull of my little plane and my rockets, and the vast pace of the earth, should give me the right direction. It had to be as precise as aiming a rifle, with this slight advantage on my side, to make up for all the forces that grudged my journey, that the target would attract any missile that was going a little too wide.

"But how to get back? That doubled the complexity of my calculations. If the pace of the world sent me forwards, so would the pace of Mars. Mars would be ahead of the world when I started. Where would the pace of Mars send me?"

I saw a flash of doubt even on Jorkens's face at that.

"But it was fairly simple," continued Terner. "Our world has the inside berth, a much shorter journey round the sun at ninety-three million miles than Mars at an average of a hundred and thirty-nine million. It consequently soon passes its neighbour, and I found that just as I was to shoot forward from Earth to Mars, so, by leaving at the right hour, I could shoot forwards from Mars to Earth. As I said, these calculations took me three years, and of course my life depended on them.

"There was no difficulty in taking food for two months. Water was more cumbersome; so I took the great risk of carrying water for only a month, and trusting to find it in Mars. After all, we have seen it there. It seemed a certainty, and yet it was an anxiety all the while, and I drank so sparingly that, as it turned out, I had ten full days' supply when I got to Mars. A far more complicated matter was my supply of compressed air in cylinders, my method of releasing it for use, and my utilisation of exhaled air to the utmost that it could be utilised."

I was about to ask some questions about those cylinders when Jorkens interrupted. "You know my theory about Jules Verne and the men in the moon?" he said.

"No," I replied.

"So many things he describes have been done since, and have become commonplace," said Jorkens; "Zeppelins, submarines, and one thing and another; and are described so minutely and vividly; that it's my theory, I don't know what you think, that he actually experienced these, especially the trip to the moon, and then told them as fiction."

"No, I never heard that theory," I said.

"Why not?" said Jorkens. "Why shouldn't he? There are innumerable ways of recording events. There's history, journalism, ballads, and many more. People don't believe any of them very devoutly. They may disbelieve fiction too, now and then. But look how often you hear it said 'That's Little Dorrit's home, that's where Sam Weller lived, that's Bleak House,' and so on and so on. That shows you they believe fiction more than most things; so why shouldn't he have left his record in that form? But I am interrupting you. I beg your pardon."

"Never mind," said Terner. "Another thing that perplexed me greatly, and gave rise to immense discomfort, was the loss of the pressure of the atmosphere, to which we are accustomed. I shall always regard this as the greatest of all the handicaps that anyone has to face on a journey from Earth. Indeed without the most careful and thorough binding with bandages one's body would be crushed, by the pressure within it working outwards when the weight of the air was gone. I should have published details of all these things if it hadn't been for that outbreak of disbelief; which would not have occurred if I had had a publicity agent."

"Most annoying," said Jorkens.

Terner got up and paced about the room, still smoking as always.

There certainly had been an outbreak of disbelief. It was just one of those things that the public had turned against, like Epstein's Rima, only far more so. Some men are unlucky. It was largely his own fault. It was as he had said; if he had had a good publicity agent, the outbreak would not have occurred. They would have believed him without his troubling to make the journey at all.

He paced up and down, a few long strides, in silence.

"I spent every penny I'd got," he went on, "on the aeroplane and the outfit. I had no dependants. And if my calculations were wrong and I missed the red planet I shouldn't want the cash. If I found it and got safely back to Earth, I imagined it wouldn't be hard to earn all I needed. I was mistaken there. Well, one never knows. Achievement by itself is not enough. The necessary thing is for people to admit your achievement. I had not thought of that. And the bigger the achievement, the less ready people may be to admit it. Lear was recognised much quicker than Keats."

He lit another cigarette, as he did throughout his story as soon as he had finished one.

"Well, the planet came nearer and nearer. It was quite large now every night, distinctly coloured. Orange perhaps, rather than red. I used to go out and look at it at night. The awful thought occurred to me more than once that that orange glow might well come from a waste of deserts, yellow sand without a drop of water for me; but I was consoled by the thought of those vast canals that had been seen with our telescopes, for I believed like everyone else that they were canals.

"I had finished all my calculations by then, by the winter of 1923; and Mars, as I said, was coming nearer and nearer. I grew pretty calm about it as the time approached. All my calculations were done, and it seemed to me that any peril that threatened me was all decided months ago, one way or the other. The dangers seemed all behind me; they were in my calculations. If they were right they would take me through; if they were wrong I was doomed two or three years ago. The same way with those tawny deserts that I used to think I saw. I gave up worrying about them too. I had decided that the telescope could see better than I could, so that was the end of them. I wouldn't tell anyone I was going; I hate to talk about things I am *going* to do. Apparently one has to on a stunt like that. Any way I didn't. There was a girl I used to see a good deal of in those days. Amely her name was. I didn't even tell her. It would have soon got out if I had. And there would I have been, the silly hero of an adventure that as yet I was only talking about. I told her I was going in my 'plane on a long journey. She thought I meant to America. I said I would be away two months; and that puzzled her; but I wouldn't say more.

"Every night I took a look at Mars. He was large and ruddy now, so that everyone noticed him. Just think of the different interests with which they were looking at Mars; admiration of his beauty glowing with that bright colour, casual curiosity, apathy, scientists waiting the chance that would not come round again for years, witch-doctors making spells, astrologers working out portents, reporters making their articles, and I alone looking at that distant neighbour with lonely thoughts unshared by anyone on our planet. For, as I told you, not even Amely had the very slightest idea.

"Mars was not at his nearest on the night that I started; still over forty million miles away. The reason of this I told you: I had to shoot forwards while Mars was ahead of us. He came within thirty-five million in 1924. But I set off before that.

"I started, naturally, from the night side of the earth, as Mars was lying beyond us away from the sun, and this enabled me to aim accurately at my target. It was a far trickier job coming back. When I say I aimed at my

target, I aimed of course far in front of it. That will be understood by anyone who has ever done any shooting. Well, I went to Ketling aerodrome on the night in question, where my 'plane was. There were one or two fellows there that I knew, and of course my rig-out astonished them.

" 'Going to keep warm,' I remember one of them said.

"Well, I was. Because in addition to my system of bandages to hold me in when I lost the pressure of our atmosphere, I had to wrap up against the absolute cold of Space. I should have that inconceivable cold in my face, while on my back I should need all the clothes I could wear, to protect me from the blaze of the sun; for those clothes would be the only protection there was, when our fifty miles of air were behind me. Sunstroke and frost-bite could very easily have overcome me at the same moment. Well, they are very keen at Ketling about nobody going up if he's in the least bit biffed. You know: a bit the better for his dinner. So they started asking me questions with that in view. I wouldn't tell them where I was going. It wasn't till I actually got the 'plane out that I told two of the mechanics, so as to have my start recorded. One of them merely thought I was making a joke, and laughed, not at me exactly, but in order to show that he appreciated my having a joke with him. He merely thought it was funny in some way that he couldn't see. The other laughed too, but at least he knew what I was talking about. 'How much juice are you taking, sir?' he said.

" 'Fifteen gallons,' I said, which as a matter of fact he knew. It's good for three hundred miles, which gave me plenty to spare if I wanted to cruise a bit over Mars.

" 'Going there and back in three hours, sir?' he said.

"He was quite right. That's as long as you can fly on fifteen gallons.

" 'I'm going there,' I said.

" 'Well, good-night, sir,' he answered. I told a third man too.

" 'To Mars are you, sir,' he said. He was annoyed that I should, as he thought, play a joke on him.

"Then we were off. I had a system of sights that gave me a perfect aim all the time that I was in the darkness of Earth and within its atmosphere, and could still see Mars and still steer. Before I left our atmosphere I accelerated with my system of rockets, and broke away by a dozen explosions from the pull of our planet. Then I shut off my engines and fired no more rockets, and a most enormous stillness wrapped us about. The sun shone, and Mars and all the stars went out, and there we were perfectly still

in that most absolute stillness. Yet I was moving, as you are now, at a thousand miles a minute. The soundlessness was amazing, the discomforts beyond description; the difficulties of eating alone, without being frost-bitten, and without being crushed by the awful emptiness of Space, which we are not built to inhabit, were enough to make the most resolute man turn back, except that you can neither turn nor steer without air to turn in.

"I was sure of my aim: it was accurate enough according to my calculations, the last I saw of Mars: I was pretty sure of arriving: but I soon began to doubt my capacity to hold out for a month of it. Days and nights can go by pretty slowly sometimes even on Earth, but this was one interminable day.

"The compressed air worked all right: of course I had practised it on Earth. But the machinery for letting out continually the exactly right quantities into a kind of metal helmet, from which I breathed it, was so complicated, that I could never sleep for more than two hours on end, without having to wake and attend to it. For this purpose I had to have an alarm clock quite close to my ear. My discomforts would, I think, be no more interesting than a record of a long and tedious illness. But, to put it briefly, a little after half-way they got the better of me and I was going to give up and die; when suddenly I saw Mars. In the broad glare of the daylight I saw a pale white circle, like the very littlest of moons, nearly ahead of me and a bit to the right. It was this that saved me. I gazed at it and forgot my great discomforts.

"It was no more visible than a small bird's feather, high in the air, in sunlight. But it was Mars unmistakably, and just where it ought to be if I was to reach it. With nothing else to look at through that endless day, I gazed too much at Mars. That brought it no nearer; and I found that if I was to get any comfort from it in my weariness I must look away from it for a bit. That wasn't easy with nothing else to look at, but when I did look away from it for an hour or so, and looked again, I could see a change. I noticed now that it was not entirely lit, being dark on the right hand side, and illuminated about as much as the moon on its eleventh day, three days from full. I looked away again and then looked back at it, and so I passed about two hundred hours of that long weary day. Gradually the canals, as we call them, came in view, gradually the seas. It grew to the size of our moon, and then grew larger, exhibiting a spectacle the like of which no human eye had ever seen before. From then on I forgot my discomforts. Now I saw mountains clearly, and presently rivers, and the flashing panorama widened before me, giving up secrets at which our astronomers have guessed for over a century. There

came the time when after a spell of sleep I looked at Mars again, and found that it had lost the look of a planet, or any celestial body, and appeared now like a landscape. Soon after that I got the feeling that, though my course was quite unchanged, Mars was no longer ahead of me but underneath. And then I began to feel the pull of the planet. Things rocked in my 'plane: kegs, tins and such; and began to shift, as far as their lashings would let them. I felt the pull too where I sat. Then I got ready for entering the atmosphere of Mars."

"What did you have to do?" said Jorkens.

"Had to be very careful," said Terner. "Or I'd have burned up like a meteorite. Of course I was overtaking it, not meeting it, so that our two speeds largely neutralised each other; and luckily the atmosphere is only thin at first, like ours, so you don't strike it bang. But the plane took some handling for all that. Once I'd steadied her, flying is much the same there as it is here. Of course I'd turned on my engines as soon as I struck Mars' atmosphere. I came down pretty straight, not wishing to show over too wide an area, so as not to excite too much curiosity amongst whatever might be there. I may say that I expected to find men there, not through any knowledge I had or researches I'd made, but because most people do. I don't mean that I was persuaded by that, but what vaguely persuaded them had vaguely persuaded me. I came down over a country that was considerably covered with forests, though with plenty of clearings for a landing. The spot I chose was a clearing down in a valley, as it gave the best cover for my aeroplane, and I didn't want to show too much. I expected human beings, but thought it just as well to keep out of sight if I could: they're not always as friendly as all that even here. In a little over ten minutes from the time I turned on my engines I landed in this valley. I had been away from Earth a month, just as I'd calculated. It wasn't so very unlike Earth when I stepped out. All the trees were different, and of course twigs of these were the first things I had meant to bring back. I actually picked a bunch from five different ones and laid them down in my aeroplane. But the very first thing I did was to replenish my water-supply, and to have a good drink, at a stream that I had spotted before I came down, running out of the forest and down that valley. The water was all right. I had had some fear that it might be full of salt, or some wholly unknown chemical; but it was all right. And the next thing I did was to take off those infernal bandages and my breathing-helmet, and to have a bath in the stream, the first I had had for a month. I didn't put them on again, but left them in the 'plane, and dressed decently, as I wanted to show the inhabitants something human. After all, I would be the first one they had seen from here, and I didn't want them to think we were like caterpillars in a cocoon. I took a .450 revolver with me too. Well, you have

to do that here sometimes. Then I started off to look for these remote neighbours of ours. I passed wonderful flowers but did not stop to pick one: I was only looking for man. I had seen no sign of buildings as I came down. Yet I had not walked a mile through the wood when I came to open land, and there by the very edge of the trees, quite close to me, I saw what was clearly a building made by some intelligent being: and a very odd building it was.

"It was a long rectangle, barely fifteen feet high, and about ten yards wide. At one end of it four windowless walls and a flat roof shut out all light for about twenty yards, but the rest of it was a stretch of quite fifty yards guarded by roof and walls of open metal-work, a stout mesh of the same material of which the whole building was made.

"And at once I saw that our scientists' dreams were true, for walking in that enclosure so carefully protected by metal I saw a large party of the human race."

"Human!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," said Terner, "human. Folk like ourselves. And not only that, but, as I had often gathered from books was likely to be the case on account of the smaller planet cooling sooner than ours and so starting life earlier, rather more refined than the best of our people. I never saw anything more graceful; ages had given them a refinement that has not yet come to us. I never saw anything more delicate than their women's beauty. There was a stately simplicity in their walk alone that was lovelier to see than our dances."

Then he strode on, up and down the room, in silence awhile, smoking furiously.

"Oh, it is an accursed planet," he said once, and went on with his rapid smoking. I was going to say something to get him back to his story; but Jorkens saw me and held up his hand. He evidently knew this point of the story, and the strong effect that it had upon Terner. So we left him awhile to his pacing and to his cigarettes.

And after a bit he continued calmly, as though there had been no pause. "When I saw that mesh I got my revolver ready, for it seemed to me a pretty obvious protection against some powerful animal. Otherwise, I thought, why not walk about in the open instead of in that narrow enclosure?

"There were about thirty of them there, dressed simply and gracefully, though their dress was a bit oriental from our point of view. Everything

about them was graceful except that dingy-looking flat house. I came up to the mesh and greeted them. I knew that taking my hat off would probably have no meaning to them, but I took it off with a wide sweep and bowed. It was the best I could do, and I hoped that it might convey my feelings. And it did too. They were sympathetic and quick, and every sign that I made to them, except when too utterly clumsy, they understood at once. And when they didn't understand they seemed to laugh at themselves, not me. They were like that. Here was I utterly crude and uncouth, half savage, compared to them; and they treated me with every courtesy that they could get my poor wits to understand. How I'd like to go back with a thousand more of us . . . but it's no good, they won't believe me. Well, I stood there with my hands on the mesh, and found it was good stout metal though much less than half an inch wide: I could easily get my thumb through the round apertures, so that we could see each other quite clearly. Well, I stood there talking to them, or whatever you call it, as well as I could, and remembering all the time that there must be something pretty bad in those forests for all that thick wire to be necessary. I never guessed what.

"I pointed to the sky, in the direction in which they would have seen Earth shining at night; and they understood me. Fancy understanding a thing like that just from my uncouth gestures. And they obviously did. But they won't believe me here. And then they tried to tell me all about their world, and of course I understood nothing. And it wasn't just being ignorant of their language that I felt as my greatest handicap: it was my awful lack of every kind of refinement, in comparison with those gracious gentle creatures, that weighed on me the most heavily all the time I was there. One thing I was able to understand from them. Would you like to hear about those canals?"

"Yes, very much," I said.

"Well, they aren't canals at all," he replied. "There was one in sight of where we stood, a huge expanse of water with a straight edge to it, going through flat plains. I pointed and asked them about it. And they all pointed up, and there I saw a little moon of Mars, lit up and shining like ours. Well that conveyed nothing to me. I knew Mars had two moons, but I saw no connection with canals. So I pointed to the water again, and again they all pointed up. This still conveyed absolutely nothing, so they pointed then to the far end of the great canal out in the plains; and at length after a great while I was able to see that the water was moving, which is what they were trying to explain by signs to me. Then they pointed up to their moon again. And in the end I was able to understand them. That moon passes so close

over plains of mud that its attraction drags the mud along after it, and the water pours in behind. Once I had seen it, it seemed simple enough. No one would dig a canal fifty miles wide, and they are at least that. Whereas pulling water along is just the job for a moon."

"But are the canals as wide as that?" I said.

"You'd never see them from Earth if they weren't," said Terner.

I'd never thought of that.

"There was one girl there that was extraordinarily lovely," said Terner. "But to describe any of them you'd need the language of a lover, and then turn that into poetry. No one will believe me. Not a soul will believe me. I talked to her, though of course my words meant nothing; I trusted so much to her bright intelligence that I almost expected her to understand every word; and so she often did. Strange bright birds flew often over us going to and from the forest, and she told me the names of them in the queer Martial language. Mpah and Nto are two that I can remember, as far as I can spell it; and then there was Ingu, bright orange and black, with a long tail like our magpie. She was trying to tell me something about Ingu, who was just then flying over us, squawking, away from the trees; when suddenly she pointed. I looked, and sure enough something was coming out of the forest."

For a while he puffed rapidly in silence.

"I can't describe it to you. We have nothing like it here. At any rate not on land. An octopus has some slight resemblance to it in its obese body and thin long legs, though this had only two, and two long thin arms. But the head and the huge mouth were like nothing one knows. I have never seen anything so horrible. It came straight to the wire netting. I slipped away at once before it saw me, as that lovely girl was warning me to do. I had no idea that the thick wire had not been woven as a protection against this very beast. I hid amongst some sort of flowering scrub. I can smell the scent of it to this day; a sweet aroma unlike any on Earth. I had no idea that they were not perfectly safe from it. And then it came straight towards them, and up to the wire. I saw it close, all nude and flabby, except for those wiry limbs. It lifted a lid in the roof before I knew what it was doing, and put in a long horrible arm. It groped about with extraordinary rapidity, and seized a girl and drew her up through the lid. I was on the far side of the wire from it and couldn't shoot. It wrung her neck in a moment and threw her down, and slipped in that arm again. I ran out from my covert, but before I got near it had caught a young man and drawn him up, and was wringing his neck as I came round the corner. They had made little effort to avoid that gruesome

hand, just dodging as it swept by them; though when it singled one out there was little chance to dodge, as they seemed to know. And they were all standing together now in the corner as I came by them, with a dignified resignation in their faces."

"Couldn't they have done *anything*?" I asked. For the idea of a branch of the human race quite helpless before such a horror was too new for me to accept it. But he had seen it, and understood.

"It was nothing more than a chicken-run," he said. "What could they do? They belonged to this beast."

"Belonged to it!" I exclaimed.

"You see," said Jorkens, "you don't understand. Man isn't top dog there."

"What!" I gasped.

"No," said Terner, "that's it."

"Another race, you see," said Jorkens.

"Yes," said Terner. "It's an older planet, you know. And somehow in all that time it's got ahead of them."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Ran up to the beast," he answered. "I somehow thought he wouldn't be afraid of a man, from the way he treated them, so I didn't trouble to stalk him, but just ran after him as he was moving off and swinging those two young bodies by their ankles. Then he turned round on me and reached out an arm and I let him have one from the four-fifty. He spun round and dropped the bodies and stumbled away, waving his arms above him and bleating out of his great mouth. He was evidently not accustomed to being hurt. He went bleating away and I went after him and gave him two or three more, and left him dead or dying, I didn't care which.

"At the sound of my shots the whole wood had awoken. Birds soared up piping and whistling, and animals I had not seen began to hoot in the shadows. And amongst the general clamour I thought I detected some sounds that might have come from mouths like that of the beast I had killed. It was clearly time to go.

"I turned back to the cage, and there they were all gazing at the dead creature in silence and curiosity. I went up to them but they continued to gaze at it. None of them spoke to me. I saw then that I had done the wrong

thing. It seemed that one did not kill these beasts. Only the girl I had spoken with about the birds turned to me, and she pointed swiftly up to the sky, towards Earth. The clamour was increasing in the forest. She was right; it was time to go. I said farewell to her. I wonder what my eyes told her. I said farewell more sadly than I have ever said it before. I nearly stayed. If it hadn't been for what I had to tell our own people I would have stayed, and shared out my two dozen cartridges amongst those hideous beasts; but I thought I owed it to Earth to bring home the news. And in the end they never believed me!

"I heaved a rock at that horrible body as I went by, not liking to spare another cartridge, on account of the clamour in the forest. But those poor people in the chicken-run didn't approve. One could see that in a moment. To be eaten by that beast was their fate, and no interference with that seemed right to them.

"I got back to my 'plane as fast as I could. Nothing had found it. It was still safe in the valley. Perhaps I felt a moment of regret when I found my retreat to Earth was not cut off. It would have made things so simple. And yet it would never have done. Well, there was my 'plane, and I jumped in and began to wrap on those bindings, without which it is impossible to keep together in the bleak emptiness between our atmosphere and theirs. Something peered out of the wood at me as it heard me get into the 'plane. It looked to me like some sort of a fox, and I went on with my wrappings. All the noises in the wood seemed coming nearer. Then all of a sudden I thought: what if it was a dog, and not a fox at all! Whose side would a dog be on in Mars? I could hardly imagine a dog on anyone's side but man's. But I had seen such horrible things, that I wondered. What if it belonged to those beasts! As man did, for that matter. It would go and tell them I was here. I hurried with my wrappings. But the brushwood was being trodden quite close. Then I saw branches waving. And a lot of them came pouring out of the forest, hurrying towards their chicken-run. They were not a hundred yards away, and they all saw me. Then the filthy things turned to their left and came towards me. I gave them one shot, and started my engines. One seemed hit, but I couldn't hear its noises on account of the sound of my engines. They seemed puzzled by the shot for a moment, then came towards me, with a queer look on their hideous faces, hands stretched out. I only just cleared them. With their great height they could almost have gripped my 'plane as I went over them. And away I went with all my bindings flapping. Of course I couldn't face Space like that. And I couldn't dress myself and steer at the same time, with such steering as I had to do. One degree out and I should have missed Earth. I hadn't much petrol either. It is petrol that I had

economised on. Obviously. As it was of no use to me except for about one millionth part of my journey at each end. You can't churn up Space. Well, I went about twenty miles, and lit down in the wide plain through which that moon was dragging its fifty-mile groove of mud, for us to look at through telescopes. And I had to fly up and down a good deal before I was sure of a landing in which I wouldn't be bogged; as happened to me later. Well, I lit down and got on with my dressing. And all the while I had the idea that Mars knew a lot more about my presence there than I had hoped for. Birds seemed ill at ease, and there seemed too much scurrying. At any rate I was in the open and could see what was coming. Yet I should have liked to have gone a hundred miles or so further, except for the uneasy feeling it gave me to be left without any reserve of petrol beyond what I knew I should want. So I stayed there and saved up my petrol; and it was lucky I did. Well, I got my bandages on, but I still had my observations to make from the sun in order to find my way home, when I saw some of those foul creatures a long way off. Whether they were coming after me or not I never knew, but they hurried my calculations, and did not encourage me to go gathering Martial rocks and flora, which of course would have made all this vehement disbelief impossible. And the samples from five different trees that I had got in the wood were of course all blown away when I went off in a hurry the first time."

"And you brought back nothing at all?" I asked. For there was the ring of truth in his story and I was hoping it could be proved.

"Nothing except an old match-box broken in a very peculiar way. And, if you can't see what broke it, that will prove nothing to you either. I'll show it you later."

"What broke it?" I asked.

"When we come to it," he said, "you shall tell me. I'll show it you and you shall see for yourself."

Jorkens nodded his head.

"Well, I didn't go gathering flowers or anything else, except for those twigs that I lost. I ought to have, I know. And perhaps I was in too much of a hurry to get away when I saw that second lot in the distance. But I had seen the faces of the beasts, and they were all I was thinking of. I had a large camera and took a few shots at the landscape, which ought to have been conclusive. But I didn't get it home. I'll tell you what happened to that afterwards.

“Well, all that incredulity here was the last thing that I thought of; and the mouths of those loathsome beasts were filling all my imagination. I hurried my calculations and was off, homewards towards the sun. I saw several more of those chicken-runs as I went; but little else besides forest, and plains of mud. I might have seen more if the sun had not been in my eyes. Very soon Mars turned a lovely cobalt blue, and the beauty of it made me even sadder.

“Then began again that long weary day, with sun and ‘plane apparently motionless. Engines shut off, no sound, no movement, no weather; and the weeks dragging by with no sign that time was passing at all. It is an awful place; time seems dead there.

“Again I began to despair, nearly to death; when suddenly I saw ahead of me, like a swan’s feather all alone in Space, the familiar curved shape of a world, a quarter lit by the sun. There is no mistaking a planet. And yet, rejoiced as I was to be nearing home, one thing strangely perplexed me: I seemed to be ten days ahead of my time. What amazing luck, I thought, that part of my calculations must have been wrong, and yet I had not missed Earth.

“I had not seen it as soon as I had seen Mars, on account of its being so near to the line of the Sun. Consequently it was large when I did see it. As it grew larger and larger I tried to work out what continent I was approaching, not that it greatly mattered, as I had petrol enough to make a good landing unless I was very unlucky. Though it couldn’t be where I had expected to land, as I was so much ahead of my time. Well, I couldn’t make out anything, as most of the orb was in darkness. And when I got into that darkness it was a blessed thing, after the glare of the sun in that endless lonely day. For there is no light there really, only glare. In that awful loneliness there is nowhere for light to fall; it just goes by you in a glare. I got into the darkness at last and switched on my engines, and flew till I came to the very first edge of twilight that gave light enough for me to land, for I was tired of staring at the sun. And that was how I came to make a bad landing, with my wheels deep down in a marsh. It was not that that whitened my hair. I felt my scalp go cold, and my hair whitened; but it was not being stuck in a marsh that whitened it. It was the knowledge I had, the very moment I landed, that I was on the wrong planet. I should have seen it before, coming down, although in the dark: the whole thing was much too small. But I saw it now: I was on the wrong planet and didn’t even know which. The awful concentrated loneliness of the accident at first froze my thoughts. And, when I did begin to think, all was bewilderment. What lay

inside of Mars? Only Earth, Venus and Mercury. The size pointed at Mercury. But I was ahead of my time, not behind it. Or was my chronometer all wrong? But the sun had appeared no larger, five minutes ago than it appears from Earth. In fact rather smaller. Perhaps, I thought, it was Venus in spite of this; though it was too small even for Venus. And the asteroids were behind me, outside Mars.

"What I did not know then was how Eros (and perhaps others too), on account of the tilt of the planes of some of the asteroids, comes at certain times within fourteen million miles of us. So that though his path round the sun lies outside Mars, whose nearest is thirty-five million, Eros at certain times is Earth's nearest neighbour. Of this I knew nothing; and yet, when I began to think reasonably, the facts at last spoke for themselves: I was on a strayed or an unknown asteroid. It should be easier to examine such a body when one is actually on it, with its continents all spread round one, than when it appears no more than a small pin's head in a telescope. But the calm, the safety, above all that feeling of Home, which lie about the astronomer, are aids to accurate thought which cannot be estimated.

"I saw that I had blundered when leaving Mars, making some wrong calculation in my hurry, and was very lucky to have got anywhere. Who can say when he thinks of all the things he might have become, who can say as I can that I nearly became a comet?"

"Very true," said Jorkens.

Terner said this with the utmost seriousness. The danger had evidently been near to him.

"When I realised where I must be," continued Terner, "I set to work to pull my 'plane out of the marsh, standing up to my knees in it. It was easier than I thought. And, when I had got it up I lifted it over my head and carried it about nine miles on to good dry land."

"But an aeroplane?" I said. "What does it weigh?"

"Over a ton," said Terner.

"And you carried it?"

"With one hand," he said. "The pull of those asteroids is a weak and puny thing to anyone accustomed to Earth. I felt pretty strong on Mars, but that's nothing to what one could do here, in Eros, or whichever it was.

"I got out at the edge of a forest of minute scrub-oak, the size of the ones that are dwarfed by the Japanese. I looked out for any disgusting beasts such

as those foul things on Mars, but saw nothing of any sort. A few small moths, as I thought them, flew by me out of the trees; though, looking back on it, I think they were birds. Well, then I settled down to work out my new calculations. I was so near Earth now, that I might get it if I could pull away from the asteroid, and if only I was close in my guess (and it could be no more) at the pace that the asteroid was doing. More than a guess I could not make, for I did not even know on what little planet I was, and guesses are bad things for calculations. But you must use them when you've got nothing else. I knew at least where the path of these asteroids lay, so I knew how far they had to go, but the time that they took to do it I could only guess from the time that I knew their neighbours took. Had I been further from Earth these guesses would have ruined my calculations, and I should never have found my way home.

"Well, I sat there undisturbed by anything except my own rapid breathing, and worked out those calculations as near as I could. I had to breathe three or four times as fast as one does on Earth, for there didn't seem as much air as there is here. And of course there wouldn't be in a little place like Eros. What troubled me far more than the breathing was the thought that I had only my engines to pull me clear of the planet, having used the last of my rockets in leaving Mars, and never guessing I should need them again. Imagine a passenger from Southampton to New York being suddenly landed at an island in the Atlantic. He would be far less surprised than I was at landing here, and I was not prepared for it. The pull of Eros, or whatever small world it was, was not much to get away from; but the amount of atmosphere I should have in which to pull away from it was bound to be diminutive also, like the planet round which it was wrapped. I knew I could get up enough speed to pull clear of Eros, if only I had long enough to do it, if only the air went far enough. I knew roughly how far it went, as I had felt it in the wings of my 'plane on the way down. But would it go far enough? That was the thought that was troubling me as I worked at my figures, and breathed as men breathe in high fevers. I wouldn't use my compressed air while I had air of any kind to breathe outside. For the hours that I could live before I reached Earth were numbered by my supply of compressed air. Well, I made my plans, and arranged my aim at the Earth, in leisure, such as I had not had on Mars, while the little planet spun towards the sun, and its day was dawning where I had landed in twilight. Then I had time to look round at the oak-forest, whose billowy tops were rolling away below me. Take a look now at this match-box. Handle it gently. Now what would you say made that hole in it?"

I took from his hand a Bryant and May's match-box, considerably shattered; shattered from the inside; leaving a hole large enough for a mouse to run through.

"It looks as if something had gone through it pretty hard," I said.

"Not through it," he answered. "There's only a hole on one side."

"Well into it," I said.

"Nor into it. Look again," said Terner.

Sure enough it was all burst outwards. But what had done it was more than I could see. And so I told Terner.

Then he took it over to the mantelpiece, where he had two little cottages made of china, and put it between the two, and put a little thatch over the match-box, that he had made to fit it. The little cottages on each side of it were just about the same size.

"Now what do you make of it?" he asked.

I didn't know, and I had told him so, but I had to say something.

"It looks as if an elephant had broken out of a cottage," I said.

Terner looked round at Jorkens who was nodding an approving head, almost benevolent except for a certain slyness.

I didn't understand this vehement exchange of glances.

"What?" I said.

"The very thing," said Terner.

"An elephant?" I said.

"There were herds of them in the oak-forest," said Terner. "I was stooping down to pick a branch of a tree to bring back, when I suddenly saw them in the dawn. They stampeded and I caught one, a magnificent tusker, and none of them bigger than mice. This I knew must be absolute proof. I threw away the branch; after all, they were only small oak-leaves; and I put the elephant into that match-box and put an elastic band round it to keep it shut. The match-box I threw into a haversack that I wore over my bandages.

"Well, I might have collected lots more things; but, as I said, I had absolute proof, and I had hanging over me all the while, and oppressing me with its weight, that feeling that I was on the wrong planet. It is a feeling that no one who experiences it can shake off for a single moment. You

Jorkens, you have travelled a good deal too; you've been in deserts and queer places."

"Yes, the papyrus-marshes," muttered Jorkens.

"But," continued Terner, "not even there, nor far out with the Sahara all round you, can you have had so irresistibly, so unremittingly, that feeling I spoke of. It is no mere home-sickness, it is an always-present overwhelming knowledge that you are in the wrong place, so strong that it amounts to a menacing warning that your very spirit repeats to you with every beat of the pulse. It is a thing I cannot explain to anyone who has not been lost outside Earth, an emotion I can share with no one."

"Very natural," said Jorkens.

"Well, so I got everything ready," Terner went on, "not only for myself but for the little elephant. I had a tin into which I meant to drop him before we left the atmosphere of Eros, and I had found a way of renewing the air in it from my own breathing supply often enough to keep the little beast alive. I had a handful of green stuff, branches of oak-trees, just as one does with a caterpillar. And water and all for him. Then I threw over everything that I could do without, in order to lighten the 'plane for the dash away from Eros. My revolver and cartridges I threw into the marsh, and that is where my camera went too. Then I started off and flew back into night, to the one part of Eros from which I could just see Earth, hanging low above her little neighbour's horizon. It shone in the night of Eros like a small moon, like a cricket ball of pale turquoise set in silver. I aimed exactly, with all the allowances that I had calculated, and shot homewards flying low where the air of Eros was densest. At that low level I merely got my speed. Then came the crucial moment when I tilted upward to my aim. Would the air be heavy enough for my wings to work on? It was: I was heading in exactly the right direction, just as I got clear of night and Earth paled away. Now would the speed I had last? I couldn't make much more in that thin air. I wondered if someone from Earth would ever find my bones, if Eros pulled me back, and my 'plane beside them. But I did not forget my elephant, and reached for the match-box to drop it into the tin; when I found what I've shown you."

"Gone?" I said.

"Charged out, as an elephant would," said Terner. "He must have gone before I left Eros. You see for yourself, now that you get the proper proportions, that that match-box would be to him no more than a hut of laths to one of our own elephants. And he had magnificent tusks. You wouldn't try to shut up an elephant here in a hut of the very thinnest boards. But I

never thought of that. You saw it at once. But then I had put those cottages just beside it so as to give you the right scale. Well, I didn't grudge him his liberty at the time. I had no idea of the bitter incredulity that I should have to face. I was thinking more of the tug-of-war on which my life depended, the speed of my 'plane against the pull of Eros.

"And all of a sudden we did it. There was a slight rocking of all my kegs and tins as Eros let go. Then the long day started once more. I spent it mostly thinking over all the things that I was to tell our learned societies about Mars, and that asteroid which I believe to have been Eros. But they were too busy with their learning to look at a new truth. Their ears were turned to the past: they were deaf to the present. Well, well." And he smoked in silence.

"Your aim was all right," said Jorkens.

"Good enough," said Terner. "Of course the pull of the Earth helped me. I suddenly saw it shining in the day, and I didn't seem much out. Oh, what a feeling it is to be coming home. Earth pale at first, then slowly turning to silver; and growing larger and larger. Then it takes a faint touch of gold, an enormous pale-gold crescent in the sky; to the mere eye a sight of the utmost beauty, but saying something more to the whole being, which the understanding fails to grip. Perhaps one does take it in after all, but if one does one can never pass it on, never tell a soul of all that golden beauty. Words cannot do it. Music might, but I can't play. I'd like to make a tune, you know, about Earth calling one home with all that changing light; only it would be so damned unpopular, because it is nothing like what they experience every day.

"Well, I hit it. With the help of that great pull that Earth flings out so far, I got home again. The Atlantic was the only thing I was afraid of, and I missed that by a good deal. I came down in the Sahara, which might have been little better than the Atlantic. But I got out and walked about, and hadn't been looking round for five minutes when I came on a copper coin the size of a sixpence, and on it the head of Constantine. I had recognised the Sahara at once, but I knew then that I was in the north of it, where the old Roman Empire had been, and knew I had petrol enough to get to the towns. I started off again northwards, and flew till I saw some Arabs with a flock of sheep or goats: you can't tell which till you are quite close. I landed near them and said I had come from England. I had no vulgar wish to astonish, as the bare truth would have done, so I said I had flown from England. And I saw that they did not believe me. I had a foretaste then of the world's incredulity.

“Well, I got home, and I told my tale. The press weren’t hostile at first. They interviewed me. But they wanted cheery interviews. They wanted a photograph of me waving my handkerchief up towards Mars, to friends I had left there. But how could I be cheery after seeing what I had seen? My blood grows colder even now when I think of it. And I think of it always. How could I wave my handkerchief towards those poor people, when I knew that one by one they were being eaten by a beast more foul than our imaginations can picture? I would not even smile when they photographed me. I insisted on deleting little jokes from the interviews. I became irritated. Morose, they said. Well, I was. And after that they turned against me. Bitterest of all, Amely would not believe me. When I think what we were to each other! She might have.”

“In common politeness,” said Jorkens.

“Oh she was polite enough,” said Terner. “I asked her straight out if she believed me; and she said ‘I believe you absolutely.’ ”

“Well, there you are,” said Jorkens cheerfully. “Of course she believes you.”

“No, no,” said Terner, smoking harder than ever. “No, she didn’t. When I told her about that lovely girl in Mars, she never asked me a single question. That wasn’t like Amely. Never a word about her.”

For a long time then he went up and down that room, smoking with rapid puffs. For so long he was silent and quite unobservant of us that Jorkens caught my eye, and we left him alone and walked away from the house.

Chapter 6

A LARGE DIAMOND

THERE were several of us sitting before the fire at our club, in the room in which we all gather after lunch; some of us on the sofa in front of it, others scattered about in chairs. It was a grey dull winter evening. Evening is the word for it, not afternoon. It seemed to have begun about eleven a.m.; and now at a quarter to three night was obviously falling. Often on such occasions I've heard such talk there that you would not notice that a cheerless day was dully dying in fog, nor for that matter would you have cared if the smiles of summer were luring all others out into golden air. I've heard talk there as brilliant, and sound as well, as anyone could desire. And the variety of it! And yet this evening, with the fog in our throats, and I suppose deep down in our spirits, this is the kind of conversation we were having, as far as I can remember:

"By gad, that's a big one."

"Big what?"

"Big diamond."

"Oh, I thought you meant a fish."

"No, a diamond."

"But you can't tell from a picture like that."

"Yes, I can."

"How can you?"

"It's life size."

"How do you know?"

"Why; it says so."

"But do you suppose the editor knows?"

"Of course he does."

"How?"

“Why, a stone like that is known all over the world: he has only got to ask.”

“Still, I don’t see how a flat picture can give one any idea of the size of a solid diamond.”

“Don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, any way it’s a big one.”

“Oh yes, it’s big.”

“Well, that’s all I said.”

One thing, and one thing alone, relieved for me the tedium of this discussion, and that was that Jorkens, who was in the club that day, was solemnly shaking his head. He began at the first mention of a big diamond, quietly continuing through the whole discussion. I hardly noticed him at first, and perhaps should never have done so at all had he not shaken his head with increasing vigour whenever anyone called the diamond big. But for this the monotony of his disagreement might have escaped my attention. I listened then to hear what Jorkens would say, and not a word came from him, but the confidence with which he sat shaking his head made me feel—you could not doubt it—that he really knew something about diamonds that was pretty well hidden from most of us. It wasn’t like him to sit silent so long; and it was I that eventually broke his silence when my curiosity could bear it no longer. In any case it was time these two dull fellows stopped discussing their diagram in an illustrated paper. I glanced at the paper and said directly to Jorkens: “It’s a pretty big one, isn’t it?”

“Not really,” said Jorkens quietly.

“Why,” I said, “have you ever seen a bigger one?”

“Yes,” said Jorkens.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“Well, people who think a stone like that is specially big,” said Jorkens, “will hardly believe in my stone.”

It was, if I remember right, a diagram of the Koh-i-noor.

“I’ll believe anything,” I said.

And one or two other fellows, bored I suppose by the fog, leaned forward and said “So will we.”

Something in that seemed to cheer Jorkens and encourage him a good deal, and without any more ado he started his tale at once.

"It was a long time ago," he said. "Many years ago a meteorite had fallen in the far North of Russia, up in the Esquimaux land, a colossal thing; and it took a year or so for the news to reach civilised Europe. When it did, it came only as rumour. But what struck me at once, as soon as I heard the rumour, was that the thing must have been as big as a mountain. For one can sift truth out of a rumour as well as out of anything else, if you go the right way about it. It appeared first as a fable of the Esquimaux. A god, they said, had arrived in a flaming car and driven away southwards, and the sky was red all night and all the snow was melted for forty miles.

"It was not a matter of trusting the Esquimaux; I wouldn't trust them a yard; but simple people invent tales usually for simple reasons, and where was the reason here? Their report passed unnoticed; but to me it seemed that the only reason for its existence was that something like that, something that looked like that, must actually have happened; in fact a meteorite, and one vastly larger than any that had hit the world before. In the end I went to look for it.

"I had no difficulty in finding it, either: the Esquimaux had given geographical details. What was difficult was to find out what on earth had happened. I found a mountain of meteoric iron before I had gone a day and a half from the coast, and it seemed to be what I was looking for. It was not on the map, but then very little in those parts was; so that proved nothing. It was of the right material, and within forty or fifty miles of the right place; and yet, without shutting one's eyes to a very obvious fact, one could not be satisfied that one had discovered what I was looking for. My expedition was purely scientific, and in science you can't shut your eyes to facts that don't quite fit. I used to be very keen on science in those days. I made many scientific journeys. I may have told you of some of them."

I didn't want Jorkens to wander, because, if he did that, you never got him back.

"What was wrong with your mountain?" I asked.

"Simply," said Jorkens, "that a colossal thing like that, as big as one of the Alps, could not have hit the earth at the enormous pace those things travel at, plus the pace of our own earth, without having gone right in and utterly buried itself. But here it was sticking up in the air as high as the St. Gothard. Well, I questioned the Esquimaux then. I had three or four with me, running my reindeer sleigh, and you must remember that nothing had come

to our end of Europe about this meteorite except Esquimaux's rumours, so that these rumours were the only scientific data that I had on which to work. Well, they stuck to their story that the god in his car had arrived much further North and had driven away in this direction. And the conflagration had been where he had arrived, not here. That puzzled me for a long time. It seemed simple enough. It seemed so like burning forests. And yet there weren't forests there in the North: it was just snow and ice, except for one month in the year, when the snow melted and enough sparse vegetation appeared to feed a few reindeer. I knew very few dozen words of the Esquimaux language, and I questioned them largely by signs; but there was no doubt about that conflagration.

"And all of a sudden I got it, an exposed stratum of coal. The meteorite must have hit it and set it flaming.

"There was no sign of any coal round the mountain that I had seen, so it must have struck our earth a glancing blow and ricochetted on. That was what I eventually decided on, and it turned out to be right. You see the meteorite had not merely dropped; the gravitation of Earth had not been its only influence; if so it would have come straight; but it had its own orbit and a movement of its own; this combined with the pull of the earth had made its slanting course, and it had hit us obliquely and ricochetted.

"When I had worked out this it was easy enough to follow up the course of the meteorite to where it had first struck earth. Theory is the difficult thing: anyone can do practice. Well, the mountain had hit the earth in several places, leaving shallow hollows like the beds of old lakes, about a mile apart. But after a while the distances grew greater and the hollows much deeper, more and more of them being partly filled with water. I had had to leave the reindeer behind at the mountain, because the snow was rapidly melting. I had chosen the one month in the year when the snow is gone, so that I could see the ground."

"By the way," said someone. "Are there diamonds in Russia?"

"Are there diamonds in Russia," repeated Jorkens with a sort of sad fervour.

"Well, you were telling us about a diamond, weren't you?" he said.

"You shall hear," said Jorkens. "You shall hear." And then he added "You know what a diamond is, I suppose."

"Well, of course we do," said one or two of us, with the rather irritable confident air that so often goes with ignorance. But one man knew.

“Crystallised carbon,” he said.

And then Jorkens went on with his tale. “The snow had all melted; I’d timed my journey just right for that; and we went on with three donkeys that I bought at a kind of village, if you can give such a name to a cluster of huts that comes one year and goes the next. I had three Esquimaux, one for each donkey. Our kit was on the donkeys and we walked.

“We came to a huge depression in the earth, into which water had come, and frozen. A huge lake without reeds, not yet discovered by wild fowl. A most lonely waste; cold, empty and glittering dully, the ice turning to slush. And then no more of these hollows for twenty-five miles. It was in fact the last of the bounces the mountain had made. Or the first, rather; for I was travelling in the opposite direction. We camped about ten miles North of that vast lake, glad to see the last of its chilly miles of dull loneliness. Next day we packed up our crude little tents and did fifteen miles more. And that brought us to the place where the meteor had first hit our earth, striking a glancing blow. Right on the top of the earth it had fallen, partly pulled by our gravitation, and partly flying on some course of its own, which our arrival must have disturbed. Then, as I have said, it ricochetted away.

“There was no mistaking the place where it had struck: first of all, because I had been right about the coal, and we walked over about a mile of cinders, a fine outcrop of coal burned right down to the bottom of the stratum as far as I could tell. And then we came to a wide flat dreary waste, going perfectly level to the horizon; and cold, it was horribly cold. And the snow still covered it though it was gone everywhere else. I intended to camp that night on it so as to take a few miles off the long journey, next day, to the other side. But the Esquimaux would not come. I asked them why not. Bad ice, they said. I stamped through the snow and it seemed hard as steel. But they repeated ‘Bad ice.’ ‘What’s wrong?’ I asked so far as I could manage their language. ‘Too cold,’ they said. ‘Very bad ice.’

“ ‘You don’t like ice being cold?’ I tried to ask. But you can’t be ironical with natives, in their language, helped out by signs.

“ ‘No,’ they said. ‘Very cold.’

“So in the end I took the donkey that had my own tent, and went on alone through the snow. Being unable to tether the donkey he went off that night after the rest, but I managed to get my tent up, and tried to get some sleep, cold though it was. The silence was measureless, not a sound from the cracking of ice, not a rumble from water. There are hundreds of sounds that come grumbling up through ice; but there there was not a murmur, not a

whisper, and no sounds of animal life but my donkey breathing. And later on, when he went away, I thought I heard him slithering on the hardness for five miles, till he reached the shore, for there was no other sound whatever in all that waste. That silence in the cold kept me awake for a long time. So that when a sort of morning came and I put on my skates, I knew already, as well as the Esquimaux, that there was something odd about it. I put on my skates because the layer of snow had all melted. It had puzzled me to see it there at all; but I have seen the same on a hard tennis-court when it has gone from everything else. I had trudged overnight in my boots, my snow-shoes having gone back with the reindeer; but now I put on a pair of skates, and calculated on getting to the other side in a few hours. Yet I saw that there was something odd about it. The queer glitter of the thing was odd if nothing else. Well, I soon found out what was the matter with that ice. It was harder than steel. That was one thing that was the matter with it. My skates wouldn't grip at all, and I sprawled and fell till I was bruised all over. What could that meteorite have done to ice, I thought? And all of a sudden the right idea struck me. If it was harder than steel it wasn't ice. The idea came to me while I was on my hands and knees, looking down into depths of light. I pulled out my pocketknife and tried to scratch it. Not a mark would it make. There aren't many things on earth that steel won't scratch, and this was one of them. I had a ring in those days, a stone set in gold, that as a matter of fact was rock crystal. Not the one I am wearing now of course; that is perfectly genuine. People used to think it was a diamond, though I didn't buy it with that intention. I don't remember why I bought it: liked the look of it, I suppose: took my fancy. Anyhow, I had this bit of a crystal in a ring, and I tried it now on the cold glittering substance; and not a scratch would it make either. It would have scratched it if it had been rock crystal too. This left very few things it could be. Well, I sat down on the wet stone and took off my skates. Then I stood up and shaded my eyes from that frightful glare, and tried to think. It was no use going back to the idea that that wide plain was of ice. An unscientific mind might have wasted time considering such things; but the touch of the steel had proved that that was impossible. I had therefore to think forward to new theories. Well, it was easy enough. The first thing you do when you see a stone—I mean, if you are a scientist—is to consider what stratum you're on. The moment I thought of it it was clear enough. I was on coal; I had seen the burnt cinders all along the edges. You know what coal is."

"Carbon, by Gad," said the man who had spoken last.

"But you don't mean . . ." someone else was beginning; when Jorkens quietly said to him: "Well, you know what crystallises carbon, or anything

else."

"Pressure, isn't it?" said the other.

"Pressure beyond anything we can imagine, and heat beyond any fire we have ever lit," said Jorkens. "Well, not quite beyond, because a diamond has been made in a laboratory. Only it was so small, and the requisite pressure was so expensive, that I don't think anyone ever tried it again. But imagine a white-hot mountain travelling at, say, a thousand miles a minute: add the pace of our earth, doing about the same, and a bit more for the force of gravity; and pitch the whole thing full into a field of carbon. Why, the result is so obvious that I might have guessed it, without the trouble of going to look. But now that I had gone to look I decided to go right across it and see the other side. And a weary journey it was. The awful hardness, the cold and that deadly glitter, wearied feet and head and heart. Chiefly I was looking for a flaw, in order to insert a knifeblade, or the edge of my skate, and bring a good slab back. And—would you believe it—there was not a flaw in the whole of it.

"A headache I got from the glare grew worse all the time; and there was no nightfall to help me at the end of June in those latitudes. I plodded wearily on, and the sight of any considerable display of diamonds has wearied me ever since. That is the true reason why I don't go to Lady Clashion's evening parties any more, and you can tell whom you please. Well, I went on and on; and at last, late in what would have been evening in any civilised country, I got to the other side. There was nothing much to see, just burnt cinders again; dusty to walk on of course, but I came the whole way back over the ashes rather than cross that diamond again. I was wearing furs, so I was able to sleep on the way. I couldn't have done it in one journey, even if I'd started fresh. It was a long way round the shore of that diamond, over the ashes.

"I found my Esquimaux again, but nothing would take them near the diamond. Devils had come there, I gathered from them, after the god had gone, and had enchanted the place with coldness and glare. Whether they had pursued him to Earth, or had merely come to the place that he had vacated, I did not know enough of their language to gather. In any case there are many ways of accounting for anything, and the scientific and the religious are two of them. I was going one way, while the Esquimaux went the other.

"I might with some difficulty, and certainly with much publicity, have got a quantity of dynamite at the coast, and gone back and got enough

splinters to have stocked the Rue de la Paix. You know Paris? Yes, yes; of course. But I had bigger ideas than that. I wanted to beautify homes. I wanted to form a company that would bring chandeliers of surpassing beauty within reach of the moderately rich. I had planned gorgeous vases. And I had thought a good deal along the lines of sheer utility.

"And in the end what happened? The very day that I got to London, the very day, I saw placards in the streets saying 'Big Earthquake In ——' Just saw those words, the top three lines. I rushed up to a newspaper man. 'Don't tell me,' I said. 'Don't tell me. It's in Russia.' And, sure enough, I was right, though they called it something ending in 'ansk'.

"I knew it was there. You see, I knew what a blow the earth had received. I knew that the strata must have been shattered for miles down, under that frightful blow. I had been thinking of nothing else. You know how, if a friend hurts an ankle badly, or has a groggy knee, and all of a sudden you see his name in the papers, or it might be a her; you know at once what's happened; the ankle or knee has given out, and they have fallen and hurt themselves. It was just the same with our poor old earth: I knew what a blow she had had, and the moment I saw the word Earthquake I knew where it was. And I was perfectly right. They had merely worked it out from the seismograph, but I could have told them the very spot.

"Of course I went back at once to see what had happened. No use forming a company to place a thing like that on the market, until you're sure that it's all right. I went back by the next boat. And I found worse than I'd feared. It had been the hell of an earthquake. And no wonder, considering the frightful blow that the strata there had received. The wonder is that they had held up so long. Worse than I'd feared, it was certainly; a long way worse. The diamond had tilted sideways. It must have been that: it could never have gone clean out of sight, as it had, if only it had stayed level. But that would have been too much to expect, with all the strata like broken arches after some unimaginable railway accident. When they went they must have just dropped in heaps, into subterranean caverns of which we know nothing. Anyhow the diamond was gone. Not even the cinders were there, that had been like a shore all round it. It was gone with every trace, and the earth had closed again over it. It almost looked as if the right thing had happened, in a kind of way, after all. We're probably better, in the end, without that diamond. But I'm not a philosopher. Not that I didn't do my best to bear my loss as I suppose one ought to. And I think I do, pretty well; considering the size of it. Only, you can understand, when I hear anyone talk of big diamonds, that it upsets me a bit. I can't help it."

“Couldn’t you have dug for it?” The question came out of the silence that had fallen when Jorkens ceased; it came out of the gloom of one of the leather chairs, now dim with that wintry evening but for the glow from the fire.

“Couldn’t we have dug for it!” exclaimed Jorkens. “Couldn’t we have dug for it! *Of course* we could. A couple of thousand men might have done for a start. But I thought we’d better do the thing properly. Fifty thousand would have been about the right number, and we could have easily got them in Russia. Labour is cheap there; ten shillings a week would have done for them. That would have been £25,000 a week. We are sure to have got results in about ten weeks. That would have been two hundred and fifty thousand in wages. Say the same again for feeding them, and about the same for transport. Then of course there’d have been the housing; quite primitive huts would have done. We could have done the whole thing for a million to start with. And what is a million in the City of London? But do you think I could get it? Money in plenty, and imagination simply not there. I tried talk, I tried everything, and as many drinks as they wanted; but not one would put up that million. Good Lord, when I think of the profits, the hundreds of thousand per cent profit on that one miserable million; and not a single one of them would touch it. It was enough to make me tell them what I thought of them. I did tell one of them; and then I gave it up.

“Waiter,” he called, “bring me a very small whiskey, with just a dash of soda in it.”

There are no very small whiskies in our club. There are small whiskies of course; but all the waiters know that they must never bring a small one to Jorkens.

Chapter 7

A QUEER ISLAND

It was the same fog that we'd had for a week. Trees when seen were spectral, full of vague omens. Houses were outlines of windows appearing out of one dimness. But one turned away from these things to the warmth and light of a room. We were before the fire again at the Billiards Club, a slightly narrower circle. Not that we were fewer than when Jorkens had told his story about the large diamond three or four days ago; but it was colder and we moved in nearer the fire. Jorkens was there again, and silent; a little, what shall I say? Well, one must rest a bit after lunch to digest one's food: he was merely resting. And another member had taken the opportunity to tell a tale of his own. It had been a long, long story, obviously an attempt to emulate Jorkens, and at last it drew to its close. "And at those words," the teller of it was saying, "my blood ran cold." This kind of climax coming on top of the dull tale was somehow more than we could stand without some sort of protest.

"Can words ever make one's blood run cold?" asked one.

"Why not?" said the story-teller.

"But not the mere words; not cold," said the other.

"Yes they can," said Jorkens.

I had thought that he was asleep.

We all turned to Jorkens then. But the critic stuck to his point. "Well, what were the actual words?" he asked Jorkens. "Can you remember them?"

"Yes, well enough," said Jorkens.

"Well, what were they?"

"The actual words," said Jorkens, "were: 'Now, Arthur Tibbuts, don't think that just because you are English you can pick a quarrel with whom you please.' "

"Doesn't sound very . . ."

"No," said Jorkens, "but they made my blood go cold, all like slush in a thaw; and the goose flesh came out, and that made all the little hairs on my

hands go up on end. You're wrong about words not being able to do that, because they did it, and on a warm day too, away at the far end of the Mediterranean."

Terbut, who doesn't usually listen to Jorkens' tales with much patience, was the first to ask for the story. Probably he thought that Jorkens was bluffing, and may have anticipated that a challenge to prove his words might quieten Jorkens for some days. Anyhow Jorkens began. And just about then I remember the fog came down in earnest; the white lines of the window sills opposite disappeared, and only the yellow lights of those that were not curtained shone from across the way; all else was a bank of darkness going dimly into dark sky, which hung on the roofs so heavily that you could scarce tell them apart.

"Yes," said Jorkens, "it was in the Mediterranean. Some while ago now. A little rocky island over at the far end. I'd gone there with a young fellow, Sir Richard Isden; still alive, only grown respectable. Oh, damned respectable. One of the brightest young fellows I ever knew. One of the very brightest."

"What? Isden?" said one of us.

"Isden?" said Jorkens. "No, no, no. Sits on committees. The blood of his aunts came out in him.

"I don't mean him. I mean the young Dick Isden I knew when he was twenty. A very different thing. Time makes queer changes."

"Really," said someone meditatively, thinking of the Sir Richard Isden he knew.

"Queer changes," said Jorkens. "Well, Dick Isden began as he ended. But he wasn't like that always. I knew him first, meeting him quite by chance while he was out for a short walk. He lived with two aunts in the little village of Bothnor, in a small house called 'The Lilacs,' right on the village green. They had caught him quite young, for his father died when he was five, and he had never known his mother. There was no one else to dispute their claim, so it seemed that there was no escape for him. They never sent him to school, they wanted him where they could always watch over his health. And every morning the two old ladies would open the Bible together, at any page, just by chance, to see what should be done with Dick. They always found something that they could twist, and that decided Dick's amusements for the day. Well, perhaps amusements isn't the right word; but, whatever it is, that's how they decided it. And some episode that had

occurred between him and their under-housemaid (nipped in the bud, I expect) had given them a horrible hold on him. Well, this had been going on for years when I got into conversation with him on that short walk that they had allowed him for the good of his health, and because it coincided with a walk that Julius Cæsar had taken, which they had just been reading about. Not in the Bible, isn't he? Well, someone who was.

"He interested me as soon as I saw him coming along; there was a sort of look in his eye that you might see in the face of an eagle that had got shut up in a very small pretty cage and was being fed on bird-seed, if you quite follow me, and we got into conversation. It seemed that he didn't mind their Bible so much, what he couldn't stand was when it came to their hymns, and it very often did.

"He very soon told me all about his life, if you can call it a life; and his aunts. Was that really the right way to live, he asked me? He knew that his aunts did everything for the best, but was I sure they were always perfectly right? He had sometimes wondered, you see.

"Well, I felt like a swimmer who had chanced to swim right on to a drowning man. Why not save him? So I said he must judge for himself; but, so as to be quite fair to the aunts, he should see a bit of the world first. Do you know, from the way he looked, I really don't think he knew that there was a world. How should he do that, he asked? I suggested Paris. He became thoughtful at that, and in the end said No. 'They'd have spies there,' he said.

" 'Spies?' said I.

" 'Not exactly,' he said, 'but there'd sure to be one person there that they'd know. And they'd hear from that person at once. They've an awful knack of getting information.'

"And I saw that he might be right. Quite a bright young fellow. And then I thought of some islands that I knew, knocking about the world as I have done, so far away from that kind of aunt and all their ways, that not a single bony finger, far as they reach, could ever close on his wrist there; where no whisper of minatory advice could blow; not a threat, not a warning. I thought of the journey through France, when winter is with us still, and you come in the morning to the almond and peach blushing into bloom in the South. And then the Mediterranean. Oh, that sea. Waiter, another whiskey. And these islands at the far end of it, all bathed in summer for ever.

“It was autumn when I met Dick, and went and called on his aunts. You may think me not quite the kind of caller those aunts would expect. My dear fellow, I was ideal. Young Dick hadn’t unburdened his heart to me for twenty minutes when I knew their patter exactly. I was a good example, a steadying influence, a light where there was darkness. Yes, all that, I assure you; every word of it. But it was autumn in that house, autumn for ever. The aunts’ hair, their jet brooches, their thoughts, their phrases; the antimacassars on the chairs, the fading photographs; all the ornaments in the room; they were all autumnal things, all waning weakening forces.

“I hung about the place for a few days, dropping in to tea and talking like a steadying influence, and a light where there was darkness; and if I’d done it a few days longer they would have given Dick over to me with their own hands. But I couldn’t. That autumnal air that brooded over ‘The Lilacs’ made me too sad. I couldn’t stand any more of it. There was a beauty in their old ways and their old outlook. But it was all too sad. And there was Dick like a crocus, being covered up with dead leaves.

“So one day I stole Dick. It was better that way. No breach of trust. Though the metaphors they used about me! I assure you you might search through all the minor prophets and never find anything to equal them. It’s no use arguing about it, because I had them all down in writing, in letters they sent to Dick. Magnificent beyond words. They were just born prophets. Wrong time and wrong country of course; but if one of them had gone up and prophesied against a city somewhere in say Assyria, a few thousand years ago, well, that city would simply have wilted. I’m pretty tough, and it takes more than that to ruffle me. And if you’d asked me in those days, if any words could affect me at all, I’d have said, as you did, just now, that the idea was all nonsense. Then, that was a week or so before I heard the woman on the island say those words that I told you. Well, I’ll get on with the story.

“It was autumn, as I said; Kent all golden with it. I’d told Dick about that island, sleeping with summer, out of the way of those aunts. He’d plenty of money; I bought all the tickets; and we slipped away from ‘The Lilacs’ one day immediately after breakfast; and the same morning we were leaving London for Folkestone. Next morning when we woke Provence was smiling around us, mellowed by a milder autumn than ever comes North of France. White rocks, black cypresses, and all the gold of autumn raced past us through the morning; and so we reached Marseilles. And a lot I could have shown him in Marseilles, but he was too shaken by all those years with his aunts, to have let himself go even there: I could see it by the uneasy way he glanced sideways, without turning his head, at anyone who looked like

coming from England. So we just dined at a place I knew of and went on board our boat, and she pushed out of Marseilles harbour from under the protection of Notre Dame de la Garde the next morning somewhere about seven. High up in some mountains along the coast winter was lurking in uplifted valleys; southwards the Mediterranean promised us summer again.

"Dick wouldn't say a word to the other passengers. The shadows of those two aunts were over him still. I knew they'd lift, but not yet.

"That night we passed through the straits of Bonifaccio, with their long line of lighthouses. 'What's that street?' said Dick. Lord, but the world was new to him.

"A large lake only ruffled by our screw seemed to lie round us next morning, too serene for any sea. Oh, the beauty of it! And to think that it's shining there now!

"I went to the fo'c'sle head and looked down into that blue sea, like a sapphire before us; but, level with us on our port side, too dark for a sapphire, where the ghost of the shadow of our ship lay faint on the water. At our prow a white fountain danced over the sea before us; and with us went the only wave in that part of the Mediterranean, a black wave bursting into light blue as it fell, then leaping up in white foam. The sky one dome of blue, but for the frown of Stromboli.

"That night we passed through the golden straits of Messina, all twinkling and flashing. And the night after, a little before morning, we got to Crete and anchored. That was, I think, a Saturday; and as a ship for the islands only left on Fridays, we hung about a bit in Crete. There was quite a pretty girl there; several in fact, but Dick soon spotted the prettiest; and I saw him looking at her in a thoughtful way. You see, he was still puzzled what to do about anything, without the aunts to look up a text for him. We might have stayed quite a while in Crete, but I was bent on saving this poor lost soul as completely as it could be saved, and I had set my heart on taking him to this island I knew of, where the spring flowers come up in sheets in January, and the girls are lovelier than the flowers. So we went on on the Friday, and that brought us into December. The absurd little steamer took us nearly a week to get there, stopping at various islands. I remember she was called the 'Queen Regent of Palermo.'

"Why? I don't know. Never was such a person so far as I've heard. As well ask me why we call a ship the 'Empress of Ireland.' It's the sort of name some ships get.

“The islands were pinky yellow, when first we saw them, under pinky yellow clouds; far far off, so that you could not always tell which was a cloud and which was an island, except for the pale blue shadows the island had. It made them strangely mysterious to see them so like the clouds. It made one feel that they might float away. It made one understand how they got all mixed up with legend. The Cyclades and all that. But at evening the clouds seemed to come down closer upon them, and to turn black with the islands. This fellowship of the fantastic shapes of the air with the queer wild rocks below them, really gave me quite an uncanny kind of feeling, and it was this as much as anything that prepared my mind to associate this rugged rocky company with the legends that had haunted them through the ages. That point of view may seem silly, sitting here in the fog; but when one actually saw a ship, with her sails all black with nightfall, slip out of sight into one of those tiny harbours, one forgot for the moment that Odysseus was dead and three thousand years had slipped by over his bones.

“Well, night came down on the islands, and some seemed asleep, and some like boxes of jewels, open and all heaped up, handfuls and handfuls of rather yellowy diamonds, and here and there a ruby; and trees stood up invisible in the night, but revealed by a trembling of shadows over the lights, as though a ghost were passing. And in the morning we came to the one I was looking for, a little thing you would never have seen on the map; it was called Inos. Girls from a little white village were standing along the wharf to see our ship come in; slender tall figures very straight and supple, brownish complexion and bright fluttering clothes. I turned to Dick and just said: ‘There are no aunts here.’

“Dick was no fool. He was only cowed. A fool would have argued that there must be aunts everywhere. But he understood, and his eye brightened, like the sea when a shadow passes: at last the memory of the aunts was lifting.

“Well, we played about there for some weeks, staying at a little kind of an inn. Oh, dear me, I suppose we’ve all been young, but often in this fog I forget it, forget it altogether and really don’t believe that I was ever young at all. I can’t remember, I can’t remember at all. It doesn’t seem possible that all that sunlight shone, and all that laughter was rippling along little hills in the evening. And I wouldn’t tell you anything that I was not sure was true. It’s no use; I forget it all. Well, it’s very good of you. One doesn’t really need it. But it’s very good of you. And this fog. Thanks, I will. Well, here’s luck. What was I saying? Ah, yes, those golden girls; and Spring beginning in January. Well, as I was saying, we played about awhile. And young Dick

was really wonderful. The very, very brightest lad you could reasonably expect to meet. Of course there were little difficulties now and then, but I'm not going to talk of those: I was older than he; knew more of the world; and I smoothed them over. About that time the first letters arrived. Never mind them either. They described Hell very graphically. As I said before, those letters were perfectly magnificent. A natural prophetic style. But, good Lord, I'd *saved* him from Hell, as *I* saw it. No, what I was going to say was that about that time Dick came to my room one morning with a thoughtful look in his eye, and said that there was a woman who was perfectly wonderful, that he had come across in the village while she was shopping. There was a rocky hill in the centre of the island, and a large white house half-way up, with large courts open to the air, their roofs resting upon white pillars: she lived there. She'd asked Dick and me to stay, and Dick was thinking about going. Well, why not? That was all I had to say. And we went.

"Now this woman; it's no use my trying to describe her. You won't see her for any words of mine. She was dark, she was rather tall, she was rather slender: that's all I can say. You see she had a most astounding beauty, and that isn't a thing there is a receipt for. It can't be acquired by having certain features, and it can't be described in words. She wasn't so very dark either, there was a clear touch of auburn in her hair, and her skin was no darker than the southern sun would make anybody's. Her eyes were dark, but that's saying nothing. There was an enormous power in them, and a flash of them seemed able almost to petrify a man. I've felt it on myself, and I never quite knew what was going to happen; there have been times when I felt that in another moment . . . but that comes later in my story; as yet she had not even looked at me. But that power was always there, and not over men only; I've seen her frighten a leopard by gazing at him; she kept leopards. And she spoke perfect English. The beauty of her face and the terrible power of that steady quiet gaze of hers are things I shall remember still when I remember nothing else. And that's what Dick in the very newness of his heart came on one day when she was shopping. Her dog had attacked her and Dick had driven it off. That was their introduction. I remember picturing her as a poor weak little thing if she couldn't control her own dog. Good Lord, she had hideous power. Her dog attacking her was of course just a put-up job, to attract Dick. That dog had to do what it was told when those eyes flashed at it. I soon learned that.

"But Dick would never see it. It was just one of those things that his aunts had never taught him. Not that they didn't know. You see women have got a sort of Trades Union, that we know nothing of. They meet every seven years or so, though I don't know where, and tell those present all the tricks

that are known, and communicate them to the rest by some means we know nothing about. It must be so, when you come to think of it, or how could quite young girls know as much as they do? Well, perhaps I'm wrong. I certainly wasn't able to convince Dick.

"I soon saw how it was with Dick: it was a grand passion. If you can quite describe as a grand passion anything that only lasts a few weeks. Anyhow, it was while it lasted. There she was showing him about her lovely southern garden, with the early flowers flaring against the rocks and her two tame leopards slinking up and down, and Dick going everywhere after her just like a pet lamb.

"I didn't interfere. She and her leopards were a lot better for him, to my way of thinking, than those aunts and their canaries.

"And so the early Spring wore away with her and Dick, as the early Spring wears away with everybody. Dear me, it was dull for me sometimes, looking on, and remembering my own early Spring, which wasn't coming again, even then: it's just all damned fog now. Well, look at it.

"I wasn't jealous of Dick, only regretful; and I'd no cause to be that. It was a lovely house, a beautiful time of year, a perfectly enchanted country. The only thing I didn't care about in all her wonderful hospitality was the way she had of keeping pigs in the house. I didn't mind the dogs, but pigs and leopards were too much. You never knew what you were going to run up against in any room, from goats to, well, anything. Of course it would have been absolutely intolerable but for her wonderful command of them all. As it was, one just stood it.

"Of course I counted for nothing there. She was looking dreamily at Dick all the time. Right past me if I happened to be nearer. I doubt if she could see me at all. And Dick was a good fellow, but he had forgotten me. And that's how it was far on into February.

"And then one day he seems to have begun asking questions. Where did she come from? How did she learn English? Who were her parents? What was her name? For she only gave us a Christian name, if you can call it such a thing; and even that she varied. Sometimes as often as two or three times a week, according to what flower might be coming up in her garden. And of course the answers he got were of no use at all. Sometimes she said she came from the air, sometimes from the sea. She said she was blown by the wind from some snow on the mountains of Crete. She said she was thistledown, massed rose-petals; anything that came into her head. You

know, that kind of answer can be very annoying to a young man that really wants to know.

"So one day at the end of February, on a morning bright as a dewdrop under a hyacinth sky, when such a thought should have been inconceivable, he asked some question about which day ships left the island. As a matter of fact it was on alternate Thursdays. But she never said so: she just stood and gazed at him. However, he stuck to his point; he couldn't stay there for ever; he had a business paper to sign when he came of age, and a horse to buy, and one thing and another; and which day did ships leave the island? Do you know, she never said a word to him. I was the man that got the whole brunt of it. And she hadn't been able to notice me for nearly a month. I got the brunt of it suddenly, all in one moment, when she said those terrible words, that I don't repeat willingly even to-day and after all those years, because there seems to be still an echo about them of the icy shudder they brought me when she said them first to her dog. Yes, she was in the large hall in the centre of her house; white marble everywhere, and a pig or two lying on it, and one of the leopards that she had brought in from the garden; and her bull-dog, who liked the leopard little enough out of doors, furious with it for being in the house, and snarling and wanting to rush at it: she standing there like a witch-queen, and I just coming in at a door behind her, and you have the whole picture. And just as I did come in I heard those words to her bull-dog; and I tell you they froze my blood; my heart actually stopped for a beat or two and my blood turned cold, and my pulses seem to remember it to this day. 'Now Arthur Tibbuts,' she said, 'don't think that just because you're English you can pick a quarrel with whom you please.'

"The woman herself, her island; right on the course, so far as we know, that Odysseus must have steered coming home from Troy; would have been enough by itself; but there was more than that to turn my blood to ice: I had known one Arthur Tibbuts, known him in London well, and he had travelled East one day, and had disappeared as completely as Browning's Waring."

"Good Lord," said someone quietly.

"Well, you can imagine that I went to Dick pretty quickly, and told him that you couldn't play fast and loose with these island women. I don't know what I told him, anything that came into my head. Told him they all carried knives; told him they had a bad way with absconding lovers, an old island custom. I knew that a woman like that would want change in a year or two, anyhow from young Dick Isden. But, for the present I told him he must wait, and that it was not safe to be seen even thinking about that ship that was

going on Thursday week, not that I told him which day it went. And Dick didn't care a damn. And I saw that I couldn't frighten him.

"What was I to do next? He saw that I was absolutely stricken with horror. And there was he young and smiling; but he hadn't heard what she had said to the dog. And I wasn't going to tell him. Well, I went straight to her and said to her: 'Madame Anemone (that was the name she was going under just then) I heard what you said to that dog.' And she said: 'What's done can't be undone.' And I said: 'Maybe, but don't hurt young Dick.' And she said: 'Then tell Dick not to play fast and loose.'

"Those were the only words that passed between us, with the dog and the leopard looking at her eyes as she spoke, to see if everything was all right; and I dumbly trusting that, if she was what I feared, there was yet a certain rough justice even among cruel gods, as I had learned from legend on legend; and in the hope of which I now sheltered, for I had done her no wrong.

"I went straight back to Dick and denied everything I had said about vengefulness, and knives, and island customs, and told him she was just a simple trusting girl that knew nothing of the big world from which Dick had come. Yes, I said all that to him. And I put it to him as a sort of 'noblesse oblige' between one who knew the big world, like Dick, and one who only lived like one of the flowers after which she childishly named herself, in a dell of this tiny island away at the back of beyond.

"And Dick asked: 'Does she want a ring and all that?'

"And I, who knew she only cared for essentials, said a simple trustful girl like her would never make a fuss about anything of that sort.

"And in the end he stayed. And I hung about for a while. I believe I was useful to him doing all sorts of odd jobs. Chiefly seeing that the wild sort of men that she employed about the place to look after her animals, and one thing and another, did their work while she wasn't looking. When she was looking they daren't do anything else. Worked with the sweat streaming from them for as long as they were under her eye.

"But as soon as the summer began to get too hot I cleared off and came back to these fogs. And glad I was to get safely back to them; for, day or night, I never quite knew."

And Jorkens gazed past us out into the darkness, as though his thoughts had not wholly come home to London yet. It was all he had to say. And whatever doubts we had, no one as yet had obtruded them, while we listened

to his story rambling on, with the streak of poetry that there was deep down in Jorkens, coming almost in sight of the surface or sinking back, as the whiskey rose or waned in him. But now that he had ceased and we looked at London again, all robed in that cloak it so often wears in November, and at all the little familiar things in the room, I am not exaggerating if I say that there was not one of us that believed him. For a while we sat perfectly silent. Then someone said: "But do you mean that you really think she was Circe?"

"No," said Jorkens, "I know she wasn't. It turned out, so far as we were able to find, that she was a Mrs. Harbett that had lived a pretty fast life in London."

"Then what are you getting at?" said the other member. "Why did you tell us Tibbuts had disappeared from London? Why did she call her dog by that name? What is the meaning of it?"

"Well," said Jorkens, "you know what women are. I suppose she knew it would get round to Dick through me, and I suppose she counted on me keeping him if I got some sort of queer idea about it all. And Lord knows I did. Anyway he stayed. Oh yes, they married, to some extent, and lived happily, well, not ever after, but till she grew tired of him, and then he came away. But you wouldn't think it to see him at a board meeting, would you?"

He turned his eyes back meditatively to the fog. "You see," he said after a while, "one never knows."

Chapter 8

THE ELECTRIC KING

THIS is a story Jorkens told me one day. It goes to prove that he does not talk always of himself, as some of the members of our club have chosen to assert; and since there is no personal motive to be served by any inaccuracy, I see no reason for doubting it. And if this story of his be true, why not his other ones? That is the way I look at it, without any wish whatever to interfere with the judgment of others.

He had fallen asleep after a somewhat heavy meal, and all the other members but I had left: some had business to attend to, while others were irritated by Jorkens' snoring, though I couldn't see what harm his snores were doing; or what good their business did, if you come to that. And presently one of Jorkens' snores turned to a gurgle, which seemed for a moment to be going to choke him; and that woke him up; and, being all alone with him, I made the remark: "I suppose you have seen some pretty queer things in your time."

"And people," said Jorkens. And very soon he was well started, wonderfully refreshed by his sleep, and by whatever he may have had with his lunch. And this is the tale. He was in America, knocking about in New England, and chancing to be somewhat out of funds. And he had taken up reporting for a paper, and interviewing, whenever he could get a scrap of work to do, in order to get on to what he called a financial footing; which I expect meant money enough to get back to England third class. And one day they had sent him to see Makins, the millionaire, who had been having a good deal of publicity lately, and to get an interview from him. In case the name of Makins conveys little, he was better known as the Electric King; and his publicity had come from the interest that had been taken in the case to prove that he was capable of administering his own affairs. That he was so capable had been triumphantly proved by his lawyer, chiefly by full details of the organising, the working, the tending, even the very oiling, of the giant dynamos that were watched and directed personally by Makins himself for fourteen hours out of every twenty-four, the whole year round, year after year. What the dynamos were used for was a point that was brushed aside with such consummate brilliance that, unless my reader be

thoroughly trained in the law, he would never be able to appreciate it. These were the dynamos that Jorkens saw when he went to interview Makins.

Jorkens would never have had the job if it had been an easy one, and yet he got the man's whole story. There was something about him that Makins had liked, even if it was only that "he took his wine like a man," to use Makins' own words, and so he had got his story. Jorkens had congratulated him on the news with which the world was ringing, that he had just been proved capable of controlling his own affairs, and Makins had said "Isn't it just marvellous?" And then he had been silent for a quarter of an hour, sitting sometimes shaking his head, in a large carved chair, till he suddenly muttered, and soon his voice gained strength and he told Jorkens this story.

"I had the idea of busting the whole electric light of America, and then gathering it all up again into my own hands: one company to illuminate every city of the United States: we should have been a power, at the lowest computation, equal to the full moon. I had it all clear in my head, and I could have done it—I can't give you the details: it isn't clear now: but it was in those days; clear to the last cent. You might have asked me any question about the minutest part of the scheme, and I could have answered at once in those days.

"I should have controlled all that light; think of it. As much as the full moon sheds on the North American continent. Then my leisure went. I suddenly lost my leisure. A slight attack the doctor called it. But it wasn't an attack: I was perfectly well in body. And it certainly wasn't my mind: that was clearer than ever, too clear in fact; my thoughts were crystal-clear, but too many of them. I simply lost my leisure. It takes a good deal of work, a good deal of thought, for one man to control big business; and when I stopped to breathe at the summit of my career, on a pinnacle higher than I had ever dreamed of, my thoughts ran on. They would not stop, and so I lost my leisure. Well, I didn't mind at first: they all went into the business. But when I found that the most trivial thoughts began to run through my head, like a mob of dirty children in a great ball-room, thoughts too trivial and silly and irrelevant even to mention, and no keeping them out, why then I began to panic, and went to a doctor, and said to him 'What about it?' And he said 'Sea-voyage.' And I sailed from New York for Bombay.

"Well, I found the sea-voyage was not doing me any good, and I did some thinking then; I was always thinking; and I figured it out then that what I wanted was not a doctor, but one who dealt with the terrors of the soul. Yes, I don't exaggerate: I was pretty well frightened by then: I began to see that those thoughts were hunting my reason. Noses down, tails up, ears

flapping, that's what they were after, as surely as hounds a long way behind a fox. Well, there were one or two priests on board, of various denominations, and I talked to them a good deal, walking round the decks in the evening with one or other of them, and putting my case to him as soon as he began to listen. But they mostly talked to me about going to Heaven, and I figured that their advice was too like my doctor's, who had sent me to Bombay; not that Bombay's like Heaven, in the hot weather not at all. And besides, I knew their talk pretty well already; and my thoughts went racing on.

"And then I remembered that I had heard that there were a good many religions in India, some with idols and some without; it was all one to me; I was being hunted over a precipice and was anxious to clutch at anything. I mean any prejudice I may have had against idols seemed now merely absurd: you mayn't like brambles, but you'd grab them, going over an edge, and to such a drop as I saw. Yes, sir, my wits were tottering. And that thought went on hunting them.

"It had come down chiefly to one thought now. It was something about a rat that I had once thrown a stone at. That was the nearest one, the leading one of the pack: night and day you know, and of course no sleep to speak of.

"I got to know a man on board, who had been in India a good deal. I guessed it by his face, and began to talk to him. And in a day or two I had put my whole case before him, as near as I dared, for I daren't speak of the rat in those days. Ebblit his name was, and he told me about the Ganges. Our acquaintance began in the Mediterranean, we used to play chess at first, and sit and talk when the game was over. But he never really spoke out, never told me all he felt, or half he knew, till we turned that corner where de Lesseps stands, with one bronze hand held out to the eastern gate of the world; and the corrupt city of Port Said drops astern, a cluster of white domes in the evening, the sort of thing an angel might dream on waking; just leaving it behind him, you know, as we were. And Ebblit soon after that began to talk of the East, as though it were really there, and there were nothing odd about it; while the West and its ways seemed to drop further and further away from him, till he seemed no longer intimidated by its prejudices and customs. And then he spoke of the beauty of that river. He did not seem to know whether the calm of its beauty moulded the thoughts of those people, soothing and lulling them to an undreamed content, or whether it was the thoughts of generations of people that had given the river that surpassing sanctity. But I began to see there was ease to be found on the Ganges; and rest, as I dared to hope, for my hunted wits. And I asked him

what part of the river was best to go to; and he thought for a little while and answered ‘Benares.’

“I had a long way yet to go, and that rat with its wounded tail was terribly close. I forgot to tell you that its tail was broken. Gosh, I’m a tough man! I’ve known hundreds of men right through, their little minds clear as glass to me, and I don’t know one of them, not one, that would have held out against that rat through the Red Sea.

“They had a large tank on board rigged up as a swimming bath, and I used to get some coolness there after sunset, floating on the water and looking up at the stars and thinking of the rat.

“And then I used to go and talk to Ebblit. Every bit of information I could get from him I used to collect like a stamp collector. The name of the best hotel, the best part of the river to sit at, the priests, the temples, the legends; everything I could get from him, while we walked up and down in the heat. And one day I very nearly mentioned the rat to him. Not quite, but I think he saw it coming. After that I found it more difficult to get him to have a talk with me, especially when alone.

“I was practically all alone with the rat after that.

“And at last we reached Bombay.

“Of course there are things to see in India between Bombay and Benares, quite a lot in fact. The eighth wonder of the world is at Agra, and the earthly paradise in the old palace at Delhi, not to mention the marvels of history which are the equal of legends in other lands. There’s a lot to look at beyond the pinnacles of the Western Ghats. But by now I could see nothing but the slow blood oozing from the battered bruise in the tail. So I hurried on to Benares.

“There was a man outside the Cow Temple who would help me, Ebblit had told me, to the right-hand side of the door. He was there three years ago, Ebblit had said, and would probably still be there. And I mustn’t mind him being rather dirty, very dirty in fact. I would have laughed at the idea, if I’d been able to laugh in those days. Dirty, indeed! What was dirt to that rat?

“I went to that temple in terror. What if the man had gone? Three years seemed a long time to me. But it wasn’t long to him, just as Ebblit had said. He was there right enough, to the right-hand side of the door that leads to the Cow Temple; loin-cloth, bare skin, and dirt; sitting upon the ground with a bowl beside him. So I found an interpreter and went back to the dirty man, and put my case to him at once, before I had even gone to my hotel. Of

course I didn't tell him about the rat; perhaps I might have done so had he been cleaner; but I said that I was a business man much troubled by business worries, and that other thoughts intruded themselves on me too. He seemed to pay little attention, and when my interpreter and I had done, he merely replied, 'Speak openly.'

"You may guess that I didn't like being spoken to in such a way by a man like that, and I was silent a moment. And then in my utter despair I mentioned the rat. And the instant I mentioned it the whole thing poured out: I had never spoken of it before. Its eyes, its whiskers, its fur, I described it all to him, from its eager nose to the mangled bend in its tail.

"And he said to me, if the interpreter got it right, 'The River Ganges is beautiful beyond the conception of man, and beyond the capacity of any mind to estimate. In the contemplation of this beauty is complete fulfilment of all desire. No ambition transcends it. Nothing even hoped for can surpass it. It is the fitting occupation of any life-time. Go, and sit by it until the picture of the river dwells in your innermost mind, as it does with me, more near than the hands and feet. Sit by it, if needs be, all your days. The reward hereafter is infinite; and for the seekers, like yourself, for immediate gain, even for these it is adequate.'

"It's odd, but it seemed to me that the man was talking sense. The rat was still there, but a ray of faint hope had shone from beyond the sound of his voice. I felt like some wayfarer lost and terribly hunted, who suddenly hears in the darkness a music of bells, and beyond the bells at last some cottager's light. That was no mad fancy, but only came from the stress of weeks without sleep.

"Well, I went to the Ganges. Boys, it's a jewel! I went down to it about sunset, and it lay there like a vast piece of a semi-precious stone, one of those very pale beryls or aquamarines. I realised at once it was no use just looking at it; I wasn't a sight-seer now, but a fugitive from a terror greater than any of those that ever hunt the body: I would cheerfully have sat and played with a tiger, to get away from that rat.

"Suicide may be suggesting itself to you as an obvious remedy. But I wouldn't do that, because I felt that the rat was after my reason, and I wanted to save it from him with all its power, not to throw it away. So I had gone to the Ganges, not to gaze at it, but to let it sink into my soul, to contemplate its beauty as I had been told, till it became more to me than my hands and feet, and nothing else should matter, not even the rat.

“It seemed the world’s end, that river; so many steps led down to it. It was not like tracks that run down to a ford, and go onward the other side, or paths that lead to a ferry, to wait awhile; these steps thronged down to the water’s edge and ceased, the end of the journeys of pilgrims living or dead. I sat down on one of the steps near a tiny temple and watched the day fading, and the more it faded the more easy I found it to take my first lesson in the lore that should save me from the rat. And the beauty of the river began sinking into me, as easily as if I’d been there for years and years. Pilgrims came down the steps by twos and threes, pigeons came in to the little temple beside me, dropping down to their rest among the tiny domes, and the colour went out of things with the loss of the sun, all but the river which seemed to keep a light of its own. Now for the first time I noticed the fires of death, flickering up from the burning ghats. Sometimes a ship with great sails stole down the river, with never a ripple upon that wondrous calm, so that it seemed that the ship was a ship of ghosts or the river something from dreamland, something far out among dreams, a long long way from waking. Now I saw vividly a slanting moon, young in the West like a horn, over the little temple. And, as the moon brightened and the fires of death grew stronger, the colour that had faded out of the sky with sunset began to return with the afterglow, coming back more gorgeous than it had been before, like a traveller returning to some rural home clad in the silks and splendours of wonderful lands. It increased and increased, till the luminous river seemed dark, beside the astonishing glow of it.”

As Makins spoke of the Ganges he talked very fast, gazing straight in front of him over Jorkens’ head, without a thought of his scurrying pencil. Jorkens was writing shorthand and even then scarcely kept up. It wasn’t so much the beauty of the Ganges that was entrancing him, Jorkens thinks, as the first escape, of a kind, that he had ever had from the rat; though he hadn’t really got away from it. As he put it himself, “masses of twilight seemed to be descending rapidly, draping the holy city with all their glory: you know how pieces of evening, slabs of light, seem to fall between you and buildings at this enchanted hour, buildings on solid earth, and sky between you and them. It was like that with me and the rat. There was something at last, at last, between me and him: the beauty of the Ganges. It could not overcome him, the thing was too strong for that. But the rat was now on the far side of the river.

“A most intense beauty filled the sky with the deep colours of India, a hush hung heavily at the brink of the river, a hush as though the world had ceased its spinning to watch for the first star: the door of the little temple opened noiselessly, showing all dark within, and the hush deepened over all

the river. And suddenly bells at the very water's edge sent up a melody clanging across the hush: wide windows opened in the dark far up above me, from which poured sudden music of instruments utterly strange to us: drums beat unseen from the little temple near: the rapidly darkening air throbbed to a strange rhythm, that boomed and resounded among the walls of Benares: that was their way of worship; they were giving praise to the river. You'll excuse me a moment, won't you." And Makins rose and went to a little shutter, a sliding panel in the library where they were sitting, and moved the panel aside. And at once a great purr filled the room, the voice of a hundred dynamos. Jorkens had heard the murmur of them before, all the time that Makins was talking about the Ganges, but now the roar of their purring filled all the room, and he could see the rows of them, like a vast stable of elephants. What stupendous energies that iron multitude was unloosing Jorkens did not then know, only that a vast power was going invisibly forth. They were looking down on the hall of the dynamos from the height of one storey, and men were going about amongst the dark rounded shapes, oiling machinery. "My dynamos are being fed," said Makins. Jorkens said nothing: the hugeness of the power so near to him, the humble service these monsters were giving to man, and the incompatibility between the organised might of science and the devoted worship of an Indian river, seem to have taken his breath away. And Makins continued: "I stayed there for three days. The rat was now, as I said, on the far side of the river; but it went no further away. In the gloom of thought I could see its whiskers twitching whenever it sniffed, and I knew who it was sniffing for. So I went back to the dirty man and told him all about it. And he said: 'The Ganges flows from a hill too high for our feet. And on that hill is a city of pure gold. Everything there is gold, pavement and houses: even the shops are gold. And all the people that dwell in it are Hindus.' When he spoke of the beauty of the river he had me beat; that was a thing he understood; but when it came to a definite fact of geography that set me arguing. 'How did he know,' I asked, 'that the golden city was there?' 'I have seen it,' he said. 'I walked for months up the river, walking in my youth, great distances every day; and I came to the hill, and it was all white, and there was no city there. I was young and had not the faith. And I stayed there looking at it for seven days, fasting and sometimes praying to those to whom prayer is due. And at the end of the seventh day I thought I noticed a change. And the sun set, and there was no change. And all the hill grew dull. And I was faint with fasting. And all of a sudden the golden city came; street upon street of it straggling along the hill; and domes and walls and towers all twinkling and shining; a city of purest gold, as the Brahmins teach.'

“ ‘Should I see it?’ I asked.

“ ‘Not yet,’ he said.

“ ‘When should I see it?’ I asked him.

“ ‘Stay for three months upon the bank in Benares,’ he told me. Well, it seemed a long time, but I did as the dirty man said. And the rat stayed all that time on the far side of the river, and I had some sleep at nights, yet things got no better than that; I could still see the country of madness too near to my borders, the edges of my imagination almost touched it.

“One day at the very end of the three months, as I sat watching the pilgrims, it suddenly occurred to me that it was not my river; that I should never believe the story of the golden city, and its gods could never be my gods. I made up my mind suddenly. I never even told the dirty man. I suppose he is sitting there now by the door of the Cow Temple, with the cows and the peacocks strolling about inside, and the worshippers tolling a bell whenever they pray, so that their god shall hear them. I left at once. I suppose I valued too lightly the rest I had had from the rat, or thought that the respite would last. The moment I left the Ganges he crossed the river, and was back again as close as ever he was. He might have driven me back to Benares, but I knew by now that the Ganges could never get rid of him: the holy river was only a palliation, and I had a hope of shaking him off altogether. You see, from the first I thought religion could do it. I am pretty shrewd as men go, and make up my mind quickly, and from the very first I had spotted that that rat was one of the terrors of the soul. So that spiritual help was what I needed, if I could only find a religion that had a priest that was ready to fight the rat. And I had not given up hope. The greatest religions, I said, have always come out of deserts. And it must be so: for before a man can even look at the verities, let alone ponder and value them, he must clear off the dust of all the things that don’t matter; like to-day’s news, to-day’s opinions, to-day’s fashions; yesterday’s customs, and to-morrow’s fears. So I left the opalescent city of Benares, travelling in search of a desert. And the rat travelled with me.

“I took a train for Delhi to begin with. There I intended to enquire my way to a desert, and in the desert I hoped to find some holy man who might have found enough wisdom, out of the way of cities, to be able to solve the terrific problem I brought him. Well, I was sitting in my railway carriage towards evening, thinking of the rat, when all of a sudden, pale and clear on my right, I saw a range of mountains that I did not know were there.

“While we waited at the next station I asked the station-master about them, and he told me they were the Himalayas. The Himalayas! Imagine seeing a waterfall, and asking its name, and being told that it was Niagara; or entering a church by chance, and finding it was Westminster Abbey. So I came to the Himalayas.

“The station-master told me the names of the peaks, pale mauve a long way off. I’ve always found you English very obliging. And then I asked him the name of a white one, all alone over the rest, and he answered as though it was not there at all, or at any rate need not be bothered about: ‘Oh, that’s in Thibet,’ he said. Isn’t that like you? You’re nearly all like that. It was outside the British empire, and so it didn’t count.”

Of course Jorkens said that that wasn’t so at all. That we thought rather more of a foreign country if anything than of our own, and would do anything rather than show we thought it was foreign. So a few moments passed over international courtesies, meaningless and polite, while the dynamos purred on faintly the other side of the shutter. And then Makins continued. “I hadn’t been looking at them for long when I said to myself, Mountains. Mountains, I said: they’re every bit as good as deserts; and I’ve heard strange tales of Thibet. On a mountain a man may do as much thinking as he could down on the sand, provided he goes high enough; all the silly little phrases that buzz round thought and obscure it wouldn’t get far up a mountain. I’ll go there, I said; and I decided at once; at the next stop from that I got out. And the rat hopped out with me.

“I hired a motor in course of time; you can do anything in time in the east; and we started straight for those mountains. I was getting no sleep now at all, and I made the chauffeur do sixty. We startled the little tree-rats as we shot past. Wonderful little animals. How I wished it was one of them that was after my reason, instead of the foul brute that I knew. Or even a monkey. But I suppose a man can’t choose what terror will hunt his soul. And looking at it reasonably, as one always should at anything, I suppose one curse is as bad as another; only I couldn’t think so then.

“Well, we motored on towards the mountains in the afternoon, the afternoon of the day following my talk with the station-master, until what had been patches of blue laid upon lilac began to be great ravines rent in the slope of the mountain. Thibet by now no longer peered down on one, but was hidden by this huge wall, shutting it off from the world.

“We did a lot of mileage that day, till we came to a place where the chauffeur said that the car could go no further. Not that I bothered about

that, for I had had from him the rumour of a monastery fifty miles or so further on, the very thing I was looking for; and I would gladly have walked without food or rest, with that ahead of me and the rat behind.

"As it turned out I didn't have to walk, and as it turned out it was a lot more than fifty miles, but we got hold of a bullock cart at a village, a thing they call a tonga: two bullocks drag it, and they can go anywhere. I don't say it was comfortable, but comfort had gone from me since the coming of the rat, and I found bodily discomfort rather pleasant than otherwise: I had come to that pass long ago. We were travelling in the bed of a great river, the man that was driving the oxen, and I, and of course the rat. Our wheels were going over white sand and boulders, everything perfectly dry, except for long narrow pools of shallow water, lying like shreds torn out from a mountain oread's dress. The sambhur came out of the forest to gaze at us, not the least afraid of the bullock cart. So thick was the forest all along the dry river that we seldom saw the mountains: when we did see them their imminence was tremendous; we were all among them now, as though we had strayed unannounced into the assembly of giants, ancient ones of the earth, deputed by Nature to deliberate on her plans. Now night began to fall and the man halted his oxen and built a little circle of fires for the night, to keep away tigers. I kicked one of his little fires all golden into the darkness. 'Will that keep it off, do you think?' I blurted out at him. But he was only thinking of tigers.

"I regretted my violence almost immediately. 'You must forgive me,' I said, 'I can't sleep.' But he understood never a word, and it mattered not what I said to him.

"One tiger came very near: I heard his whispering footfall above the thought of the rat. The night passed, like all sleepless nights, in about a year; and dawn came suddenly. We made some tea, and the man ate some food he had brought, and we pushed on for Thibet. We went on all that day, our wheels climbing over the boulders and dropping down with a crash on the other side. But none of these jolts could shake the rat away.

"We made our little bivouac that night far up the slope in the cold with only one fire, above the fear of tigers. Not that I feared tigers: I had only one fear now, and my reason was tottering before it. Another sleepless night dragged by like a long chapter of history; and in the golden morning my driver pointed; and there, far enough off, but shining bright as the morning, there on a mountain was the monastery I sought. By noon we were as far as the bullocks could go; the rest of the way was sheer mountain. We had already changed bullocks twice, and done over sixty of the fifty miles that

they had said it was to the monastery. I found that distances in India were often like that. But here was the monastery at last in sight. I was able to get more men to carry my kit from the tonga, and I pushed on ahead of them up the mountain. A tiny little path went winding away over what was otherwise nearly precipice: by the look of it they didn't often go from that monastery, whoever they were, and few seemed to go to them. A bell sounded as I climbed up to them, but there was hardly a welcome in the sound, as you might expect there to be in this voice from the lonely mountain; it was too unearthly for that, too little concerned, so it seemed, with any cares we know. The way to the door seemed almost quite untrodden. By the door a bell-handle in bronze, shaped like a dragon, hung from a light chain. I went up and pulled the handle, and an astounding din reverberated through the monastery. By some system of pulleys the chain that I pulled so easily must have swung a bell weighing little under a ton. And out came a wizened man in a monkish robe, and to him I tried to explain what I wanted without an interpreter, and without knowing a word of his language, or he knowing any of mine. But I think he must have guessed from some look of fear in my eyes, for he led me in; and presently the men came up with my baggage, and it was easier to explain more about myself by pointing to that. Had I come with less kit, and perhaps bare-footed, they might have sent me on sooner. As it was I sent one of the men with my baggage to go and get an interpreter, and it took him a week to find one. And all that time they housed me and gave me their queer food, and a small stone cell to sleep in. And when the interpreter came I had a talk with a younger monk, telling him all my case; and he told me to ask the interpreter to come back in a year; and that at the end of that time I should have prepared myself by suitable meditation to have speech with their Lama.

"That was an unthinkable year. The rat gnawing through my thoughts and working in to my reason, and they would not even let me ask for the cure. A year of horror. A year of the pit. I will not speak of it. They kept the rat from doing its worst, I will say that for them; they knew of exercises, exorcisms and spells, fastings and meditations, that kept up the walls of the soul and kept the powers of night from actually taking the citadel; but I was beleaguered by terrors all that year, and they would not even let me ask for help. A ghastly unspeakable year, and the rat so close that were it not for their bell, were it not for their bell I don't know what would have happened.

"It came to an end at last. At last they sent for me and said that their Lama would see me; and they had the interpreter all ready.

“I was shown into his cell; a man in a yellow robe, with a flat-topped head; sitting calm at a table, and eyes like the scrutiny of the entire night, like the whole night solving a riddle, unravelling the mystery of courses of worlds that were older than ours. I spoke to him through my interpreter, but he did not speak to me. When I had spoken he merely pointed upwards, not to the sky but up the slope of the mountain, then he sat motionless with his gaze before him and his hands stretched out on the table. I saw that it was time to go, and I bowed to him, and left the room and soon afterwards left the monastery, and started, where he had pointed, up the mountain, where as I was told by one of the younger monks I should find another monastery before nightfall. Something in the reverence with which he spoke of it, something in the awe with which they watched me set forth, gave a fresh hope to my hard-hunted soul. It was in the early morning, and I climbed all day. No track whatever led up from the monastery I left: late in the afternoon I met a track arising out of nowhere and winding upwards. They didn’t seem to call on each other much. I could not see the monastery to which I was going, but they had pointed out the direction, and I had no doubt that this insufficient track was the road of the people I looked for. The heat and fatigue were nothing to me, for without the protection, such as it was, that I had had from the monks of the lower monastery, the rat was hunting me sorely. And before the sun set I heard a bell above me; but so faint it sounded, lonely and lost on the mountain, and so very strange were its notes, so aloof from our joys or troubles, that it hardly seemed to ring from a habitation of men.

“I had brought my interpreter with me, a Hindu from near Naini Tal; that is to say he had left the lower monastery with me; but I had let him follow at leisure, not being driven, as I was, over the rocks by the pursuit of the rat. But besides the interpreter I brought nobody; nobody to carry my kit, and no kit to carry. I had an idea that it might be better to arrive like that this time. They don’t set store by the things that we set store by.

“Over a rise the track I was following rambled, leading down to a little valley, and on the far side of the valley the upper monastery stood, with the little rocky valley to look out on, and the mountain going up like a sheer wall behind it. The sun set then, and a queer glow over everything added a mystery to the house I approached. By the door hung a bell-handle of silver, obviously shaped as a symbol, but a symbol of something of which I was utterly ignorant. I pulled the bell-handle, and a gentle note turned all the air of the monastery to music. And presently I heard monkish feet coming slowly down a passage, and the door opened. I had picked up some words of their language in the year at the other monastery, but not enough in which to

speak of the terrors of the soul, the soul's affairs being so far more intricate than are those of the body. So I asked him for lodging, trusting to these people's hospitality, and told him that I had come from the lower monastery and that my interpreter would soon arrive. When I spoke of the lower monastery, looking in his face, I might have been speaking of another world, so little it seemed to mean to him. I hoped from that. I hoped that they had some wisdom here of which they knew nothing below.

"To their hospitality I had not trusted in vain: he took me in at once; and as soon as the interpreter arrived I went with him to the cell of one of the monks and told over in all its terror my old story. Well, they certainly had spells: they used to chant them round my bed at evening, spells in no language I knew, not even the language that they usually spoke on this mountain and of which I had picked up scraps. They were only like reinforcements on tottering ramparts: they kept the rat away while I got some sleep; but I was nearing my end now, and palliatives like this could not postpone it much longer; the end was near, and the rat would get my reason. They occupied my day by reading runes to me that were all of them greater than curses, if you could get the right rune against the right curse. But I had a feeling that the rat was winning. And you'd think that when he was winning he'd be all the neater and sleeker; you'd think that his fur would be smooth and shiny, and the rat in fine condition. It was just the other way about. His fur was like dead fur; his lower jaw was drooping, his lips were shrunken, his sides were sinking in, and the wound in his tail was rawer and more revolting. Everything was shabby and mildewed about him except his eyes, and they were as keen and penetrating as ever.

"About a month went by. And then one day their Lama sent for me. I went in terror, for it felt like my last chance. But all the monks smiled at me, and seemed to be telling me that all would be well. We were shown in, the interpreter and I, to the dim room in which the Lama was sitting, in a yellow robe, at a table of red lacquer. Nothing spoke but his eyes when we came in. And then I told my story. The interpreter knew the grim details of that tale of mine now, and told every terrible sentence after me rapidly. At the end, in the silence, the Lama spoke one word. I could not believe it. One word to my interpreter, and then that empty look upon his face that shows one that the interview is over.

"I looked at the interpreter, but he rose to go. And so I left in despair, having only got one word.

" 'What did he say?' I asked, as much out of curiosity as anything.

“ ‘Prayer,’ said the interpreter.

“But prayer? What prayer? Did he think I hadn’t prayed? As well advise a hunted fox to run. What did it mean, this one word that he spoke to me, I asked monk after monk. And they all of them said the same, they did not know; I must go further up the mountain.

“ ‘Another monastery?’ I asked.

“Yes, one more, they said; a monastery at the top of the mountain. I calculated that that was another two thousand feet, and pretty steep; but I could not miss my way, it was right at the top of the peak. And so I started, though it was late in the afternoon, and soon night fell on my climbing; but I didn’t mind that; it was better than lying awake on sleepless beds, with the sly rat in the dark, gnawing and gnawing its way through thought to my reason. I climbed all night, letting the interpreter come on when he would, and in the heat of the next day I dropped at their door and rested. Here at least they could send me no higher. And after a while I got up and pulled a plain iron bell-handle, and a bell like a cow-bell clanged in the monastery, and a smiling Buddhist with a friendly face opened the door for me, and I staggered in. And for a while I said nothing. And then I said ‘Prayer, Prayer,’ using the word that the Lama had said to me, and stumbled through some words of their language, trying to tell of my stress and the near approach of the rat, but I did not know enough of the language for that, yet he seemed to understand, and took me in and fed me. Then he took me to a cool room where there was a bed, and gave me a pitcher of water, and there I slept for some hours. When I awoke the interpreter had arrived, and I wanted to tell my terrible story at once; but some of the monks quieted me and I rested for some while longer. And when I woke again in the cool evening they seemed to know my story already; I suppose the interpreter had told them.

“And an older monk came in, and gave me a small square of paper with red writing upon it; and smiled, and said ‘The prayer.’

“I grasped it, and he went out of the room. But it was all in Thibetan. What was I to do?

“They did not leave me in perplexity long. The monk who had taken me in at the door came back, with a tiny wheel, which he gave to me. Then he slipped the prayer into a catch in the wheel and showed me how to turn it. One did not pray orally, but turned the wheel.

“He went away and left me with my prayer, and I began to turn it. Oh, man, it was the right prayer!

“It was the right prayer at last. Imagine a man cold, weary; bitterly cold; taken instantly from the uphill road he is trudging to a soft chair by a fire in a warm room, instantly without troubling to walk to it; or a man lost in a desert without water suddenly finding that it is not true, suddenly finding himself safe at home; even so the rat faded.

“Well, I needn’t tell you that I turned that wheel all day, and far into the night. It was the first real rest I’d had for what seemed ages and ages. The only trouble was that the moment I tried to get to sleep, and stopped turning the wheel, the rat came back. Not that I minded that much at the time: it was such a relief to be able to keep that rat away that I turned the wheel till morning and troubled no more about sleep.

“Bright morning poured into my room, and I rose and looked from the window on a land more full of mountain-tops than any field is of ant-heaps, always turning my wheel. A bell tolled, I did not know whether for breakfast or prayer, but it showed that the monks were about, so I went down and met them walking in one of the wide corridors. They greeted me and asked me if I had slept well, and then I explained my difficulty.

“A cheery laugh went up when I came to the difficulty about sleeping, as soon as I made myself clear. There was no difficulty in that, they said; and they sent for the interpreter, and when he had come they explained that they had little water-wheels all along a mountain-stream for several yards, that turned prayers night and day, and they said they would put one of these at my disposal. A kinder act I never knew; it meant rest by day, sleep by night; it meant at last a safe retreat from the rat.

“So two or three of them came down to the stream with me, and it was my turn to laugh when I saw their little wheels. Very crude compared to anything we can do over here. And one thing I didn’t quite like about them was that they went slower than the one that you turned by hand. Too slow won’t do, you know. It gives the rat time to slip in between thoughts. However, I said nothing of that at the time: I was too grateful to them to risk hurting their feelings. And they showed me the wheel I might use, and I slid my prayer into it. And though thoughts of the rat slipped in at the far end of the revolutions, just before the prayer got round to its starting point, they were gone too soon to be able to keep me from sleep.

“A few days in that bright crystalline air, with regular sleep every night, and my prayer-wheel turning, and the company of these men, keen as

pioneers, giving all their days to extend the limits of human thought, did wonders for me. I put on weight rapidly, and my face began to get some likeness again to the face that my friends would have recognised. And as my health came back my keenness came with it, my old capacity began to return, my grip of business and industry. And one day I went to one of those monks and said to him: 'See here. You want to let me move those prayer-wheels fifty yards lower down. It will give you a fall of another fifty feet. Or let me move them a hundred yards and you'll have another twenty feet on to that, seventy feet in all, which will about double your power. And what's more you've another stream, just as good, quite close, and a hundred men could dig a connecting trench in a day; or say ten days, working as the people you're likely to get will work; and that will double your power again. See?'

"I was speaking as much by signs as by the interpreter. The thing was such obvious sense there was nothing to argue about. But would they do it? They wouldn't even think about it. They wouldn't turn it over in their minds. Instead of thinking they said it had always been like that. Instead of improving it they said it was good enough for their fathers.

"I grant you the wisdom of the East: it had saved my reason. But when it comes to organisation, you have to go a long way West for it. God's own country every time. And back to it I returned very soon after that. It wasn't that I was ungrateful, I owed them more than ever I can repay, but I couldn't stand their lack of horse sense. You know, a man may have the wisdom of the ages, and yet be unable to put gasoline into his car if his chauffeur isn't with him. It was the same with these people. I did all I could to teach them, but in the end I had to leave them alone to go their own way. It wasn't that I was ungrateful, and it wasn't that I was not happy there, but those absurd little prayer-wheels were more than I could stand. Why, they had the water-power for ten times the speed they were doing, and I could have quadrupled it in a day or two. But I told you that. And, mind you, all the time the rat was gaining on the wheel. Very slowly, but gaining. And they stood helpless, and letting nobody help them, because it had been good enough for their fathers. So that, even if I had been able to stand their obsolete way of doing things, the rat would have got me in the end, slipping in between thoughts a little bit quicker than the wheel, just before it completed its lazy revolution. So I came home to these dynamos. I took the little prayer-wheel with me and left them. I tried to get the monk that gave it me to come out here, to see what these dynamos could do. I wanted to pay his way across the world. But he wouldn't come, and so we parted for ever; some slight regret on his part, as I always like to think; and I in tears.

“In three days I was out of the mountains and in a few more down to the coast, twiddling my prayer-wheel day and night all the way. You’ll wonder how I slept all the way from Bombay to London. That was a very small piece of inventiveness for a man who has controlled the businesses I have controlled. I fixed my prayer to the electric fan in my state-room.

“And now you see these dynamos. All of them work to turn one wheel. And it’s doing nine thousand revolutions a minute. My prayer is on that wheel.

“Not much chance for the rat. Not much chance for him to slip in a thought between one turn and the next. My prayer is down on him before he can dodge it.

“He may try to slip in sometimes. If I have been talking too much of him, as I have to-night, or remembering my time in India; then when my thoughts are all leaning his way he may make a grab at one of them before the wheel comes round, but he has to be mighty quick. And on just such a night as this, with all that talk about him, and calling to mind those days on the jewel-like Ganges and with the monks in the mountains, he might well be likely to try. But I take no chances. Smedgers,” he called through the shutter. “Is Mr. Smedgers there?”

And the man answered from the far end of the stable of those mighty dynamos.

“Accelerate,” said Makins.

At once the drone of the dynamos rose to a wail, nearly drowning Makins’ voice when he spoke again. “Get them up to twelve thousand,” he shouted.

Smedgers nodded.

“For half an hour,” Makins called down to him.

“Right, sir,” shouted Smedgers.

“That will stop him,” said the Electric King.

This is the story as Jorkens took it down, word for word, in shorthand, and it would have been printed years ago, but for some doubt there chanced to be raised at the time as to whether or not the interview was authentic.

Chapter 9

A DRINK AT A RUNNING STREAM

We were debating one day at the club what was the best drink. One said vermouth because it was good for the liver, another said gin because it was good for the lights, and almost every drink was mentioned in turn, till one wondered how human organs kept working at all, where alcohol was not to be had in abundance.

And then Jorkens joined in with the remark: "The best drink I ever had in my life was out of a running stream."

A silence fell at that. It was not so much the staleness of the story that depressed us, as the feeling that, excellent as its moral was, Jorkens was not quite the man to tell it. We didn't mind tales that had been told before; one often has to put up with that at a club, and does so quite readily; but it jarred on the feelings of men to whom a tumbler of whiskey was nothing, to hear that tale, so intimately associated with the memory of gentle governesses, told by a man like Jorkens.

We said "Was it really?" or "Yes, I suppose it was," and turned quickly to other topics. But Terbut, who never will let Jorkens alone, probably welcomed the idea of letting him make a fool of himself; he consequently leaned forward, all politeness, and begged Jorkens to tell us the story. After that of course there was no stopping it, and we had to sit and listen.

"Yes," said Jorkens, "a drink out of a running stream."

"And muddy water, I suppose," said Terbut, for that's the form the story usually takes.

"No," said Jorkens. "No, it wasn't muddy. Clear, clear as crystal. I'll tell you how it happened. It was when I was in Canada, just after the war, in the fall of 1919. It's gorgeous there in the fall; the leaves of the oak-trees glow like embers; and the maple standing amongst them, or out in the fields by itself, shines like a lonely flame. I know nothing in nature more like a flame than a maple. I was there looking for a job of some sort, being slightly low in funds; and I knew nobody, except Jiggers, Lord Ludd's Dun as he is now; it's the old spelling of London of course. And he was no good to me then; he was as broke as myself. He had some trifling job with one of the biggest

Canadian distillers, but it only barely kept body and soul together. Yes, if you'd asked Lord Ludd's Dun to lend you a fiver in those days he'd merely have turned round and borrowed ten cents off you. Well he and I were out for a walk one day along the American border, and I said that something ought to be able to be done to get a few bottles of whiskey over. And he looked at the frontier with the gaze of a man seeing further than me, and said nothing. And somehow or other I never fathomed that mind at the time: consummate power is not always immediately recognised: and I said to him 'Surely a frontier like that, four thousand miles without a fort, ought to have its uses.' And I remember his words to this day. 'Uses!' he said. 'Why, it's sent by Heaven.'

" 'Well,' I said, 'you can get a few bottles of pink-and-blue (that's the silly name they called their whiskey), and I don't mind trying to get it across to the States. They want it over there. And we'll go fifty-fifty.'

"I'll never forget his quiet look of contempt. He was almost starving, and yet he didn't want to handle anything like a dozen of whiskey. In those days, just as now, he seemed only able to see things if they ran into hundreds of millions. And as a result he very nearly starved.

" 'Well, why not?' I said to him.

" 'Oh, yes,' he said in a tired voice, as though the price of a dinner every day for a fortnight were so trifling a matter that he'd sooner go without dinner; as he very often did.

"Well, then I began to explain my theories to him, for you can't do any piece of work without some idea to start on. What I said was that we'd think of various ways of concealing the whiskey, but that we wouldn't act on the first bright idea that came into our heads, like common smugglers; we'd smuggle water first, or milk; and whatever got through most easily and often we would try again with the whiskey. A good idea too. But he just listened moodily and said 'All right.'

"Well, he got the dozen of pink-and-blue, and I got lots of bright ideas, and tried them out with water as we had arranged. And the odd thing was that the really bright ideas all got found out. The American preventive people seemed to have been doing some thinking too. But they couldn't do anything to me for smuggling water. And one or two quite simple little devices got through as easily as possible.

"Well, I got my dozen of whiskey through quite comfortably, and came back for some more, and gave Jiggers his half share. I didn't know what a

great man he was in those days, but I couldn't help being awed by the look that I often saw on his face. It was the look of a master musician about to play, the look of a Napoleon before his Austerlitz, the look of a statesman about to explain away something that to common people is merely a fact. And he was very thin in those days owing to want of food, and that added to his expression a force that was almost a terror. You know him by sight of course; he's dark; and he's aquiline still, seen side-face, in spite of his fat. But in those days he was like a brooding eagle. An eagle on a high place watching lambs.

"Well, he took his share of the money, and got me another dozen; but he wouldn't say thankyou for what I'd done, or talk about what I was going to do. He was moodier than ever, and his mind was far away from my whiskey.

"So I went back through the border with my pink-and-blue, as soon as Jiggers was able to let me have it. I won't say how I got it through, for that's not in the private interest: some other man will be working my scheme now, and I won't give him away. It's sufficient to say that filling all the hollow parts of the frame of a bicycle with whiskey won't do at all: they found it out as soon as I tried it with water. 'What's all that?' they asked. 'That's a Canadian Hydraulic,' I said.

"When you have to talk nonsense for any reason, you must talk the kind of nonsense they are accustomed to, and they'll accept it as they accept an advertisement.

"Well, I got my whiskey through, and I was wandering about in the woods on the way back, looking at the glory of the fall, and suffering from raging thirst, for I couldn't afford to drink any of the whiskey. The sun so late in the year was shining quite warmly through the glittering leaves, adding to the pangs of my thirst, and I was getting near to the point when men drink water. Perhaps I should have done so there and then from a rocky stream in the wood, only that the stream was dry; so I buoyed myself up with the hope that barely a mile across the Canadian border, now only a few yards away, was a dear old soul who was often good for a drink. I'd worked pretty hard, and it meant a lot of walking; and Jiggers seemed to think it was all too trifling to thank me for; that's the way with all great men towards everybody that is off the direct road that they think destiny's chosen for them.

"I sat down on the bank of the stream to rest before going back into Canada. I must have walked fifteen miles before I disposed of the whiskey, and another eight after that. I sat down in a heap. The stream was oddly dry,

even the pools that lie in the hollows of rocks in almost any dry watercourse seemed to have all evaporated. But sitting there on the bank the sun still got me through the pink and golden leaves, and, late in the year though it was, I couldn't bear even the slightest aggravation of the raging thirst that had been made all the acuter by carrying whiskey that I couldn't afford to touch. Because you see it was like raw gold to the Americans. Their Dry Law was quite new, and they were just feeling the sting of it.

"So I climbed down into the watercourse, and made myself comfortable against a good smooth boulder under the shade of the bank that was on the side of the sun. And there I sat thinking about the Dry Law, trying to make out whether it was good or not, and wondering if I could utilise it further, so as to earn a steady livelihood. My thoughts took a hopeful turn in this direction, and they and the rest in the shade were so gently soothing that I must have almost fallen asleep, when I suddenly heard a murmur. I may have been quite asleep, but I was on my feet at once. No one that has travelled about the world a bit, as I have done, can mistake that murmur. It's not difficult to recognise, but you must recognise it at once, if you're sitting as I was in the bed of a dried watercourse. It is death to stop and wonder if it is really the sound that you thought it was. It was the sound of a torrent coming round the corner, a little way off in the wood. The banks were singularly steep and regular and it was not as easy to get out of the watercourse as it had been to get down, but I did it, and just in time; and the torrent went by me like a tiger. No, I wasn't dreaming. The thought occurred to me, for an instant, that I might be, when I saw the tiger-coloured torrent, more golden than the sun. But I was wide awake, standing there watching it flashing in the sunlight, and foaming over the rocks. Spell-bound is I suppose the word; but whatever it was I stood motionless. Motionless I remained perhaps for minutes, while that torrent went glistening by. And all of a sudden I realised that I was wasting moments of opportunity that in all my life were unlikely to come again. Very unlikely. And I ran to a place from where I could reach it easily, and got down on my hands and knees and had a drink. And from the moment my lips touched it I could tell that it was pre-war."

"Pre-war water?" said Terbut.

"Whiskey," said Jorkens. "If you underrate the abilities of Ludd's Dun you'll be making a great mistake. That was probably his first scheme; the first we know about, any way; planned by him, worked out by him, and carried through by him in every detail. And, as is perhaps the case with most great men, his earliest conception was his greatest. Nothing daunted him,

nothing turned him aside. Instead of asking if it had been done before, its novelty was probably what attracted him most; instead of asking if it could be done at all, he did it. Of the whole scheme he spoke to never a soul. The distiller knew that he wanted an incredible amount of whiskey for the States, and compelled by the giant size of the man's personality he relied upon him to get it through, and supplied it. But he never knew how it was to be done. Of course it made his fortune too.

"Others dammed the stream inside the Canadian border, but they never knew what they were working for, except treble wages, to be paid in a week.

"Another man scooped the water out of the rock-hollows, for fear of contaminating the whiskey, but he never knew what was to come down that watercourse when all the water was safely out of the way. And further down in the wood there were tanks all ready and thousands of casks. One man there must have known, but that man was Porvis, who is Ludd's Dun's secretary to-day, a man that never speaks a word, at any rate not of Ludd's Dun's business.

"And all these things were only financed by the certainty which that tremendous personality enforced upon every mind, that this vast enterprise was bound to prosper. For ready money, the cash I brought him for the first dozen of whiskey must have been about all he had. And little he remembers of that to-day.

"And in the end how simple are almost all great enterprises. Merely, ninety per cent of them, recognising some urgent need among men, and then going and satisfying it. Jiggers stood like Cortez upon the boundary of the Sahara. . . . Well, whoever did first discover the Sahara. He stood there and saw a nation panting for drink. Others had seen that much; but what did Jiggers do? He gave it to them. And that torrent went amongst them and disappeared, as a rivulet in the desert.

"Yes, I was present at the foundation of Ludd's Dun's fortunes. And little enough I got out of it.

"Yet, after all, I got the drink of a life-time.

"Thanks, I will."

Chapter 10

A DAUGHTER OF RAMESES

THERE are days when the atmosphere is over heavy. It weighs down on us and our spirits wilt beneath it. It is not the fault of our philosophy; it is merely that we are not built to support the awful weight of the air, if it stir the least with Earth's sleep and lie any heavier on us than with the old weight we are used to. I remember one day walking to the club full of oppression and weariness, arising as I thought at the time from perplexities in the affairs of the human race; and I should have looked for a larger source, for a flash of lightning going like a ragged tear through the sky soon showed me that my sense of troubles afoot came from Earth's impending effort to hurl off some of the electricity that in some way was irking or menacing her. But I reached the club before that flash of lightning, so that I did not know as yet what was weighing upon my spirit. So, instead of looking at the barometer to see what was really the matter, I sought the palliative nearest to hand by remarking to Jorkens who was sitting heavily there amongst silent members "What is the strangest thing you've ever seen?" For, whether you believe Jorkens or not, he always distracts my attention from other things.

There are those at the club that do not always care to listen to Jorkens talking for any length of time, but to-day if any wished to make a protest they seemed too inert to do so; and Jorkens began thus: "Well, it's hard to say. You know what I mean: it's just the way things happen: sometimes one way, sometimes another. It's just the way it takes you, if you follow me. It's pretty much the same whichever way you look at it. It's the same old thing, you know, day after day. But what I really mean to say is that it all depends on the way you look at it. It's what you might call, well I don't really know how to put it; but you know what I mean. Well, it all seems to me very simple, but I can't quite make it out: nobody could, the way things are going nowadays. I mean that's just the way things are: that's pretty well the long and the short of it, and one must make the best of it, so to speak. Don't you agree with me?"

"Waiter," I called, "a large whiskey for Mr. Jorkens."

He turned at once and went for it.

“Jorkens,” I said, “pull yourself together.”

“Don’t see much to pull myself together about,” muttered Jorkens.

And then the gleaming glass came near, a quarter full of what looked like liquid sunshine, in the room already darkening with the thunderstorm that was to come. Jorkens looked gloomily at it, added a little water, and drank it without a word; and for several seconds afterwards still clung to his gloom.

Then he turned a quick glance upon me, and asked: “What were you saying?”

“The strangest thing you have ever seen,” I said.

“The strangest?” said Jorkens. “If you’d asked me the most interesting, or the most exciting; but the strangest. I think the strangest thing that I ever saw was a princess’s coffin in the Cairo museum; on a shelf at the end of a room, the same room in which they put Tutankh-Amen’s relics later. What they had in the coffin, and the princess herself, and her astounding point of view; which I came on later; were, taken altogether, the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever come across. Quite the most extraordinary.

“To begin with the coffin contained only rags, never had contained anything else. That was odd enough to begin with; so odd that I determined to find out how they ever got the idea of burying rags in a sepulchre worth half a million; for they’d found enough gold in the tomb to have made a motor-car out of. They’d dug it up at the foot of a barren mountain above Luxor, a mile or so from the Nile. They told me the dynasty, which I forget; and that was all that I could find out about it. And I asked men who knew; knew all about Egyptology, and all about that dynasty; but they could tell me nothing more about the bundle of rags in the coffin in the golden sarcophagus.

“Well, there was a man called Sindey who was the last word about that sort of thing, and I used to bother him about it, because I felt that it was a thing they ought to know; and the less they told me the more my curiosity grew. And when I found they’d no record whatever about the rags in the coffin I said to Sindey one day: ‘Can you find no legend about it among the people of Egypt?’

“ ‘No,’ he said.

“ ‘Have you tried?’ I asked.

“ ‘It’s no good,’ he said. ‘Their only interests are in Islam and modern Egypt; they remember nothing of ancient Egypt; there is not one legend in all the land from those days.’

“ ‘None?’ I said.

“ ‘No not one,’ he repeated. And then he added: ‘There *is* an Arab; but you know what Arabs are; and he’s not quite reliable; and I shouldn’t recommend him to you. Besides, what he goes in for is not strictly legal. Such practices may have all died out in England, but the laws against them are still on the statute book.’

“ ‘What? Fortune-telling?’ I asked.

“ ‘Worse than that, I’m afraid,’ he answered.

“But I would not be put off, and I asked for the Arab’s name.

“ ‘Well, he calls himself Abdul Eblis,’ said Sindey.

“ ‘And where does he live?’ I asked.

“ ‘That one doesn’t quite know,’ said Sindey, ‘but one can usually find him hanging about the Sphinx. He really isn’t quite the kind of man . . .’

“But I cut all that, and got Sindey’s promise to bring Abdul Eblis to me, and made him keep to his promise. And so I met that Arab; tall, straight, sixty, a pointed beard, shrouded with the usual burnous that had once been white, and eyes that, whatever they could see, at any rate pretended to look through you, to your destiny brooding beyond. ‘This is Abdul Eblis,’ said Sindey, with a wave of his hand, and showing by tone and gesture that he wished to have nothing to do with him.

“I went at once to the point. ‘There’s something I want you to tell me,’ I said to Abdul Eblis.

“Equally to the point was the Arab.

“ ‘Past or future?’ he said.

“ ‘Long past,’ I answered.

“ ‘It is there,’ said Abdul Eblis.

“I don’t know quite what he meant, but I understood at the time that whatever had happened, or however long ago, the deed rested somewhere and could be revealed by him. Whatever he meant I told him what I wanted, and he nodded and nodded his head at every sentence, till I had the feeling

that I was asking nothing extravagant. Sindey had gone away and left me by then.

"And Abdul Eblis took me round to the other side of the Sphinx, and pointed to the ground where her paws were, and said: 'Meet me here, and I will show you.'

"And I had the idea at once that he meant by night, as otherwise he might have started immediately, at least that's the logical reason for supposing so; but it wasn't my real reason, which was simply that night, and night alone, appeared appropriate to the air he wore. And I said: 'I will come to-night.' And he said: 'No, not now: the moon is full: and there will be tourists here. Come in four nights from now, four nights after this one.'

"One thing that gave me confidence in the man was that he made no effort to bargain, no mention of money; and when I mentioned it he merely told me to wait, and then to pay him what I thought, when he had shown me what he would show.

"I was staying at an hotel near the Pyramids; indeed the district is now named after the hotel, and is called Gizeh no longer; one speaks of the Pyramids as being near the hotel, and not the other way round: I suppose such changes overtake everything. Well, I was staying there and sitting in the garden, looking towards the Sphinx when the appointed night came round; I was looking in the darkness towards the Sphinx, but of course the Sphinx was invisible; nothing but stars were in sight, and I was waiting there for the Arab. He was to come at ten o'clock, as I understood the appointment, but it was perfectly clear to me that he was very vague about time. Ten came, and half past ten, and there was nothing to do but wait, for there was no way of finding him if he did not come. Jazz was new in those days, and someone with a gramophone in the hotel behind me was turning the silence to chaos. In the desert a wind that had arisen with night was whispering in gusts to the silence, and after every gust the silence answered. One might guess what the wind said, that old traveller that had seen so many cities, that had traversed or rested upon so many lands; one's fancy might overtake now and then the tail end of one of his stories; but what wisdom the desert revealed by its hush there is no way of guessing. You must be a prophet before you can speak with the desert. I never could do it. I knew there was something there, some terrible wisdom that went past my hearing and sight, and away beyond me and was utterly lost. Utterly lost. Waiter, another whiskey.

“Well, I was sitting there blind and deaf to the desert; the wind had sunk, and there was nothing but that huge silence, and it was past eleven o’clock. The noise on the gramophone had long since ceased, and the lights of the hotel windows were going out one by one, and nothing was stirring. And then I saw the shape of Abdul Eblis making a blackness quite near me. I never saw him come, but he was standing there beckoning to me, with a finger up close to his face, too furtive even to beckon as Arabs usually do, with a sweep of the whole arm downwards.

“ ‘Abdul Eblis,’ I exclaimed.

“But Abdul Eblis moved his hand to his lip, and turned and led the way, and I followed him silently to the feet of the Sphinx.

“And there he sat down and waved me back with his arm, till I was standing some ten or fifteen yards in front of him, and the Sphinx towered behind.

“And then he made a circle with something on the sand, some powder as I supposed; and lit it, and it burned slowly; and presently the flame was going away from him, on both sides round the circle, burning a pale blue. It turned the Arab’s face a hideous colour, and lit up every wrinkle in it, illuminating his expression with such astonishing clarity that you could see the changing of his thoughts behind it, whatever his thoughts were. The flame grew taller and lit the eyes of the Sphinx, showing the battered features that have looked in the face of Time. And as the light played over the lips and the hollows; and the shadows danced from their crannies, and streamed up into the night; the veteran monster unmistakably smiled.

“You would think from the number of people that go to see that smile, when Arabs light for them a bit of magnesium wire, you would think that there was something friendly in it, at least some message for us. Not a bit of it. There was only in that smile the contempt of the ages for what passes swiftly away.

“Somehow it riveted me, that enormous contempt, stored there I suppose for ages, hidden in those wrinkles, growing a little in power every century, and released by the careless matches of wondering trippers to sear their souls by its scrutiny. No it’s better not to make gods or demons smile: they don’t laugh at the same jokes as us.

“It took a drink or two after that, and pretty stiff ones, to get back my self-respect; and even they didn’t do it entirely: you never know where you are with those immortal things.

“Well, I was watching the flickering smiles of that immense contempt, unable to get my thoughts away from the grip of it, when a figure came fluttering out from between its paws behind the circle of fire, and right through the blue flames, which died as the figure touched them, and turned into grey smoke. So real was the figure of that Egyptian lady that walked five paces towards me and stopped in the smoke, that had it not been for her extraordinary point of view, so utterly remote from this age, I should have believed that the whole apparition was just a trick of the Arab.

“Abdul Eblis rose and moved till he stood beside her, then made his salaam; and she spoke to him in I know not what language. He turned his head toward me and translated. She says, ‘What do you want now, Abdul Eblis?’

“It was a time to ask for wonders.

“ ‘Ask her to speak in English,’ I said.

“ ‘In English, please, Illustrious,’ said Abdul Eblis to her.

“She sighed shortly, as though compelled by something vexatious and overwhelming.

“ ‘And then?’ she asked.

“ ‘Your coffin, Illustrious,’ said Abdul Eblis, ‘that had only old rags in it.’

“She laughed merrily at that, and her laughter trilled away over the empty desert, empty but for the vastest monument mankind ever erected, away and away toward the Mokattan hills, until remote jackals heard it and passed the wild cry on.

“ ‘I had to have a funeral,’ she explained.

“ ‘Aye,’ said the Arab. ‘Even so all of us.’

“ ‘But I wished to live,’ said she.

“ ‘Ask her to tell us how it was,’ I said.

“ ‘Tell us, Illustrious,’ said the Arab, bowing towards her.

“ ‘It was the sunsets,’ she said, ‘the gold Egyptian sunsets; the glow behind western hills, and the wild pipes of Porásthenees. I heard them first one evening under that golden sky. One star was faintly shining in the green of the sky, between sunset and night. And little winds were roaming through the evening and cooling Egypt, slipping unseen along the darkening hills

like the gods, who also walk at this hour. I knew a priest who had seen them. At any other hour I could have disdained those pipes, however haunting their melody; for Porásthenees was only a goat-herd. But at that hour, under those sunsets, when men are helpless before the gods and music and love, I had no choice, whoever blew those pipes; and I thought at first that it was one of the gods; but it was no matter who blew them at that hour. And one evening I went to the hills and found it was only a goat-herd, but it was too late then; god or man it was all the same. Over a ridge of those hills I went through the glow of that haunted evening, all tremulous with the tune of the pipes, and magical with the sunset. All trembling I went to find out the mystery of the music; and found in a hollow over the hill my young goat-herd lover, Porásthenees. When he saw who it was that had come to the sound of his pipes he gazed but he did not speak; and I when I saw that it was no god said never a word, for no other roaming the hills could have right of speech with me. And there we stood looking long in each other's eyes as the twilight faded away. But the light never faded out of Porásthenees' eyes, though the stars came out and were jealous, if it be possible for immortal spirits to be jealous of earthly eyes. They teach that it is not possible, yet on that night only I believe that they were. Emboldened by some vast folly he dared to sigh, but I uttered no sigh in answer; though my heart should break for it I would not sigh. Then I saw the lanterns of the men of my father, he who was none other than Rameses, coming near, searching. And I deemed it a pity that they should kill Porásthenees, even though he had dared to sigh. So I gazed into his eyes long without ever blinking, then turned and ran; and they found me far from Porásthenees. And when I returned he was wrath, who was none other than Rameses. But I knew that his wrath would pass: is not the sun often darkened with raging clouds? They go by, and the rays are bright again. Many had noticed my father's resemblance to the sun, and had been greatly struck by it.

"Again I went to the green hills at evening, as their greenness was growing dim, and the sunset burned like flames in a golden land; so near to us, yet untrodden by earthly feet; for only the gods walk at evening in the golden fields of the sunset, its colours tinting their feet with splendours not for Earth's people. I went to the sound of the pipes of reed, that were luring my spirit to fly through the hush of the dusk. What could my feet do but follow? For every man and woman has a spirit, which does not die when they embalm the body, but is an immortal thing. So away I went to the green hills in the hush, and came over the ridge to the hollow; and there was Porásthenees among his goats in the dusk, playing upon his pipes, and the afterglow over his head turning from glory to glory. And he laid down his

pipes and we gazed again at each other, and still we did not speak. Oh the eyes of Porásthenees; I could not put away the thought of them. All night I pictured them shining, all day they seemed glittering so close that almost another could see them. And sometimes there were those about the Court that looked at me in such a way that I was sure they knew that his eyes were shining near me, though he was far afield, and over the western hills that look on Nile. Only he still saw nothing, who was none other than Rameses. Once he said I was moody, and I said I was; but of Porásthenees he guessed nothing.

" 'Often we met again but never spoke, and my love for Porásthenees came between me and sleep.'

"So faintly she sighed a helpless sigh standing there veiled in smoke, that one could scarcely tell if it were she that sighed, or if a lost wind wandering through the desert had breathed its last breath out by the Arab's curious fire. And at once I wanted to help her, for her sigh being there beside me, I forgot that her trouble was from thousands of years ago. And how could I help her? There seemed only one remedy. And for that my advice came thousands of years too late. 'Could you not marry Porásthenees?' I said.

"Late or not, my advice, she turned at once from her sigh to merriest trills of laughter. 'And one of the House of Egypt marry a goat-herd?' she said. 'What whimseys have come to the world? Who has heard of such a fancy? What merriment has moved you to such a conceit? Who has designed so strange a quip in these years wherein I now wander? Is it not death to jest so strangely, as it would have been surely of old? Yet jest unto me as you will, for I always loved quaint absurdities. And indeed none ever before . . .' And her words turned all to laughter, which trilled away and away over the sand through the silence.

"I gazed at her, so far as I could see her form in the dimness, and draped as it was with smoke; and when her laughter quieted I was still gazing in wonder. And she had not yet done with her point of view that she was expressing so vehemently; for as soon as her laughter gave her breath for speech she was talking of it still, and still with that mirthful incredulity, as though she could not believe that my words were real.

" 'Do the sun or the moon mate with slugs or beetles?' she asked. For a moment her merriment turned nearly to indignation, and then she laughed again, but this time shorter and more contemptuously, and I saw that I could not press the point. So I remained silent till her laughter had wholly ceased,

and she was sighing once more, remembering Porásthenees. It was hard to sympathise with the pig-headed young fool; and yet I did sympathise, for, with all the folly of her point of view, those sighs of hers were coming from a heart bewildered and broken, by a sorrow whose memory had lasted for thousands and thousands of years. And it had only been a brief sorrow. It cannot have been for more than a few weeks, and then it had all ended happily. But she was a creature of moods; you could see that; and they had probably encouraged every one of them in that palace of theirs on the Nile when the hills were green. So it was enough for her to remember her one real sorrow for her to waft these sighs at the very face of the Sphinx, whose ancient calm meant nothing to her. And in that calm that the Sphinx has imposed on that one spot of earth for all those ages and ages, I heard her excitable story.

" 'I saw soon that I should die of love,' she said. 'And I thought of leaving the sacred land and the temples, and the river that the gods have given to water Egypt. And of these things I thought for the first time; yet, though they came newly to me in all their sadness, they troubled me little, sad though it be to leave the land that the gods walked often. And then there came among my thoughts that were all of Porásthenees, one dark thought telling me that if I died I should hear his reed-pipes no longer, stirring the golden evening. I should see his eyes no longer, shining when all else darkened. I should go to him no more across the ridge of the hills.

" 'Then said I, how much better to die and still see Porásthenees: the Court of Rameses fading; the priests adoring the gods, the fans of my handmaidens, even the glorious face of my father, all passing away from me; and still the pipes of Porásthenees haunting the darkening hills. Still the pipes of Porásthenees, and I hearing them still, although my funeral should have gone over the river. That was my thought, and at once I made my plan. That is all. I have told you.'

" 'And then,' I said, 'Illustrious?' Picking up the mode of address from Abdul Eblis.

" 'And then," she said, 'I went to the High Priest. I found him sacrificing in the temple of Thoth, and brought him away from the sacrifice, and to a place apart among palms where we could speak privately. And he asked me what I would with him, and I said to him "Comrade of the gods, how many ways of death are there?" And the High Priest answered "A hundred." For I spoke of ritual things, to which there was one answer. Then I said "And the hundred and first?"

“ ‘And he answered “The will of the King.” That also is in writing on ancient parchment: there is but one answer.

“ “‘And for a priest how many?” I said. And he was silent awhile. And then he answered me saying “Perhaps three.”

“ “‘And the fourth?” I said. And this I knew he must answer. And answer he did, but grudgingly, saying “The will of the King, if he hates the gods.”

“ “‘He loves his daughter,” I said. And the High Priest was silent.

“ “‘You must make a mirage funeral,” I said. He knew what I meant. The image of things that are not, the mockery of the desert beyond the hills. Neither by word nor sign did he show that he understood me, nor yet that he did not. But he answered me. “It could be done,” he said.

“ “‘It is well,” said I.

“ ‘We walked in silence then, he saying no more, so that if need be he still could say he had misunderstood my meaning. And after we had walked by twenty palm-trees he spoke again and said “Whose?”

“ ‘And I said “Mine.”

“ ‘And he said “The funeral of one of the House of Egypt! That would most gravely shock the gods.”

“ ‘Those days are so engraven upon my spirit that every word from them sings in my memory, like immortal birds, to this day.

“ ‘And I said to the High Priest, “You will not do this for me?”

“ ‘And he answered me “No.”

“ ‘Then I said to him, speaking softly, I almost whispered, so softly he hardly heard—’ And her voice after all those years spoke low with the memory, and the flutter of little winds that stir the surface of sand rose louder than that faint voice, and her words were lost in it.

“ ‘What did you say to him, Illustrious?’ I asked her.

“ ‘I said “It is death,” ’ she answered.

“ ‘Why so softly?’ I asked her.

“ ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘it is terrible to speak of the death of a priest. He looked at me and said “What?” And I answered “Death.” And he looked at me to see if I would take back my word, or faint, or cry out for pardon. Our house and his, there were only two that ruled Egypt. Generations of us had not his

wisdom, nor a hundred of him our strength. He looked into my very spirit in those moments; and, when he saw that I would not go back, he bowed. And then we fixed a day for my mirage funeral.

" 'It was a lovely funeral. It went at dawn from the Palace down to the calm river, the holy Nile that the gods have given to water Egypt. It went with plumes and music, and a great concourse. And he was there who was none other than Rameses, riding a white horse. And the sun came over the eastern hills as the catafalque reached the water, and the rays flashed on the gold, and a flood of gold by the boat shone back from the holy river. And the rowers pushed off the boat to the jewel-like Nile in the morning. And Porásthenees stood beside me in the hollow of the hills that we knew, both peering over the ridge at the lovely funeral, listening to the music of the players and then the horns of the priests. He tried to speak to me, but I would have none of it, till the boat touched the far bank, and the priests lifted up the gold-bound horns of great antelopes and blew for the third time. And even then I waited till one horn wailing blew from the winding end of the rocky valley, announcing to Egypt that I was laid away in the sight of Anubis and Horus and Thoth, in the keeping of those that watch for century after century, closing no eye for rest at night nor blinking at full noon.

" 'I was nothing then; I spoke with Porásthenees, and he with me. We went away that day to his house of reeds, he playing his pipes along the hills as we went, the pipes that had lured my spirit or ever they drew my feet. The house of reeds beyond the back of the hills, for many a year I tended it. It lay out of the way of roads, away from hamlets, among little fields that were home. Even the seasons loved it, passing by, each one of them decking it with some of their splendour. Was ever a home more loved?'

"I wanted to get her amazing point of view, and knew that it still baffled me. It was that that drove me to interrupt her, as she stood there turning over and over old memories.

" 'Did you marry the goat-herd?' I blurted out.

" 'Why, yes,' she said, as though astonished at my simplicity, she that had said the sun did not mate with beetles or slugs. And then she seemed to correct herself. 'He married me,' she added. 'It was good and kind of Porásthenees. For I was nothing. I was homeless and nameless. In the sight of the gods I was no one. He might have treated me as the night-wind that goes up and down through the barley, or the echo of voices of jackals, or as old legends or dreams; and I could have not complained. Before Anubis, Horus and Thoth I had neither name nor breath.'

“ ‘But you were still of the House of Egypt,’ I tried to argue.

“But she only repeated that she was nothing before Anubis, Horus and Thoth, and began to quote from papyrus stored by the priests in the royal vaults of her father; and repeating ‘Nothing, Nothing,’ she moved slowly backwards a little, and meeting then with one of those wandering winds that stray at night in all deserts, she went away with the wind.”

Chapter 11

THE SHOWMAN

LUNCH was long over in the Billiards Club, even the desultory tea-cups of such as took tea stood with tepid brown pools in them, and the warmth of the fire seemed now the principal need in the bleak winter evening. Three members sat on the sofa before the fire, Jorkens was deep in an arm-chair by the side of it, and others were dotted about in comfortable chairs. That is how I saw them as I came in. There are times when it is not so easy to get warm. When a wind is bringing snow from the North or East, men tramping marshes with a gun keep warm enough; the very voices of birds they are after warm them, or the music of wings in the sleet; but it is not so easy in London to be warm on such days as these, and considerable thought was being given to the subject, and rightly so, at the Billiards Club.

Jorkens had a warm corner, but the direct heat of the fire touched no more than his feet and ankles, on account of his being at the side of it. It was often his habit to rest after lunch, and he seemed to be still doing so. Talk on the sofa was livelier, perhaps because there they got the most stimulus from the fire: certainly it was a very cold day. And on the sofa was a man telling a story of Africa, of Morocco a long time ago. There is no rule that somebody must tell a story at the Billiards Club, yet if nobody had done so I think they would have all fallen asleep; or else gone out and attended to business, which on such a day was unthinkable. I don't think it looks well to see so many members asleep in their chairs; it is much better for somebody to be telling a story; and that is I think the way that we all look at it, without having any definite rule.

The story was of no interest; I merely mention it because of its effect on Jorkens. I really thought he was asleep; but, the moment a certain point in the story was reached, Jorkens was widely awake and listening alertly. That point was the question of rescuing a certain prisoner in one of those barbarous prisons that they had long ago in Morocco; a question that the teller of the story had decided against. He could have quite easily done it; the commander of the guard had of his own volition offered to sell him his sword, and with a little negotiation would have certainly sold the guard. A prisoner had appealed to him, and he supposed that he could have done it, but was held back merely by respect for laws, the whole system of which he

despised. That was what they were talking about on the sofa; whether he should have rescued a man from barbarous laws, or respected the laws merely because they were the laws of that country. Incidentally the prisoner was confined without food, and for a long sentence. He made basket-work out of rushes, and if he could sell his baskets to casual sight-seers he could buy food and live. They were not discussing the point with any intensity, when suddenly Jorkens rushed into the discussion. It was a curious discussion from then on, Jorkens by every suggestion and argument trying to prove that the man was perfectly right to do nothing whatever against the laws, or even the customs, of any country at all, however barbarous, whose hospitality he might have taken by invitation or otherwise. At first I thought Jorkens wanted to tell a story of his own, with the natural jealousy that Nature often provides between one story-teller and another, whereby she so frequently prevents monotony. But I soon found that he was not arguing against the speaker upon the sofa, but most eagerly for him. And presently I saw by infallible signs, which are always there in such cases, that Jorkens had something on his mind, that some old sore on his conscience had been touched by chance, and had never wholly healed. And here he was waking up from his seat by the fire in London to prove that under no circumstances should you help any man against the customs of the country that was oppressing him; and obviously knowing, all the time, he was wrong.

It made a curious argument, and when everyone had agreed that the teller of that story had acted rightly, and that Jorkens' championship of the customs of any country was just, it seemed to me that the only interesting residue that remained was the experience that, probably years and years ago, had seared that sore place upon the conscience of Jorkens.

There was nothing to do but ask him. So I said: "I suppose you never had any such experience yourself?"

"Well, in a way, yes," said Jorkens. "In a way, yes. It depends what you call laws. But if you define them as any organised acts arising out of the deep convictions or feelings of any community, well, then of course I have. Yes, I certainly had. And I maintain once more, that that view of the case is perfectly just."

Well, we were all agreed about that, and I saw that Jorkens, for all he said, really felt the exact opposite, so there seemed nothing more to argue about. But I wanted the story.

"When was that?" I asked.

"Oh, a while ago," replied Jorkens.

"Waiter!" I said.

He knew what I wanted; and presently Jorkens, as wide awake as I've seen him, was sitting up in his chair, telling this story.

"I was in a small town in France, down in the Midi, one sleepy summer's day, and a travelling show had arrived the night before, a bit of a circus and rows of cages on wheels. And I idled in during the afternoon to take a look at their zoo, for it was quite a zoo that they had in their cages; a lion, several apes, and all sorts of things; and nothing much else to look at, as things were just then."

"What were you doing in the Midi, Jorkens?" said someone, out of an arm-chair; and a reminiscent look settled deep upon Jorkens' eyes; and it took me some while to get him back to the story I wanted to hear. And when I did get him back he was telling us how he stood in front of one of the cages trying to make friends with an ape, an animal with brown eyes, friendly and intelligent as a dog and yet almost sulking. "Not sulking exactly either," Jorkens went on. "Rather like a very good-natured person with some perfectly obvious grievance. I tried to hand him a nut, and he would not take it at first. When I scolded him about it he reached out a hand lazily as much as to say 'Oh, very well.' But all the time, by his attitude, his gestures, the look in his eyes, he seemed to be expressing one thing, which if he had had the power of speech would have been something like 'If you really *must* shut us up like this.'

"I suppose I stood looking at him for some time and trying to talk to him; for a man had walked up to the cage and stood beside me without my knowing he was there, till all of a sudden he spoke to me. I suppose he had spotted that I was English, and saw that I was interested in the ape, and fancied that I had the same point of view about it as he had. 'Fine ape that,' he said.

"When I looked round I saw beside me a man in a frock-coat and tall hat; stoutish, ruddy-complexioned, fairly tall, and with a large, slightly grizzled moustache rather carefully waved; he had a gold watch-chain, a bright red tie with white spots, and was obviously incomplete without a cigar, but smoking was not allowed in the long tent in which the cages were, and he had a gold cigar-case in his left hand. I said 'Yes' rather grudgingly to his remark about the poor ape. And he replied 'You won't see a finer one of its kind in any show.'

"From that we got to arguing. Of course I saw that he was the showman. But, all the more on account of that, I expressed the view that I saw so

clearly in that ape's eyes. There were so many of these apes shut up in those cages, and I thought it was rather a shame. That was my side of the argument. His was, first that he was a showman, and the public wanted apes; and, secondly, that if you wanted to look at it from their point of view they were perfectly content; they got regular food, and dry shelter, without the trouble of having to look for such things; they were safe where nothing could leap on them or chase them or kill them, and they ought to be grateful for it.

"I said something about their liberty; and he asked what good it was to them.

"I said that when they were free they could go where they liked; and he said that they saw much more of the world going about as they did with him. For it seemed that he had had a shipment of them at Marseilles and had gone down there with his show from England to meet them, and was showing his way back across France.

"I said something about their home. And he said that animals like that didn't have those sorts of feelings. One place, to them, was just as good as another.

"Of course the more he said things like that the more I argued, and the more he argued in return, till we got more and more at variance. But it wasn't any good my arguing, because he never really thought about the apes at all; he only thought of the public. He had the showman's point of view, and nothing else in life mattered to him. Wherever he had appeared since his childhood, some waiting crowd had risen to greater intensity; their excitement had increased, their emotions had become stronger; so that you might say they were even more human than they had been before he came. He and his show were the stimulants that made eyes shine and pulses beat quicker: it was for this that he lived. He would not have taken ten thousand a year to follow any perfectly calm calling. So that to suggest that apes should not be shown to the crowds that he loved was every bit as bad to him as it would be to a dean if one casually suggested that he should shut up his cathedral. You see how I got my point of view, looking at that poor ape with the injured look in his eyes, that was there so clearly; and you see why he disagreed with me. Of course, at the time, my point of view and his each seemed to the other quite crazy. But, for all that, we saw a good deal of each other for the next day or two, till his show moved on. You see, my argument didn't seriously annoy him, because, outrageous though it appeared to him, he couldn't believe that my point of view was a real one. The show was real: human beings enjoying themselves were his normal standard: anything

outside that didn't count; anything opposed to that was merely fantastic. So he invited me into his circus, and showed me his elephant, and introduced me to his little troupe. And I must say that if I'd lived long in that atmosphere of keenness, I too after a year or so would have found myself placing the show before everything, and forgetting the lost liberty of the elephant and the apes; one couldn't help it. In and out of that circus and zoo for a day and a half, with nothing else to do, I at last began to see how he came by the views he held. But I was not long enough there to agree with them. And that was what the whole trouble was about."

"Who was he?" I asked. For sometimes some trifling detail will corroborate a whole story, not that Jorkens' tales particularly need corroboration, but all tales are the better for it. But my question got us no further.

"Fromer," he said. "It was a long time ago, and will probably convey nothing to you." Which was perfectly true. But I do not doubt Jorkens' story on that account; his sincerity was too unmistakable. He was not telling any story to impress us or make us wonder. He was merely turning over old facts in his mind, speaking aloud as he did it, trying to reconcile himself with what he had done, trying to make it all right, and knowing as he had known for years that it was all wrong.

"But what a personality he was. Sitting at tea with his troupe of five in their tent at the back of the circus-tent, he would walk in; and everyone was aware of his presence at once, even those that sat with their backs to him. Whatever we spoke of was dropped: nothing was interesting enough to hold our attention when Fromer stood in the tent. And there he would be, with his tall hat on as always and his cigar in his mouth, motionless and silent, yet the immediate centre of interest. And after some moments' thought he would say 'Well, boys.' Then he would stand there thinking a few seconds, for he never spoke hastily; and he would probably say 'Well, girls.' There was nothing much in his words; he couldn't be called a deep thinker; and yet he was one of those dominant characters that is the greatest man in the room wherever he is. I don't know how it's done. I'll tell you a story about him that his fancy rider told me. He had advertised a lion with a red mane, and the tent was full. He had some sort of lion coming from a menagerie, though I don't know what he was doing about its mane; and when the day came the lion never turned up. The people were beginning to shout for the lion; and Fromer came on to his bit of a stage, frock-coat and tall hat as usual, and took the cigar, rather grudgingly, out of his mouth, and looked at them all and said 'Do you want that lion?' Well, they'd been shouting for nothing

else; so some of them said ‘Yes.’ Then he looked at them as though a lion were a foolish thing to want, and they felt it too. He gave the feeling some moments in which to sink in; and then he said ‘Do you want it here? Now?’

“Do you know, the fancy rider told me that there were people there who really believed while they were looking at Fromer that he could call up a lion there and then, though the Great Central and Great had been unable to get it to him. Queer folk were audiences, according to him, though he loved them.

“Well, then a child screamed out ‘No,’ and nobody else said anything. And Fromer nodded his head at them slowly three times and turned round and went away, and left them with the clown and a dancing seal. And do you know he’d got it into the heads of the audience that they didn’t want a lion. That’s the sort of man he was. And that’s all that business is, if you can do it.”

“Get on with your story,” I said. It sounds a rude interruption, but there are moments when you must do that with Jorkens or he wanders right from the point.

“Well, that’s the sort of man he was anyway. With human beings that is. But he never got that sort of hold over the apes. I wonder why that was. Perhaps it was really because the audiences knew that he loved them and would do anything for them. I don’t know what the apes knew.

“Well, his show left Orignan one bright morning, and it wasn’t the same place at all without him. And I never saw him again for years.

“And then one day there came to me in London, quite suddenly, walking down Mungle Street, a craving for the South and the sun, for lands where there is no pavement and very few paths. And when that feeling comes on one I find it isn’t a question of whether one can afford it, or if one can spare the time, or anything else: Africa’s calling and off one goes. I suppose Africa has some need for a certain number of bones, and sends that curious craving far and wide through the earth, until she is supplied with the requisite number. Well, I went. And in Lolo Molo, the very first day I arrived, I got unmistakable news of Fromer. A man in a tall hat had gone through Lolo Molo with fifty cages on wheels only a few weeks earlier. From the ample description that I got from everyone there was no doubt it was Fromer. You see fifty cages on wheels would attract some attention anywhere, but a tall hat in that part of Africa was simply marvellous, and hundreds had flocked to see it. So I was easily able to identify Fromer: if one man couldn’t remember his red tie with white spots another could,

another remembered his watch-chain, another his frock-coat, and all remembered his cigar. I had evidence enough to identify him for the purpose of any charge, if he had ever sinned against any but those poor apes. And of course it was them that he was after. Fifty of them he wanted to get. And they told me in Lolo Molo all about his cages, though of course they were more interested in his hat and his clothes. Each cage was simply a trap: the whole front lifted up, and when the ape walked in to get the fruit that would be put there Fromer merely let it down with a string, and each end fell into a sort of padlock and locked. There was a locksmith in Lolo Molo who told me all about it, because one of the padlocks had got out of order and he had made one to replace it. Then he chanced to tell me that they all locked with the same key, or unlocked rather, for they locked themselves when they fell, just like the hasp of a padlock. And I remembered that later, when we were talking at the club that they have there; and everyone was against Fromer, and they were all saying that he was taking too many apes out of Africa. His audiences never talked like that, but he had given no shows in Lolo Molo; that wasn't what he was there for; and so they had none of them got to know Fromer.

"Well, you know what it is with talk; if the same point of view is being held all round you, and being held heatedly, you can't help being swayed by it if you're tepid about it before. But if it's your own point of view, if it's theories of your own that you hear being expressed all round you, with an argument here, some vehemence there, added by every speaker, why then it's overwhelming, it sweeps you away. And here was everyone round me saying that Fromer was taking too many apes out of Africa. Well, after a drink or two with these people, coffee-planters mostly, and hearing them all say the same thing for an hour, I decided rightly or wrongly that I would go after Fromer, and rescue one poor brute from his cage. If I was wrong at all, that was the beginning of it; the first step; driven on by these men's arguments, and perhaps a glass or two, and by a feeling I had very strongly that the next time I saw an ape in a cage and it looked reproachfully at me, as the one at Orignan had done, I could look back at it unashamed. It was that as much as anything that made me go again to the locksmith, and ask him if he hadn't got a key to fit the lock that he had made for Fromer. And, seeing that opinion in Lolo Molo was so pro-ape, I told him straight out why I wanted it. And he gave it me like a shot, for a couple of pounds."

I should say at a guess that Jorkens had gone to Lolo Molo, of all places, because some company in the City, or some would-be company, wished to get the public interested in it. They may have paid Jorkens' expenses there. Of this I know nothing; but Lolo Molo is really at the back of Beyond, and

nothing can be more annoying to the promoters of companies than to have shareholders dropping in and saying they've seen the place, even making speeches about it at a shareholders' meeting, as they can do if the gold mine, or whatever it is, is in Surrey. I mention it because I saw one or two members leaning forward to ask some such question, and it took me all my tact to stop them. A question at this point would have thrown Jorkens far on to another story.

"Then I got twenty natives to carry my tent and kit and their little canvas shelters, and away I went after Fromer, who with his tall hat and his cigar and his fifty cages was a good deal more easily traced than a herd of elephants. Well, we came up, in three days, with his camp, and I sent a native into it to find out what was going on. And the report was that all the cages except one were in the camp and were empty, but that the Bwana with the magical hat, as his men called him, combining something of the strangeness of his hat with his forceful personality, had gone with one cage into the forest and had been away a long time. So I took one of my men who was a tracker and we followed that cage, where two of Fromer's men had pushed it into the forest and left it with Fromer.

"It was a great place for apes. We saw them suddenly, in the sun on a hill side. And never did I see anything that so changed the look of a landscape as a herd of these creatures can; they give a curious touch of nightmare to it. All the apes looked at me together and then went slowly away, as though they had some secret in the forest that I knew nothing about.

"Then we entered the dark of the forest, following the wheel-tracks, but presently I got a view from a small cliff, with all the trees stretched out for miles before me, bright green with blue shadows; and in a small clearing a mile away was the cage. With my glasses I made out the name of Fromer clearly, in white capitals on the roof. I sent the tracker back to the camp then, and went on alone: I didn't want any witness to the freeing of Fromer's ape; one never quite knows the law unless one's a lawyer, and it might be theft for all I knew. I sent the man away, and never did I miss anyone's companionship so much. For there seemed something odd about the forest. I couldn't get over the curious way that those apes had looked at me and gone away to the trees. It was so strangely unlike any expression I'd seen on the poor beast in the show at Orignan. It was exactly as if they had something in the forest that they knew I knew nothing about. Of course in a country like Africa one gets strange fancies sometimes, especially if you happen to take a drink or two on top of a bout of malaria; which is when you think you most want it. But I had no malaria on me that day, and I had had nothing to drink

barring absolute necessities; and yet that odd feeling I had when I saw the apes was as strong as any idea I've ever had. Well, I put it away from me as well as I could and went on; but I couldn't help noticing that the little monkeys were watching me then, and in a rather impudent way, as though they were losing their fear of man. They came altogether too close and, well, I couldn't make out what had happened in that forest, for everything seemed different, and in much more subtle ways than I am able to tell you; but at any rate it is sufficient to say that there could be no mistake whatever that those grey monkeys thought they were quite my equals. I'd read that, in time of great fires or abnormal drought, all kinds of animals crowded together, but what could account for this contemptuous equality with man I never got anywhere near with my wildest guesses. And in the end it was quite simple.

"Well, I went on through that unnatural scene, with all the monkeys looking curiously at me, and wishing more and more for the company of my tracker, until I got near the cage and saw that the great apes were about. I didn't expect them to come for me, and yet their attitude seemed so curious and sinister to-day that I would not trust them, and kept out of their sight and went stalking round to Fromer's cage through covert. Which was a curious approach when you think what I had come for.

"Well, the first thing I saw was that the front of the cage was not sticking up over the top, which was what I thought I'd made out with my glasses already, when I saw Fromer's name on the roof; now it was unmistakably down. 'He's caught some poor brute,' I thought. Then I began to scout round to see where Fromer was. It was a curious scouting, for I didn't want either side to see me. But I couldn't find Fromer.

"The apes were awfully close to the cage, and I didn't at all like the looks of them, so my progress was very slow. After half an hour of crawling through papyoona scrub . . ."

"Through what?" said Terbut.

"Papyoona," said Jorkens. "After going for half an hour through it, I suddenly looked through a branch of pendulous leaves right into the cage. There were apes between me and it, walking by looking at it, and I was looking over their shoulders straight at Fromer. Yes, he was in the cage smoking a pipe, a thing I had never seen him do before. And I knew by that that he must have been there some time and that his cigars had given out. I hid again till the apes in front had gone by; and then I put up my head and whistled to Fromer. 'Don't say a word,' he said. And I didn't, and all the talking was done by him. He didn't look straight at me, and the apes never

made out whom he was talking to. He was in his tall hat and his frock-coat and red tie with white spots, everything as usual except the cigar; but somehow he hadn't impressed the apes as he had always impressed human audiences, for they had caught him, possibly pulling the string by accident while Fromer was putting in finishing touches; he never told me exactly how it happened; but once they had got him they knew what they were about, and were feeding him on bananas. They even got water for him when he passed out a small tray sideways, and they slopped it into a larger trough, he and the ape between them; and sometimes of course it rained."

And then Jorkens told us all the things that Fromer said about the apes. But what may sound all right in a tale at a club doesn't look so well in print. It was absurdly exaggerated in any case, even when one has made all allowances for a man caught like that in a cage; even when one has understood that it must be especially annoying to a showman. It does no good to repeat it. One thing he said a great deal about were their looks. "And attacks like that," as Jorkens rightly said, "are merely vulgar. But after a while we got back to our old argument, so far as one can call it an argument when only one man is talking, and the other can only shake his head or occasionally point a finger; and that was all that I was able to do, for fear that the apes would hear me. And if they had I hardly know what would have happened. I had a rifle; one doesn't walk in those forests without one; and then there was Fromer's rifle lying close to the cage; but two rifles would have been of no use to me; there were crowds of those apes. And they all came and gazed again and again at Fromer. It made Fromer furious, but it was perfectly obvious that there was some sort of holiday among them; he must have seen the same thing thousands of times at his show. But of course I couldn't explain that to him without being able to speak, and with the mood he was in I doubt if he'd have understood if I had.

"Well, he began by assuming that I was going back at once to collect a lot of men with rifles to shoot the apes, and then to let him out with his key which he had in his pocket but with which it was impossible for him to get at the locks. They were much too far down on each side of the front of the cage. Then he began abusing the apes again, and restarting that very argument that had annoyed me in Orignan much more than I appear to have annoyed him. He said that of course one must have apes in cages. That statistics showed that they lived longer there than in forests. That they were quite as happy living in cages; that they merely got more of it by living longer. More happiness, because more time for it. One point I made upon my side: I pointed at him in his cage. I pointed so violently that he understood me. Of course he was furious. Putting a man in a cage was a

mere piece of apish freakishness, an utterly useless absurdity, a thing no sane man in his senses, and so on. But apes in a cage served a zoological purpose; instructed the young; furthered the cause of science; gave innocent enjoyment on holidays. It was then that I tried to point out that the apes were having their holiday, but I couldn't make that point by signs, and in any case he was too blind with fury to see it. And so the argument went on, he having it all his own way, because I couldn't speak. In any case he always had arguments all his own way, for he was a domineering sort of man. It wasn't that he used to bully his troupe, but they merely went in awe of him without anyone having told them to. Well, when he'd finished arguing with me he gave me my orders. I was to get enough men to shoot every ape in that part of the forest, and then he was going on to fill his fifty cages elsewhere. But before anything else happened he wanted to look like a showman again. He must meet his rescuers, and show himself to the apes for the last time, with a cigar and a fresher tie and a clean collar. 'I'll do that for you,' I said by nods. I wonder if he guessed anything from that.

"I promised to do that for him, and I kept my promise. I went back to Lolo Molo and bought him ten dozen white collars, and a few bright red ties with spots on them, and three or four thousand cigars; and got back to the show that he so involuntarily gave, as quick as ever I could. The apes were still about, though a little way off; and from the punyabi leaves where I hid I was able to throw them on to the top of his cage, and the cigars fell easily through."

"I thought you said it was papyoona scrub," said Terbut.

"It's practically the same plant," said Jorkens. "The cigars fell through and so did the ends of the ties, but the collars were the difficulty, and he had to jump for them and get hold of an end and pull. Collars are often a nuisance anywhere, England or Africa. He couldn't understand why I brought him so many cigars. But I had worked it all out. It was the winning point in the argument; the argument that was taught me at Orignan by that poor ape with its brown eyes. I tried to think of the very least time in that cage that could possibly satisfy justice. Here we were in the apes' country and they had shut this man up, and with ample, ample reason. Was I to interfere and overturn their act of justice? Well, I decided to, but not for five years. They fed him, and I got him cigars enough to keep him going for all that time, and white collars and ties, which he set so much store by. Two dozen collars a year may not seem very much; but Africa's not England, and you have different standards of smartness.

“Of course Fromer was utterly furious. But did he think I never meant a word that I said, from the time I first met him in Orignan? I had given him warning enough. He knew which side I was on in this matter of cages, or only the blindest vanity could have caused him to fail to know.

“There is not much more to tell. His men had scattered when he didn’t return to his camp. His forty-nine cages are I believe there to this day, though of course all buried in greenery. And in five years to the day I sent news of him to more than one authority in Lolo Molo. But they couldn’t find him then. What happened I never knew. Perhaps the apes took him further into the forest. And if they did they may have in their keeping still a man who will never in life depart from the one idea that it is his mission to show on holidays great numbers of apes in cages.

“Well, well, we all make mistakes.”

And I think Jorkens included his own with the showman’s. I think he knew, as is so often the case in an argument, that they were both of them wrong.

Chapter 12

MRS. JORKENS

A LITTLE more and it will be a habit with me to record the tales of Joseph Jorkens, so that men and women to whom the Billiards Club means nothing may come by scraps of knowledge of far corners of Earth, or tittle-tattle about odd customs of some of its queer folk, which would otherwise be lost with the anecdotes, that were only told to help to pass a dingy afternoon or to recompense a friend for the trifling favour of a large whiskey and soda. And this tale I tell because he told it me, and to half a dozen others, one winter's day at the Billiards Club between lunch and nightfall. And I tell it because it throws a little light on Jorkens' early life, which we shall none of us quite clear up from one story: only, I think, when Jorkens has told his last tale, and we shall have compared it with all the others of his we remember, only then shall we have sufficient information to say that we know his life as it really was. I tell it too because Aden is one of the World's inns, a halting place for innumerable travellers, and so of some slight interest to such as care for this planet. I tell it for many reasons.

Yet for one reason I nearly withhold it. There are points in it that not only would be rejected by all the sceptical, but which I myself sometimes doubt. And if I doubt it others may doubt it too. There is no harm in that, indeed I advise them to reserve their judgment about it, until further investigations shall have been made locally, or until Science has penetrated far enough into biology to be able to accept or reject the story with certainty. That is not the cause of my hesitation; but it is that readers chancing to find in this story points that suggest a doubt to them, may turn back their minds to other tales of Jorkens which at the time appeared perfectly satisfactory, and disbelieve them too. For I hear there are those who for a single slip, if it be a slip at all, would write Jorkens down as an unreliable character. It would be unjust to Jorkens that merely to exercise an otherwise idle pen I should bring that reproach on him. Let us therefore be content to leave the whole matter of the truth of this tale undecided until, as I have already suggested, the hesitating feet of the biologist shall have advanced considerably further towards the light. Meanwhile there are two strong reasons for saying that no doubt that may attach to this story, even if Science should finally pronounce against it, should affect the validity of his others.

The first and strongest reason is that it tells of a lady. Jorkens was younger in those days: no doubt there was some little scandal that he had every right to hush up, or some episode that if not discreetly hushed up would have become a scandal, to the detriment of right-thinking people. Whoever the lady was, he may have been right to disguise her, and if he was right to disguise her he was right to do so effectively. We must face the possibility that he may not even have married her at all. In that case he was more than justified so to alter her story that no sordid detail could be possibly traced to her by the men he met in a club. That was the act of a reliable man, not of an unreliable. And another reason why doubt, if doubt there be, should in common justice not be allowed to spread to his other stories, is that this was not a tale that he chose to tell to me; who trusted, as he knew well, every word he said; it was a tale that he was telling already when I came into the room, and two or three of those present were the kind of fellows who are only too glad to pick holes in a doubtful story, or laugh at a man, afterwards, for having mentioned some fact that they think they can prove inaccurate. With men like that Jorkens would never take the pains to get every detail accurate that he would when telling a tale to those who believed him, and who might have further encouraged him by offering him some refreshment to clear his memory. As I came into the room these words of his caught my attention: “I was beginning to feel more and more clearly that my wife belonged to the hotel.” Something about that struck me as unusual, and so I told Jorkens. I even got him to tell me the story over again from the beginning to satisfy my curiosity. If he had exaggerated anywhere he could not now alter it, with the six men sitting beside him, to whom he had told it once. “I was just showing them this ticket,” he said. And he produced a ticket about three inches by five, that had once been stiff and yellow; faded now, and jagged about the edges as an old soldier’s discharge sheet. He fumbled with it awhile, as though a little embarrassed by showing it to me; so I did not stretch out a hand for it and he kept it in his fingers, twisting it round as he talked. “It was in Aden a long time ago. I was on my way eastwards, and we were to stop there five hours. We went ashore, in the way one does; and began looking round. And I had not gone far when my eyes were caught by two placards outside an hotel. One said High Grade Teas, and the other said Mermaid on View. Well, I had only gone ashore to look round, so I thought I’d begin there; and I went inside to ask about the mermaid. And the man I asked merely gave me this ticket and said to me ‘One rupee.’ I paid the rupee, and, well, here is the ticket.”

And this time Jorkens completely handed it to me. On the yellow ticket were printed in capital letters the two words Mermaid Ticket, and in small

letters below it, One Rupee. No man would go and get such a thing printed in order to corroborate a story that he was to tell at a club years later, and one could easily see that the ticket was years old. It was this ticket as much as anything that decided me to record this story; not that it is absolute proof of it, but it showed me that there was too much material there for me or anyone else to brush it aside and say lightly "This story is doubtful." "Well, I was shown in with my ticket," Jorkens continued, "to a long room rather badly lit, with a high screen at the end of it, and just space at the left hand end to get round the screen, and a man standing there to take one's ticket. I got him in the end to let me keep it, for I guessed the possibility of a rather unusual story and I value these little bits of corroboration, though I was miles from guessing all that that idly bought ticket would mean to me. It is like that with the past: it is all gone now; gone for ever with all its vastness, all its tremendous import; but it is made out of little trifles like that one-rupee ticket bought in an hour to spare, ashore at Aden. All gone now. Well, I walked round the end of the screen, and there was a tank, with glass sides, and rocks in it rising up through the water, and a live mermaid on one of the rocks combing her hair. At least she ought to have been combing her hair, as she told me afterwards; it was one of the rules of the hotel; but as a matter of fact she was doing nothing at all except sitting there on a piece of sea-weed and whistling, with her brass comb away on a rock at the other side of the tank. 'That's a nice tune you're whistling, Miss,' I said. 'Oh, do you think so really?' she answered. I need hardly say that I do not usually address young women as 'Miss,' but it struck me that as an exhibit in a hotel in Aden she might not have been accustomed to such refinements and courtesies as would have come the way of a barmaid in a first-class London eating house. Indeed she suggested this thought at once from the way she pronounced 'really.' And then by calling her 'Miss' I was stressing the human side of her. I thought that that would please her; and it was my immediate recognition of her humanity, a point that I always exaggerated, which as much as anything made us friends from the start. Others went in with their tickets looking for something odd; and of course the more they looked for it the more they found things that were queer about her. Then there were those, more kind but quite as silly, who pitied her for being partly fish. They had merely annoyed her. Yes, it was a curious thing about that mermaid; she was always flattered by being mistaken for a lady, and yet in her heart she was far more fish than woman.

"Well, I said to her next, 'Yes, I think it is very nice.' And she said 'Is it really?' And then we got to talking about social events at Aden, about who

was coming to the hotel, and one thing and another, though all the time her heart was far out at sea."

"And do you mean," said Terbut, who was one of those there, "that there really are such creatures?" For Jorkens telling the story the second time seemed to have made it more real to him.

"Well," said Jorkens, "there was this one at any rate. Whether there are many of them is for Science to say. And Science one day will. At present the men of that calling are doing all their biological work to prove that there is a definite unbridged gulf between us and the apes. That must always be our first interest, so far as biology goes. Some," he said, looking at Terbut with his dark hair and rather low brow, "are naturally more interested in that than others. But when they have proved that, when we can all be sure that there is no taint of the ape in man, then it will be time enough to work to the point at which we are related to fishes.

"Let me see, what was I saying? Ah, yes, we were talking, she and I, about who was coming to stay at the hotel. Nobody interrupted us. All the rest of my fellow-passengers seem to have gone to see the tanks of the Queen of Sheba, that she had made in rocky valleys to catch the shower that falls there once a year. One young man came in, as we talked, with his yellow ticket. But with a flick of her tail she was behind one of the rocks at once and leaning over the top of it, with her bright brass comb in her hand, and not a scale visible, the very image of a fake in a cheap show. 'Do you call that a mermaid?' he said to the ticket-collector. And the attendant only smiled foolishly. He didn't care so long as he got the ticket. Nobody else came near us. And after a while I gave another rupee to the man, in case he should come with some rule they might have and say that my time was up. He sauntered away after that, and then we were quite alone.

"I suppose every girl has her surroundings in which she looks her best. Certainly, half in the water and half of her out, among those rocks that the management had had covered with sea-weeds of every colour, and a shell or two on white sand on the floor of the tank, she looked perfectly splendid. And so I told her. 'Do you really think so?' she said. And I think my remark pleased her. There was something in her eyes of the deep ocean, a long way out from shore; dark blues and greens and flashes and trembling lights, and colours you could not follow; green just where you'd swear it was blue, then blue again, and every now and then a streak of what you'd call lilac if it wasn't absurd to name such a colour in trying to tell of eyes. Whenever I looked at them they made me think of great deeps lonely and shoreless, shining with unseen splendours immeasurably fairer than land. And I tried to

get her to speak of the wandering tides of her home. Do you know you might just as well have gone to some glorious singer, or to some world-famous actress, right at the height of her triumphs, and tried to have a talk with her about dairying. The tittle-tattle of the hotel was what she wanted, and whether the man in the dry-goods shop over the way had lately bought a new bicycle. So I talked all that tittle-tattle to her, and some more that I had got out of an old illustrated paper we had on the ship, in order to go on looking at the mystery of her eyes, lighting up with every silly trifle I told her, till they were like what imagination perceives in the deeps of strange seas.

"And so the time went by, till I told her that I had soon to go back to the ship. At this she said 'Ow' so plaintively that, ill-advised though it seems, and hasty and rash as it certainly was, I made up my mind in that instant to throw over my journey, and get hold of my luggage and leave the ship at Aden. Well, I was luckily able to get all my kit off the ship, but I would have gone without any. And so I would to this day, and bare-foot, and penniless, and walking all the way, if one could walk there; not to Aden but into the past, where that romance was. Oh the green of those seas, and oh those sunsets and the blaze of the afterglow. I'm sure they don't shine like that now. I never hear anyone talking of it, of the thousands that pass by Aden. I know they are all gone, all those colours and lights. And nothing remains but this dark dripping evening.

"Well, I went back and stopped at that hotel. And the very next day I had a drink with the manager, sitting outside his door, watching the folk of their rather small world go by, and asked him the price of his mermaid. And he said he wouldn't sell for a thousand pounds. Of course if a man talks like that while you are actually having a drink with him, there isn't the ghost of a chance that he'll ever do business. I saw that, and I said no more of it. Well, it's a long time ago, and if I don't tell you the truth I'll spoil my story. And the truth is that there and then I made up my mind to steal her. I've never excused myself, and I don't do so now. At any rate I never quibbled or canted about it. I never said that she would be happier somewhere else, that towns did not agree with her, that she was meant to be free, that I'd made the man a fair offer. She belonged to the hotel, and I knew it, and I made up my mind to steal her. That's the bare truth; and, however much honesty I have lost in your eyes, I'll at any rate stick to that."

For a moment I felt, and so I am sure did all of us, that something was due to be said about Jorkens' perfect integrity. And yet it was difficult to think what. The mermaid obviously belonged to the hotel, and had clearly

belonged there some time, or they wouldn't have got all those tickets printed; and Jorkens was going to steal her. Somebody said at last "Oh, I am sure it was quite all right." And that very feeble remark was the best we could do amongst us.

"Well, rightly or wrongly," Jorkens continued, "and we may leave out rightly, I made up my mind to steal her. I went to her then to talk it all over, and of course I paid my rupee."

That somehow to me was the worst of the whole story; the satisfaction, almost the smugness, with which he told us he paid that rupee. What did it amount to but an admission of, and a respect for, their ownership of that mermaid. It reminded one that those tickets were their earnings. And here was he about to take away their capital, and punctiliously paying them five minutes' income upon it. It's queer how that rupee stuck in my gizzard more than the whole mermaid.

"She was quite ready to come," Jorkens went on. "I promised to marry her. 'What's that?' she said; for she knew nothing but the deeps of the sea, and the tank in the Grand Hotel, and once for half an hour a fisherman's net. I had made my plans, and for a while I talked them over with her; but those strange blue-green eyes, like ocean currents woven with rays of the moon, would always flash at the sight of a passing hat, if they caught it over the darkened half of the window. Then she would want to know who the wearer was, and if he was coming to the hotel, and whether he had bought the hat in Aden and at what shop. So after a while I stopped discussing my plans with her, and only told her what she would have to do.

"Well, this was the plan I made. And the first thing I needed was a bath-chair. As there had never been one in Aden I got one made by a carpenter. It excited no suspicion, because I managed to cover it by Fashion; which is the sacredest thing in England, but in Aden it seemed to have a double sanctity. Not that a bath-chair is fashionable in England now. We must give the cocktails a few more years to sink in, before it comes to its own again. But it's queer how old fashions float round the world like drift-wood; and in Aden, where Landseer was beginning to be appreciated, and Marcus Stone had not yet come, they were all ready to welcome a bath-chair as soon as I mentioned it. So I got one made with wood and old wheels and a strip of tarpaulin; and found a man who would pull it for five annas an hour. And the next thing I had to do was to find a girl to go in it. You see I couldn't go up to the hotel and drive straight off with the mermaid. The bath-chair is the first place they'd have looked for her. So I had to have the bath-chair definitely occupied by somebody else in the sight of all Aden. Well, I found

a girl to do it: I paid her a pound. And I promised her a pound a month more for so long as she didn't talk about it. I made her wear a veil and gave her a green parasol and a white dress; and I got a black wig made for her, the colour of my mermaid's hair. Then I had her pulled up and down the beach by the man, before the heat of the day, and again in the evening, every day for four days. We became prominent figures of Aden in those few days, going along that beach with the green sea behind us. I changed the green parasol for a blue one on the second day, for the contrast it made against that emerald sea. What excited more curiosity than the actual sight of us going along the beach was the speculation, that ran through Aden like fire, as to who the lady was. I had wanted to excite curiosity, in order to establish definitely that that bath-chair had an occupant long before anybody should miss the mermaid, but this curiosity was almost too much for me; had it not been for two seas and the Arabian desert, there is no saying how far it would have spread. As it was, it was the principal topic in Aden for more than a week.

"I had a lot to do during those four days, besides walking along the beach by the side of the bath-chair. All my plans had to be ready. I'm afraid it is the more innocent thieves that get caught. Those that give their whole minds to their crime, as I was doing, before beginning to steal at all, rise to high place and honour. Only, every plan must be perfect. And another thing is that, after you've worked carefully for a while, luck begins to favour you. I was extraordinarily lucky to be able to rent a small house up on the cinders of which Aden is made, above the town with a fine view out to sea. It belonged to the manager of some business they had, which was on its last legs, and he was just retiring. Then I had to get in touch with the clergyman there, and of course the mermaid had to have a name; and I found from the clergyman that she had also to have a parish. Well, I went to see her, paying my rupee as usual, and told her about her name. They had given her some silly sort of name in the hotel, and I told her that that wouldn't do at all. Well, one could never discuss things with her easily: a different colour would suddenly flash in those eyes, and her mind would be off after some other subject, quick as a startled fish. So I had to choose her name for her myself. For her Christian name I thought of Syren; and yet somehow she didn't remind me at all of a syren. She reminded me more of a barmaid I once knew at Brighton, a long while ago, called Gladys. As for her surname, I named her after her parish. You, Alton, you are a lawyer," he said, turning to the man on his left. "You know that everyone born at sea is born legally in the parish of Stepney."

"Well," Alton was beginning, but Jorkens swept on, for points like this were interesting to Alton and only funny to Jorkens, and to discuss such things between these two would have been useless. "So she became Gladys Stepney," said Jorkens. "She had a bit of a dress. They used to dress her, she told me, in a green arrangement like sea-weed; but what must have been a missionary had come along, and said that it ought to be black; so they gave her a small black skirt that she'd worn ever since. And now I had to get a decent dress for her; and you'll never guess what else I got for her, never. And she liked it too. A pair of boots. Yes, boots to stick up from the tarpaulin at the end of the bath-chair. I take no credit for it, it was just thievish cunning; but I will say, on my solemn word, she was the only thing I ever stole in my life. Of course the dress was white, stitch for stitch the same as the one I'd got for the lady of Aden.

"Well, the day came, and I picked my hour. Midnight's the time for such work as that in England, when honest men are asleep, afraid of the darkness. Well, I went when men were asleep, but a greater terror than darkness kept them at home. I went at noon, when the sun was baking the cinders. You could commit suicide there in five minutes, by doing nothing more than standing out in the street with your hat off. I went at noon to take the invalid lady in white to have a look at the mermaid.

"When the Arab had drawn the bath-chair up to the door I sent him away, and glad he was to get to the shade of a wall and lie down and sleep like the rest. Then the lady of Aden and I walked inside, and I purchased two tickets. I had a red shawl, that suited her very well; and her job was to put that over her white dress and vanish. There was a back door leading to another street, and nobody was looking, and she managed that very well. Five rupees got rid of the attendant. And then I gave Gladys Stepney her new white dress. She put it on where she was, and of course it got wet, but that doesn't matter much at noon in Aden. It was dry in half an hour, except what was under the tarpaulin. Then I helped her out of the tank. It was amazing to see the pace at which she got over the floor; and I could see that without the dress she'd have been three times faster. We got to the door and I lifted her into the chair. Dresses came low in those days, so that you couldn't tell at a glance whether they hid ankles or fins. At any rate no one was watching so far as I could see, though you can never be quite sure of that. Then I dragged the bath-chair away, and up to our little house; at noon, mind you, in Aden in May, and all uphill: love is a powerful incentive. And I loved Gladys in those days. It was her eyes that made me love her. She had an amazingly beautiful figure, not the starved flattened bust that poor silly fashion likes nowadays, but a form nourished well on her natural food,

which was fish; for they used to feed her well at the hotel. And yet it was her eyes that I loved. 'Your eyes are strange to-day,' I used to say to her. And she would answer, 'Are they really,' or 'Do you really think so?' But the next moment, and it was for that moment I loved her, there seemed about to fall from her lips, seemed trembling upon them already, words telling in ancient Greek of the deeps of the sea. She might have spoken to Homer. He might have sat beside her and heard in golden hexameters, talk of the deep and mysteries of the tides, to which even his tremendous imagination had never dived, never fathomed. That's how it seemed to me that she might have spoken. 'Is it really nice?' she would say. And then a thought would darken the blue of her eyes, till you dreamed of the eyes of Athene, and she seemed just about to say something more, something to which we could only listen in awe, though we should not understand it. And though that something more never came, I seemed to be living in those days always upon the brink of it. I spoke little to other men in those days, though I sometimes went down to the town for a drink; I spoke little to them because I felt like a priest of the mystery that she would one day utter, something too far beyond their comprehension for it to be worth while to have any speech with them. But all she ever said, when once I told her that there was a mystery in her eyes, was, 'Oh, is there really?' And it wasn't only her phrases that she seemed to have picked up at the hotel, but even her thoughts besides. Even her thoughts; and I never got from her any of those stories that would have been raw gold to Homer.

"Well, we got to our little house. And the very first thing I did was to go and bring the clergyman, and to introduce him to her, and to arrange for our wedding. The very first thing. So that he needn't have talked quite so much about sin as he did. I don't mean that he was actually rude; but sin was the topic he chose to talk of whenever left to himself; and sin was the end of any subject that I might choose to discuss with him, if there was any possible way to twist it in that direction. As I pointed out to him, I was ready to marry Miss Gladys Stepney there and then. If delays were made until he was ready to marry us, it looked to me as if he was making whatever sin there might be about our little house, not Gladys and I. And at that he was very angry, as though it were I that started talking about sin to begin with. No, he began it, and then went away aggrieved and angry. Of course we never let him, or anyone, see that Gladys was only a mermaid. And, suspicious as he was of the invalid chair and the shawls, he was only looking for sin; so that the more suspicious he got, the further he strayed from the truth. Well, he went angry away from us, down the hill, as I said; jabbing at the cinders of Aden with his walking-stick as he went. But he married us in the end; in the

little church in Aden; the invalid lady in her bath-chair, spinster of Stepney; and the wedding veil that came in very handy to hide any last trace by which she might have been recognised. Her eyes lighted up at the music as though she knew it. 'Mendelssohn,' I whispered to her. 'Who's he?' she asked. 'A musician,' I answered. 'Is he really?' she said.

"Oh, these grey days. I have that memory to lighten them. A long way off, but still shining a little, as long as memory lasts. Seas as green as pale emeralds, and she and I with the bath-chair on the beach.

"I got rid of the Arab for good, and only dragged the bath-chair myself. And when nobody was about we would go bathing, I always coming out first, and ready with a long bathing dress in case anybody was there. With a towel or two to wrap round her I was always able to carry her to the bath-chair without exciting any suspicion. Wild, wayward and strange as she was, I could always render her docile, if she were risking suspicion, by mentioning the hotel. In a way she was fond of the hotel, because it was the hub of the only social life she knew; and she was always asking me who had gone to stay there, and who had looked in for a drink; but she was clearly made for the sea; and, however little she knew of her own destiny, when she got to the long rollers breaking lazily into surf, it was the sea that claimed her. In such a mood, which was strongest in her after bathing, the thought of the wretched tank in the stuffy room was repulsive to her; and in cases of necessity I had only to mention the hotel to stop any frolic of hers that might have betrayed us. What kind of frolic? Oh, anything. You could never tell what she would do. One of the things that gave me most anxiety was her habit of leaping out of the sea to bite at sea-gulls. If she were a long way out, and I nowhere near, she would do it again and again whenever a sea-gull passed. And there would I be standing perhaps on the beach and shouting out to her 'The Grand, The Grand,' and hoping that no one but she would catch the allusion. How the sea-gulls could be so silly as to go backwards and forwards above her again and again I could not understand; but they did.

"In the house I found things no easier. There was no one there but the cook; but I saw that we must have one or two people up there sooner or later, to tea, or merely looking in for a drink, let alone a little dinner-party. Otherwise suspicions would grow, and in the abundant crop of them that would thrive in that tropical air, sooner or later would come the right one, and after that I should be found out in five minutes. And even if we invited nobody, someone was bound to drop in. As things were just then, I assure you that that was impossible. We couldn't have had anyone to dinner, I

couldn't even have asked them to tea. She wasn't ready for it. There were thousands of things I had to teach her. And some of them she wouldn't even learn. You've no idea how many rules there are connected with what we do quite naturally, like sitting down to table and eating a meal. It was a race with time. At any moment somebody might drop in; and there seemed more to teach her every day, as I remembered more and more trifles that I had supposed she knew, until I found she knew nothing. And it was no use conceding a point to her, because she would only go on then and ask for something more. For instance she didn't like fish cooked; so for peace and quiet, and to please her, I said she should have them raw. But it didn't end there; when they came in raw she said she liked them alive. And all the time that I was trying to build a hasty appearance of comfortable respectability, things seemed sliding away from under me to the sea. I had thought for days of every detail, such as getting her into her chair at the end of the table, with her fins away under the tablecloth; and I had never thought to tell her not to snap at her food, not to, oh, thousands of things. It was sometimes a relief to get away from the house, and down to the beach, where she seemed in less danger of being found out than there was amongst her own tea-things. It was not her fault, but entirely mine. I'd stolen her, and I was learning something of the anxieties that haunt men who steal. I hadn't even a hardened conscience; so that, in addition to constant fear of being found out, I was continually thinking of the hotel, and reproaching myself with the memory of what the attendant had told me, that on a good day, when a liner was in, they would make from twenty to thirty rupees. Say two pound in a day. And one realises then that it was no figure of speech when the manager said that he wouldn't sell her for as much as a thousand pounds. She was worth double that to them.

"Yes, that was what was eating into my conscience. Love at first, and little thought for anything but her eyes; and then, as thoughts began to come back to me from beyond the remote wild tides that seemed roaming behind the flash of her glances, then gradually came the thought of the Grand Hotel and the twenty or thirty rupees they would make on a good day. I went down there one day, and saw them trying to show some fish that looked like a cod, that they had put in the tank instead. It went to my heart to see it. And not a word of reproach to me, for they never suspected me. And somehow that almost hurt me as much as if they had. No, I shall never steal again.

"And this was the point I had got to when you came in," said Jorkens, turning to me. "I saw, what it was impossible to be blind to, that my wife belonged to the hotel. I had stolen her; and I had thought that my anxiety would be merely to escape detection. Now I was finding that night and day I

had other anxieties; night and day I was wondering how it went with the hotel I had robbed; how many rupees they got for that wretched show of the fish, what else they were doing to try to make up their losses, whether they put up the prices of their rooms, whether they sold odds and ends: the Grand was on my conscience and there was no shaking it off.

"That was how it was with me when we'd been married a few weeks, and the more I thought of it the more clearly I saw the only thing that there was to see. No, there's no thinking round theft: I've heard men trying to talk round it, but you can't think it away.

"We were down by the sea one day. I'd chiefly brought her there to get away from the house, for every day that we were lucky about callers brought the time nearer when our luck must run out and somebody would walk into the house. And we weren't nearly ready for callers. I told you I was racing against time, trying to teach her this and that; well, I was losing the race. I'd made scarce any progress at all. For instance when we were first married I used to throw fish to her across the table, because she liked it, and she used to catch them in her mouth. Silly of me of course, but I was very much in love; and at any rate it was not an untidy habit, for I never knew her miss once, whether I threw high, wide or low. The trouble was that she still insisted on it. And I had to do it, there was no question of that. So would you have done; so would any man. I'll tell you why, though it is pretty unpleasant. Unpleasant is hardly the word for it. But once she cried. Just one howl, and I stopped her. But it was the most awful sound that ever chilled your blood. She was so frightfully human too to look at, so awfully like the girl I knew at Brighton, that I hadn't the least idea she could cry like that, and it set my hair on end. I daren't risk anything like that happening again; so you see I was in her power.

"Well, I'd got away from the house and we were down by the sea; and I was thinking over things. She was gazing at the deep-green horizon, and we were going to have a swim; and first of all I warned her against sharks, because I somehow saw by her mood and the look in her eyes that she would go a long way out to-day. But she laughed at my mention of sharks: silly fat things she called them, and they only seemed to amuse her. And for a while before going in we sat on the sand, my feet in the warm water. And then I thought that the time had come, and the sooner it was over the better; and I told her what had been on my mind for weeks, which was that of course she belonged to the Grand Hotel. The moment I said that I felt an honest man, and better in every way for it. But a look came over her eyes like the shadow of a ship on the water. I saw then that a simple matter of

honesty about which there could be no two opinions was not so simple to her.

"I might take a room at the Grand, I said: it was a small hotel and I shouldn't be far from the tank. And then, for the first time, I found that her old interest as to who stayed at the Grand was gone. Rapidly I was losing her interest altogether, her eyes were glooming and changing, till it was as when a storm darkens the deep; and, with all these changing colours darkening the iris, she was gazing out to sea. What had I said to annoy her, I asked her then. I had not made the standards of honesty, I had merely offended against them, and now I wanted my conscience to be at rest again. I had not made my conscience.

"But she could not see that her place was in the tank; she could understand nothing; and only gazed out to sea with her eyes glooming. Then I got the rug that she always wore when I carried her back to the chair, and asked her to come home; for I wanted to talk it all over quietly. And she never said a word and did not move; but when I touched her to wrap her round with the rug, she suddenly leapt forward, at the same time throwing away a light scarf that she wore. I said that she moved very fast on the floor of the room at the Grand and that without clothing she could have gone three times the speed; her pace through the shallow water was as fast as a man running. And in an instant she was where she could swim. A flick of her tail then and she was out of my sight; and then I saw no more of her for a while than a curious ripple, which went with amazing speed straight out from land. Once more I saw her where the fin of a shark erected itself from the water. She came up out of the sea as far as her waist and flung something at the fin, then dashed away under that rapid ripple; and a little splash near the fin showed where her derisive missile had struck the sea. That was the last I saw of her; and I was left all alone on the beach, bitterly wondering, as I have wondered ever since, what it was she had thrown at the shark. In those depths and swimming, as she was, near the surface, as the ripple showed all the way, she could not have found a stone. Her clothing she had cast off before she started. What then could she have thrown but my wedding ring? No, no, it could have been nothing else."

I feel it to be due to the refutation of Mr. Jorkens to quote the following letter, the accuracy of which I fully admit.

THE BILLIARDS CLUB

MY DEAR OLD BOY,

I see that you have got that tale that I told you about Aden in Nash's. I happened to drop in here and it was the first thing I picked up. You did let me down over it, you know. You really did. You've made me say that the Grand Hotel charge one rupee for their mermaid ticket. I never said anything of the sort. I know you didn't do it intentionally. But you should be more careful about a thing like that. You know, you really should. Now *don't* say it's only a trifle. To me it's one of the most important things in the whole of that story I told you. For the simple reason that there are thousands of men every year, tens of thousands, that stop at Aden and look in at the Grand Hotel, and they all know the price of the mermaid ticket. It's eight annas, old boy, eight annas, as I told you at the time. Now you must see it's by things like that they'll test my story, and even my personal veracity. One doesn't like to be thought to exaggerate, you know. They won't study up zoology and test my tale scientifically. What do they know of zoology? They'll test it by things they do know, like the price of that ticket. And they'll say "He's doubled the price of the ticket, and he's probably exaggerated the same amount. To get the truth of the story you should about halve it." That's what they'll say, damn them. I know. And all your fault, old boy. It's put me to lots of worry. You really owe me a drink over all this.

Yours ever,

J. J.

Chapter 13

THE WITCH OF THE WILLOWS

For some days after the day on which in a rainy evening Jorkens had told me his story about the mermaid, and the large part that she had played for a short while in his life, I did not return to the Billiards Club. I was puzzled. There were things in his tale that I could not entirely reconcile with views I had held before, and I was turning things over in my mind. On the one hand I had come by now to rely on everything Jorkens told me, as being the sincere chronicle of experiences in the life of an unimaginative man, whose erratic travelling had given him more opportunities of knowing the world and its ways than a first glance at his rather unphilosophic type of face might suggest to you: on the other hand preconceived ideas that I had formed of biology, utterly unsupported although they were by study of any sort, had given me various prejudices which were now muddling my mind with doubts. I questioned one or two biologists, whose knowledge was on the side of my prejudices; but for all their study I found that Science had not yet reached a point that enabled them to give me the clear-cut definite assurance that I needed one way or the other.

Things being like that, I left them where they were, and went back to the Club, to have another talk with Jorkens about it. And there I found him after lunch in the middle of the sofa before the fire, being stimulated, or goaded, by numbers of questions as to what other adventures he had had of the kind. I imagine that some of them doubted his last story, or even disbelieved it, and wanted to see how much further he would go: no noble motive, and yet it would help to pass the time away if Jorkens rose to the bait, and would probably in the end teach them something or other about the world we inhabit of which they were quite ignorant. Others believed him, and honestly wondered into what further adventures of the kind he had got himself. Others again were, I am sorry to say, too prone to listen to any tale about one of the opposite sex in preference to any more useful occupation whatever. So there they were, for different reasons, all encouraging Jorkens to lay bare to them pages of his past life, long ago turned over, away from the public eye.

"What other adventures?" said Jorkens. "Well, to take them in their order, the next was a very curious one. I left Aden at once, as soon as I lost

Gladys, with a feeling in my heart that I would never travel again. I came back to England; and of course there were just as many girls as there are now. You didn't see them tearing about on motor-bicycles so much as you do now, but they were there just the same. Well, I saw lots of them, in the way one does. And of course there was some mystery about them all; more or less. And yet, after Gladys, it amounted to nothing. You see a woman may hold a fan for a moment in front of her face, and have a young man almost paralysed with the mystery of what expression she is wearing behind it. She may awe them with the turn of an ankle, or the poise of her head. But she can't do that to a man that has known a mermaid. However mysterious woman has been through the ages, we at least know she exists; while to all that was wonderful in Gladys there was added like a beautiful veil a world-wide doubt as to the very existence of her and her whole species. You can see then that the first glance of an eye, the first dimple or blush, could not capture me so easily as they could once. Very likely it was this feeling of lost mystery, which had always oppressed me since Gladys swam out to sea, that drove me to walk alone in bleak and unfrequented parts of England such as marshes or moors; or sometimes, if I found them, in dark woods. I took my exercise in no other way, wandering about the country and sleeping in small inns, always alone and not caring to what point of the compass I moved. And so one day I came to the willow-wood in the marsh, and later to the forest of Merlinswood. You may picture me as a somewhat forlorn wanderer, the knight of an aimless quest, seeking what I should never find; for I knew that I should never see Gladys again, and a mystery had gone out of my life with her; and yet I was still searching, although not knowing for what. I don't know what people thought of me when they saw me go by; but very few did. So one day I came to the willow-wood, a haunted sort of place from the look of it, and marsh floating all through it; an ideal place for a lonely man. And lonely it was when I entered it, and soothing, for everyone I met seemed common after my mermaid; I mean ordinary, reduplicated over and over again, just like everyone else; and I was tired of ordinary people and the things that they did and said. Those few weeks I had spent with Gladys had left me like that, unfit for my kind, the kind that I had thrown over to marry her. And now she was gone, and I was quite alone. Well, I had not gone far when the sun began to set, and a mystery came down on the wood. And yet, when I began to look at it, the mystery did not seem to come from the sunset, for it had not affected the whole wood; nor was it in particular gathered up towards the sunset or radiating earthwards from it. On the contrary the sunset was almost in front of me, a little to the left of my course, while the mystery that was settling down on the willows, till their ancient boles seemed all enchanted with magic, was much more to

my right. Well, if my aimless quest was for anything it was for mystery; that was what I had lost with Gladys in the green sea beyond Aden; so I turned a little to my right, and walked straight towards those huge boles that looked so ogre-like and so enchanted. And oddly enough as I neared them the mystery seemed not to recede; not a spell seemed lifted, not an enchantment seemed weaker; but that ominous threat of magic, immense and near in the woodland, remained as sturdy and still as the huge boles of the willows. I went splashing on; and all of a sudden I met, walking under one of the willows, an old woman in a black cloak and a high black hat, coming on with a black stick. It was all round her that the mystery haunted the marshes, and it moved towards me as she moved."

"Very extraordinary," said someone.

"I am telling it you as I saw it," said Jorkens. "Many things that I have seen in my life I shall leave to other men to explain, men better equipped than I am with scientific data, so far as Science has got; and when there are more such data they can investigate still further; meanwhile I can only record the bare things I have seen. She came towards me, and that mystery that was haunting the willows and the marshes moved with her as she came. She looked at me with a quick glance of her eyes, before I was near enough to see them clearly; and I remember thinking then that in the darkness of them there might come flashes, strange and sudden like stars that appear where you are not watching. So I saw her for the first time, all wonder and magic. Some men when they have loved a blonde, and anything at all goes wrong, turn next time to a dark one; but others hang always about the same old type, like a wolf about northern sheep-folds. So it was with me; I had lost mystery, and was true to mystery, and the strangeness of this old woman lured me at once. Nearer she came, and the mystery came still nearer. I cannot tell you what the mystery was; I cannot describe what magic was haunting the marshes; I can only tell you vaguely my own impression; that's all we ever have to go by. But those impressions, everything that I felt and saw, told me as clearly as hints can warn, as clearly as omens can threaten, that something magical was impending around me, or lurking only just on the other side of the willows. And, as she came nearer, these warning impressions ran whispering to my mind, assuring my very reason that what seems so fantastic here, magic, sheer necromancy, was boding upon those marshes. Of course the hour was strange, being just on the edge of sunset; and the place was strange, those desolate marshes all dim with the shade of the trees; and the ancient twisted limbs of the willows were strange; and strangest of all the dark woman that moved swiftly towards me; and yet

above all these things there was something more, that unaccountable thing that has been for ages called magic.

“The time was come when I had to speak and say something; and I felt it could only be something apologetic, something asking pardon for my intrusion on those marshes at such an hour, or weakly explaining why I had dared to come. I stood a moment and gazed at her while she came rapidly nearer, and no words came to my lips; and all I said in the end was: ‘Is there any way out of these marshes?’

“She shook her head at that and smiled, and went on shaking it again and again. I don’t know what she meant, but couldn’t criticise, because there was not much meaning in what I had said either.

“And then I stood and gazed awhile, fascinated by the mystery of her. And she leaned her hands on her stick and gazed at me, the grey ringlets hanging down from under her hat. And then I said to her: ‘What has come over these marshes?’ knowing well that she knew.

“And she said: ‘Sunset and witchcraft.’

“And so I said to her: ‘What does the witchcraft portend?’

“And she said: ‘Who knows that? Not the witches.’

“And I said: ‘Then why do they make witchcrafts, enchanting a place like this till one can hardly tell whether one’s on earth or in elfland?’

“ ‘If there’s a warning put on a place,’ she said, ‘it’s for folks to heed the warning, not to go bothering those that have other things to do, with the way and the why and the wherefore. A warning’s a warning, and that’s all there is to it, without worrying round these willows.’

“And at that moment the sun went down, and all that was ominous in marsh or in willow grew more intense than before. And I said as politely as I could, with my hat in my hand, ‘I’ll take the warning,’ and turned round to go away. But as I turned the thought came to me that, though it went with grey hairs and with wrinkles, yet here was the mystery that I was searching the world for ever since I lost Gladys. So I turned half back and said: ‘If I came again should I ever see you here?’

“And she said: ‘You might come for weeks and never find me, and then one day I’d be here.’

“ ‘Then I’ll come again,’ I said.

“And with that I found my way out of the wood and the marshes before dark overtook me, after which the tale she had told with her shaking head when I had asked her the way would have been only too true.

“I stayed at a little inn called Wold’s End, a mile or so from the marshes; and every day I went back to the willow-wood in the dank waste towards sunset. I haunted the place till all the water-hens knew me; and sometimes I stayed till the rooks had all flown over and the duck came dropping in and the first stars appeared. Day after day I went, and still she did not come. And then one evening, perhaps two weeks later, when ice was on the marshes; for winter was still reigning, though in his later days; one evening I went again to the willow-wood when all the twigs were black and still in the frost, and menacing something with their ominous stillness, while the sun peered huge and red, low through the wood. I went into the solitude of the willows, and no sooner had I come than all that they seemed to portend with their ancient limbs in the dusk and their frozen motionless fingers, all that they seemed to whisper with shadows, or plot with the ice and the gloaming, was suddenly multiplied; and I seemed to have strayed once more to the tryst of an unseen company, silently planning things that were not all well for man. Once more I cannot tell you how these things were, only that I perceived them; and as these portents or omens, call them what you will, continued to grow more menacing, I knew they could come from nothing but the near approach of the witch.”

“Then she was a witch?” said one of us.

“Well,” said Jorkens, “I don’t know what else to call her. When you see a man in a dark blue suit, buttoned up to the neck, and a helmet, stopping the traffic and sending it on again, you say that he is a policeman. She was dressed like a witch and was acting like one: I had nothing else to go by. And just then she was coming towards me, walking with her black stick, and the mystery of the wood was coming with her.

“ ‘Willow-witch,’ I said, for I did not know her name, and ‘Madam’ would have sounded absurd for one that shared with the sunset the wonder that haunted the wood, ‘I have come back.’

“And she nodded once or twice, with what may have been a smile at the ends of her lips, so far as I could see in the fading light.

“And the next thing I said was a captious thing that I should not have said to a lady. ‘You told me there was no way out of the marshes.’

“ ‘Nor is there,’ she answered. ‘You come back and back to them.’

“That was true; they had a hold upon me already, and I suddenly saw that the willows would drag me back and back. And yet it was not to see them that I had come; their mystery without her was no more than what sunset and winter can make of any old trees. It was for the magic in her that I had returned to the willows; for my weariness of the things of every day, that had weighed on me since Gladys swam back to sea. And it had taken two weeks to find her.

“So I said to her, ‘Where do you live?’

“ ‘Out of sight,’ she said, ‘and out of hearing,’ she added, ‘and out of knowledge, of the folk that make hoardings and rubbish heaps.’ For hoardings were just coming in about then. “ ‘Where’s that?’ I asked.

“And she said ‘Merlinswood,’ and pointed. ‘By the path through the wood,’ she added.

“And about this time sounds of the night began, and continued to increase; the musical whirr of a wing cutting clear through the dusk, the croak of a small marsh-bird that you do not see, the call of a plover far off flapping over the marsh, the whistle of teal, and again the croak in the water. And then as suddenly as the geese drop in to the marshes, as swift as the wind changes, she turned in the direction that she had pointed, and went away through the wood.

“In the dim light I followed her close, knowing her to be now on the other side of the trunk of a willow, now behind the gnarled bole of the next one; but as I came round each trunk she had gone too soon, like the mystery lurking in shadows whenever you peer too close. So that soon I stopped to listen; and not a sound.

“And soon after that the first star came glimmering out, and the air was suddenly full of the singing of wings, and the voices of travellers that nest near the pole; for the time had come by now for the flight of the duck, and the time for human folk to go from the marshes. I got out with no more difficulty than is made by darkness and winter in such a place; but had she still been there at so late an hour I do not know what headway I should have made against the omens and bodings that I know would have haunted the wood.

“As soon as I got from the marshes I walked on fast through the dark, and there presently came in sight the lights of the Wold’s End. And glad I was after all that magical strangeness to see their stuffed trout under glass, with its rim of plush round the edge. Glad I was to sit with another man after

supper, listening to the technique of jam-making, from the delicate carving of the raspberry pip to the care of acres of turnips. But when I had gone to bed my need of lost mystery came back to me and I was wondering once more what magic haunted the willows, and made up my mind to set forth as soon as might be, to find out what I should see by the path that went into Merlinswood.

"Brightly the winter's morning shone into my room, clear and keen with the frost; and soon I was up and asking my way to the wood beyond the marshes. It was a very old forest they told me; and I could get to it by leaving the marsh on my left, following a lane I should find there. And from what I heard I made it out to be four or five miles beyond that spot in the marshes at which I had twice met the witch, or whatever she was with her high hat and black cloak and the mystery that seemed to float with her over the marshes. I had breakfast then, and filled my pockets with sandwiches, and started away early without further word to anyone. I should have liked to ask more at the inn about that strange woman, but in the end I thought it was better not, for there was nothing at all that was ordinary about her, and if you ask people about anything strange and they know about it or think they know, they will delight to pour out information, not very accurately; but if they don't know of it they look at you rather queerly, and any way it is better to talk of ordinary things to them. I don't know why, but there it is; and I went away saying nothing. What time would I be back, the woman who had told me the way shouted after me from the inn. 'Well, it all depends,' I called back to her. 'It might be one time and it might be another. It rather depends.'

" 'Will you want lunch?' she asked.

" 'Sandwiches,' I said, and was gone.

"Well, I left the willow-wood away on my left and was walking all the morning; and I had gone some miles before I even saw the forest, heaving its tops away into the distance like a darker hilly land. And yet there was something about it unlike land; it had not the fields' solidity; it was shaped by the wind above and the folds of the earth below; both permanent, for no stray gale had ever affected it; it was the wind that had mostly blown for hundreds of years that had had the shaping of the tops of those thousands of trees. And there it lay like the after-swell of a storm that has troubled the sea, dark folds of the pine's foliage lashed thus by the wind of the centuries. Presently the lane ceased, as though no one had any traffic with that wood; and I went on over the fields to it. And presently I was searching among dead bracken and pine-trunks for the path that led into the wood. By this

path she had told me she lived, so that I had thought it easy to find her; but I had to find the path. And at last I discovered it, though mistaking it at first for a rabbit-track.

"When I entered the wood the day seemed all different, air, light and everything; but how strangely it was yet to alter I did not guess. For at first there seemed a merriment in the wood; the smell of the pines, a little breeze dancing, a stray bird prophesying Spring, all the change from the bare fields, cheered every step along that tiny path at first. But gradually the wood was turning from its resemblance to any wood we know to something so far stranger that a deep uneasiness began to affect me, and to increase with every step. It had changed into a wood, so far as I can describe it at all, like a wood a long way off, or a wood at sunset, or a wood remembered from one's earliest years, or something only told in a grim story, having no place on earth. And this strange, almost terrible feeling seemed to come from straight ahead where the path was going, until it seemed to veer very slightly towards the left; and from this I gathered that I should find the home of the witch upon the left of the path. And, sure enough, there I came on it; a cottage all in the midst of strangeness and mystery, like lightning out of black clouds, among the trees by the left-hand side of the path. And after that the path seemed to go no further. The cottage was small, and roofed with a dark thatch, and the windows were made of round panes the size of the ends of bottles, and all as bulbous and thick. There was nothing to do but to go to the door and knock, though every inspiration that haunted the wood was seeming to warn me away. I knocked and the door opened instantly, and there she was in her cloak and her curious hat; and magic seemed to pour out through the open door, to lurk in all the dark places and to thrill the deeps of the wood.

" 'Well?' she said.

" 'I have come,' I answered.

"And she stood aside from her door, as though to see whether I would dare to enter. So I walked in, and looked at her, and she nodded her head. No doubt then but that I was in a witch's cottage. So many were drowned in mediaeval days, and right down to the nineteenth century, that one scarcely looks for witches in our own time. Yet here one was unmistakably. Nothing one's ever read of them seemed to be absent, broom, black cat and the rest of it.

" 'Will you have tea?' she said.

“I knew it would be no ordinary tea, and I knew it would be no use protesting there against whatever might happen; if I looked for the things of every day I knew that I should not find them, nor had I come for them to that wood. So I merely said ‘Yes, please.’

“She went then to a shelf in the opposite wall to the door, on which there were bulging jars of earthenware about a foot high. ‘Cowslip?’ she asked. ‘Or briar rose, or daffodil?’

“I had heard of cowslip tea, so I muttered ‘Cowslip.’ And she took down a jar.

“It was a strange brewing. She boiled water, as we do, in a great kettle over her fire, then threw handfuls of withered dry cowslip-blooms into her teapot, and added a sprinkling of herbs of which I knew nothing. She filled with it two cups of ruddy earthenware, glazed green on the outside, and instead of milk she poured honey. All the while her cat watched us, from where it lay by the left of the fire. I sat in an old carved chair that looked like yew-wood, on one side of the table, and she on the other, and both facing the fire. And for long she looked at the fire in silence, drinking her cowslip tea, while I drank the strange brew also; and as the shapes of the coals changed she peered more and more intently, till it seemed as though events, though events of which I knew nothing, were passing before us through the deeps of the fire, reviewed by her keen eye. And then the crust of black coal on top cracked through and tumbled in. ‘Trouble coming to the world,’ she said.

“ ‘What trouble?’ I asked.

“ ‘They’re going all the wrong way,’ she said.

“I said they were doing their best, or something of that sort; for she seemed to be adversely judging the whole generation, and I felt that someone or other ought to defend them. But she only shook her head again and again, gazing into the ruin of coals in the fire before us.

“ ‘Tell them,’ I said, for she had impressed me that trouble was really afoot.

“ ‘Too busy selling,’ she answered, and went on shaking her head, and turned back her gaze to the fire.

“ ‘Tell me,’ I asked her.

“ ‘Man’s losing his hold,’ said she.

“ ‘What’s taking his place?’ I asked.

“She sighed, and said ‘Machinery.’

“So that was it, a monster of Frankenstein ousting its master. It was a dreadful idea. ‘Are you sure?’ I said.

“ ‘Look at the world,’ she said. ‘Getting more and more fit for machines, and less for men. It’s even got into the hay-fields.’

“ ‘And the end?’ I asked.

“ ‘Not yet,’ she said.

“ ‘Tell me more,’ I said, with the strange brew in my hand, and the cat always watching me.

“ ‘Who are you,’ she said, ‘to know such things as that, that are the affair of the witches?’

“And I saw that I had asked for more news of such matters than are the business of men that have merely got to live, and leave the trend of events, which they cannot control, to Destiny, or the blind impulse of generations, that know so little where they wish to go that even Fashion can lead them, or the charlatan or the demagogue or a whim.”

“You’re hard on the age,” said Alton.

“Well, where do we want to go?” replied Jorkens.

“By Gad, I don’t know,” said another.

“Well, nor do I,” said Jorkens. “And nor did I in those days. But she seemed to know. And I never knew anyone else that did; so I sat there silent, waiting for her to tell me. But she wouldn’t tell.

“You may think it strange that I was waiting, as though on tip-toe, to hear of our destiny from this old woman in a cottage in an out-of-the-way wood. But, after all, even in town-halls and village school-rooms at election times we find ourselves readily listening for the same thing, when the room gets crowded and warm; and here in this cottage the imminence of impending things seemed somehow intenser a thousand times than it does in the crowded room with the oil-lamp swinging, and the platform up at the end, and the election coming that week. I don’t know how it was so; it was the way of the wood; the place seemed reeking of magic.

“So long I sat there waiting for her to speak that she seemed almost to forget me. And then she turned her eyes away from the fire, suddenly as though it had no more to show her, or as though she were weary of what it

had to show. She looked then straight and fixedly at her cat. And after a while she spoke again, though not looking at me.

" 'Ah, he knows,' she said. 'He knows. He does not run to the towns: he does not sell. He does not plan, think or worry. He walks in the wood. He knows what's coming. What is coming, dark one; what is coming? He knows though he does not say. One thing coming, and that soon. And nothing else that one need watch for or plan for. And nothing that one can do to hasten or stop it, and so no need to worry. What is coming, dark one? Spring, you would say. Aha, he knows.' And when I saw her so much taken up with her cat, I rose and bowed and left her.

"As I went from that cottage the mystery of the wood began to drop behind me. And though I had the overwhelming feeling that it was massed over my foot-prints, yet in front it dwindled and dwindled, until I got the feeling at last that I walked in an ordinary forest. Yet even then I hastened, for fear of what magic might happen to overtake me if I lingered upon that path. And the wood was beginning to darken.

"When I came to the path's end and the open evening, and saw the sun not yet set, the light was as welcome as I have ever known it. I seemed to bathe my thoughts in it, and wash away magic from the deeps of my mind. I ate my sandwiches, that I had quite forgotten, and then walked on briskly and reached the inn before all traces of daylight had quite gone from the sky.

"I was more glad than I can easily say to see the odds and ends of familiar things again that hung on the walls, or stood in pairs on the mantelpieces, of the inn of Wold's End. I was back in time for supper, which I had with the commercial traveller with whom I had spoken the night before: he was in that part of England inspecting the turnip market. All through supper we talked, and for long after; chiefly about high-grade jams, for we could not talk of my business in those parts; it was altogether too strange; and so we talked of his. I know that if I had told him I had loved a mermaid in Aden, and she had left me, swimming out alone to the deep-green sea, and that lonely for all the loss of the mystery that was about her I now sought a witch, he would have become unfriendly at once, reserved, brief in his statements, in fact completely hostile. Why? There was no interest whatever in the whole of his life's work, and I listened to him for hours; yet if I had spoken to him of what was nearest to *my* heart, there it would have been. I don't know why, but there it was. So we talked of jam-making.

"And the hours went by, and the inn-keeper's wife looked in to see if we still were there; and still we talked. And then he went to bed. Then all the loneliness came back to me, all the bleak emptiness there is in the world when mystery has left it, and all the aching of my heart for magic, or whatever it is that puts a wonder upon whatever it touches, and cannot itself be described. Yes, I was sitting there alone among the antimacassars, pining for that elusive thing that lies just beyond the limit to which Science has penetrated, for something that haunts abundantly the shades of the land of our guesses, but that enters the land of our knowledge perhaps once in a life-time. Again my hostess looked into the room, and this time her every movement showed clearer than ever before that she wanted to put the lamp out and shut up. So I went up to bed, but did not sleep, till long after the earliest cocks began to crow, wondering whether or not to go back to Merlinswood. It was not a wood to which you went lightly, and night and my wondering were multiplying the magic of it, till the feeling came that the wood and the house of the witch were surely to be avoided. For it is one thing to stand and look at a wood by daylight, even a haunted wood; while, though the impalpable magic lie heavily round you, the solid trunks of the actual trees are standing there vivid and tangible; but it is another thing altogether to think of that wood at night: then the solid tree-trunks float on the currents of thought no easier than the mystery of magic, and if the trees are more vivid by day than whatever may lurk behind them, in the thoughts of the night they are equal, or the inhabitant of the shadow even more clear than the tree. How many volumes might be written of the thoughts of a single man on one sleepless night; more intense too, and more exciting, than most of our visible activities. Well, I lay there thinking of the deeps of the wood, while every now and then, long before light, the crow of a cock reminded me of the world that lay safe outside witchcraft and magic. Should I seek again that magic without which life was so tame since Gladys swam back to the deep sea, or should I shun the shadows of that haunted wood and the witch that seemed to enchant them? Then I must have slept. And when I woke in the clear morning I found my mind was already made up. I would go to Merlinswood.

"Beyond that my mind was made up I knew nothing. What I would do when I got there, what good would come of it, or even when I should return to the inn, I had not decided. Only I felt that the world was dull without magic, and now that Gladys was gone I knew nowhere else to find it but in the shadows of Merlinswood.

"I had breakfast and made my own sandwiches. My hostess came in and spoke to me with a view to finding out what meals I should be at home for.

But I could say little to her but evasive things, because the truth was too strange for her. And even to me the whole quest seemed so strange that I could not guess what would happen. All I knew was that a great mystery had gone out of my days, that there was mystery in Merlinswood, and that there was no purpose or aim left in my life that was strong enough to hold me back where that magnet attracted. So at the first chance that came to slip away I set off on my journey.

"The frost had gone, and the ice was already thawed, as I went by the edge of the marshes; like a kid bleating far up in the air, the snipe were drumming; ducks were pairing; rooks were walking curiously; the prophecy of the birds that Spring was coming would soon pass into history. What a history is that, compared to what we call histories; the history of Earth itself, not . . ."

"Excuse me," I said, "Jorkens, but you were going to tell us about the witch." For in certain moods Jorkens will philosophise about elemental things that are far too large for one particular story, and I recognised one of these moods in him now. My interruption may seem rude, but it saved the story, for what that is worth.

"Ah, yes," said Jorkens, "so I was. Well, I came to Merlinswood after a good walk. I came to the end of the lane, and to the very spot in the wood at which I arrived before, at least so I could have sworn, but it took me nearly an hour of careful searching before I found the tiny track in the bracken that led to the path through the wood. When I found it I hurried on to make up for lost time, and so as not to be overtaken by night in Merlinswood.

"There being only one path one could not go wrong, even without those quiet waves of mystery, that slowly increased as I went further into the wood, like the gentle heaving of some summery sea, and taught me that I was nearing the house of the witch. What that mystery was I can never describe to you, except to say that what lurks in old tales of the past, or hides over distant horizons, was here close in every shadow, or just on the other side of adjacent trees. I can no more analyse it now than I did then, except to say it was magic; and, when all is said and done, we don't yet know what magic is. I believe it will one day be found out, much as the planet Neptune was, not by direct researches into magic but by other observations."

"What other observations?" said someone, though I tried to stop him, for he was leading Jorkens away.

"They discover one planet by watching irregularities in the orbit of another," said Jorkens, "by which they see that something unknown is

attracting it. In the same way there are curious leanings in the spirit of man that Science has not accounted for, and which if observed more closely might give us far more data than what we possess already for the accurate study of magic. But whatever magic may be, it was all round me there in the wood; one could no more doubt it than one could doubt the coming of Spring: every shadow hinted the one, as the birds were hailing the other. And all of a sudden there loomed up right in the midst of it the shape of the witch's cottage. Even the song of the birds seemed hushed there to a more significant chanting, as though they told of something impending more solemn than Spring; and the great trunks of the trees seemed to hide something more ominous than those I had passed further back. Shadows lurked there as though this were their meeting place, to which they had come from far, being cast by unknown shapes in fields far from our guessing. And through these sinister shadows I went, and knocked again on the door. And there was the witch again as though waiting to receive me.

" 'So you have come back from the world,' she said.

"Nothing made me realise more clearly than this that, however much magic may intersect our course, even coming at times into quite familiar fields, there are nevertheless two worlds, the world of which we know something, whose safe windows and pleasant hedgerows we recognise at a glance, and the world of which, in spite of a few rhymes and a score or so of old stories, we know nothing whatever. A dangerous world to travel alone. I looked round at the sinister wood and entered the house, and the witch shut the door behind me.

" 'Will you have some tea?' she said next.

" 'Cowslip tea, please,' I said hastily. For at least I had drunk that before, and I could not associate terror with that mild flower; and I was beginning to dread everything in that vortex of mystery into which I had so rashly entered twice.

"And she seemed to know that I was drawing back from her spells and fearing her ingredients. For she turned and looked back at me as she went to her shelf, and said: 'There is more in cowslip than you will ever know.'

"Then she took down her earthenware jar and put handfuls into the teapot and set the kettle to boil; and all the while I had said nothing but 'Cowslip tea, please.'

" 'Yes,' she said, 'there's a spell in cowslips that's been the equal before now of herbs they brought from the East.'

“ ‘Have you been much in the East?’ I said, not knowing quite what to say.

“And she looked at her broomstick leaning against the wall, and then only said ‘No.’

“She looked at her fire and I was wondering if she would tell me more of the fate of the world, but she was only watching to see when her kettle would boil.

“The glass of her curious window-panes was pale blue, and that did nothing to lessen the ominous look of the trees all gathered round the house in terrific attitudes. Inside the cat had exactly the same place that he had before, beside the left of the fire, and gazed at me with as green a look in his eyes as I’ve ever seen upon the face of a cat. The light, though broad daylight outside, was beginning to fade in the room, and the broom and the cat and the witch were growing blacker and blacker.

“And still the kettle would not boil.

“I sat there waiting for the kettle to boil, because by now I realised that I was in the wrong world, and that the world of familiar things was the world that is made for us, where from everything that one sees one can find one’s way; while everything here, every tree-trunk and every shadow, seemed to be directing one wrong. Yes, magic gives a wonderful spice to life, but it’s dangerous beyond any spices. And the cat seemed to be watching me with too much knowledge. That it was watching me, and intently, there could be no doubt, but it somehow seemed to know more than cats should know.

“And at last the kettle boiled.

“She made the tea then and gave me a cup of the strange stuff, pouring honey in as before. Again she filled a cup for herself and we sat and looked at the fire, and the cat looked at us. It grew darker still in the shadow of all those trees, and the red light of the fire began to overtake the blue light in the room that came through the thick round panes. Dark and silent. For I found nothing to say, having suddenly seemed to discover that we are not made for magic, and that the little familiar things of every day are made for us, a pair of bronze men on a mantelpiece holding a pair of bronze horses, a pipe-rack shaped like a gate, a bit of dead pampas-grass in a tall glass in a corner, all the things we had at the inn, I was remembering them now with yearning: we are safer among such things. And all the while the cat was watching us.

“The witch gazed into the fire, watching every movement in it, but said nothing of what she saw there. Sometimes she sighed, but for the rest it was all silence. She watching the fire, the cat watching us, and I wondering uneasily: so the time passed. And at last she spoke.

“ ‘I suppose you wouldn’t marry an old, old woman,’ she said.

“I may know little of magic, but from every tale that I had ever heard, from every hint I got from the darkening room and the nodding twigs outside, from every instinct that prompted me at that moment, I knew that all would be well if I said yes. I knew that she could not be the bent hag she appeared; I knew for one thing that if that were so she could never have walked to the willow wood in the marshes and back again the same evening, and faster than I could walk. I knew by every record we have of witches, every tale that has ever come down to us, that she would change as soon as I married her into something lovelier than the folk of the other world know, something only known of in ballad. I knew all this; I knew it well. And yet somehow those tawdry ornaments, dull houses and trite ways, of the world of every day had got hold of my heart-strings. It was at the turn of the tide with me; and I was veering back, in my folly, to ordinary people, ordinary events and ordinary things. Yes, I made my choice; I said No to her.

“At once there came a look in her eyes, like flaming stars in the night, where there has been no star before. The place seemed suddenly electric. Even in the eyes of the cat I saw a look that you’d never believe. And the room became darker for the flash of the eyes. There was nothing that I could say to explain away my refusal. I might have retracted, but from the way that magic was surging up all round me, both in the cottage and in all Merlinswood, I was scarcely tempted then to throw in my lot with it. Maybe I was right. Maybe. At least I thought so for a little while. But with thirty years in which to think it over I have come to know that it was the mistake of my life. What were the antimacassars of dull convention, or the equally conventional cocktails and jazz designs of to-day, to the magic I lost in Merlinswood? For I lost it, and I lost it for ever. That sudden wave of mystery that seemed to threaten the cottage was the last of them. It was like a wave that faded away without breaking. I had not gone eighty yards from the angry witch and her cottage, when the whole forest was utterly disenchanted. She was standing there in her open door looking balefully after me, with something of mystery surrounding her yet, but from the trees and from all Merlinswood it was all gone. Nothing more wonderful remained than the near approach of Spring, of which the birds sang simply, wonderful enough but earthly; and as I passed out of sight of her cottage I

saw the last of magic that I shall ever see. Yes, the last of it. For I soon found out my mistake: I soon found out that one minute of magic was worth ten ordinary hours, I soon saw that it was the light of an enchanted country lying outside the edge of ours, a country in which everything is intensified as our dreams or our hopes are here. I searched for it again and again. I went by the lane that comes to an end a little way short of Merlinswood. I went to the edge of the wood where I thought I had gone before, I searched with my fingers through hundreds of yards of bracken, but I never came again on the path that went into the wood. And though I searched Merlinswood through and through, and lost myself again and again, I never found the cottage any more. For weeks I used to go to the marshes at evening where the willows leaned over the water; but I was never able to retract my folly in casting off magic, for the witch never came again.

"And for years after that, whenever twilight or sunset gave a sudden queer look to a field or a distant hill, whenever anything strange seemed haunting birches or willows, as you sometimes see, for instance, in pictures by Corot, I would set out at once, however far the walk, and in any hour or weather, to see if the magic that I have known only twice, once in Aden and once in England, had come back to the hills. No, it never came back. It never came back."

Poor Jorkens, he sat there so disconsolate, that it was a pleasure to more than one of us to offer him such refreshment as is usual amongst friends at our club, and to leave him quietly alone with our little offerings to gleam on the table beside him.

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THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Travel Tales of Mr. Joseph Jorkens* by Edward Plunkett (as Lord Dunsany)]