

THE
SLUGLY BEAST

Lord Dunsany

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The Slugly Beast

by Lord Dunsany

*You will be able to find Lord Dunsany's Our Distant Cousins represented in half a dozen popular anthologies. In fact it is quite difficult to fail to encounter that story of a flight to Mars by an aviator friend of the famed raconteur, Jorkens, and of the curious condition this aviator, Terner, found on the red planet: how humanity was but the penned-up cattle for a fearsome, inhuman master species. What is not common knowledge is that Lord Dunsany wrote a sequel to Our Distant Cousins in response to public demand for further news of the situation on Mars. Even if by some inexplicable chance, you didn't read the original story, we are sure that you will still find *The Slugly Beast* an interesting departure from the interplanetary track.*

Of all the remarkable things that I have ever heard Jorkens say, it is odd that the most remarkable should have been not of times long since, but of only last year, and that I should have been able to check it and, to some extent, to be even a witness of the strange adventure that followed.

Some of us at the Club were talking of wireless, when somebody said that on his wireless set he had once got a bit of a programme from Auckland in New Zealand. I forget what our comments were, but I shall never forget the quiet remark of Jorkens, when the rest of us had all finished. "They go further than that," he said.

A few disagreed with Jorkens, and the talk drifted away, but I sat silent, overwhelmed by the wonder of what Jorkens had said. And after a while, when the others were talking among themselves, I said to Jorkens, "Further?" And he nodded his head. No more than that did I say, but when Jorkens rose to go I went away with him, and outside in the street I said: "What was that message?"

"It's only a few words," said Jorkens. "It's all they can get."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Turner's got it," said Jorkens.

"From?" I said.

"Mars," said he.

I called a taxi and Jorkens got in. "The old address?" I said, and he nodded, and soon we were going towards that rather dingy room beyond Charing Cross Road, in which Turner had told me once of his journey to Mars, and of the lovely girl he met there, a tale which, owing to his own fault in bringing back no convincing proofs, the public had so thoroughly disbelieved. Whether publication of his story in

the *Saturday Evening Post* has caused them to alter their verdict I cannot know for certain, though some letters I have received partly lead me to hope so. Let it suffice that this disbelief had so much embittered Turner that he is little likely to have been affected by any reparation that may have come later. On the way from the club to Terrier's rooms Jorkens told me that, as is often the case with men who are deeply interested in anything, he refused to see any impossibility, any improbability even, in the thing that he longed for happening. What Turner had longed for, for the last seven years, was a message from the girl he had left in Mars. That the people in Mars were more refined, more highly civilized than ours, he had seen at a glance; deducing from that that anything we understood, they knew far more of, he argued, as love will, that some communication with his lost lady was possible. He seemed to have overlooked the point that a race greatly superior to man in power, though fouler than any beast on our planet, which held man under lock and key in Mars, as Turner had seen, was not likely to allow him to send out any messages for help to Earth, where man, as this beast probably knew was free. And yet Turner hoped, and had done little else for the last seven years. "And the message?" I said. But we were at Turner's door now.

And there was Turner, much the same as ever; older, but still smoking cigarettes, and with his thoughts still far from our planet. He remembered me, and I got his attention at once, by reminding him how he had shot the loathsome beast in Mars, that had just wrung the necks of a boy and a girl that it kept in a sort of chicken-run, and by letting him see that I wholly believed his story. Then he talked. He talked almost as though he were continuing the story that he had told me

two or three years ago, almost as though we had never gone out of the room. He had been watching wireless for years. He had several sets: he seemed to have bought a new one whenever he could afford it. But the strange thing about him and his wireless was, that while we listen to music or the accounts of baseball matches, or whatever we do listen to, and sometimes impatiently curse atmospheric, or whatever those noisy interruptions are, he listened only to atmospheric. Those shrill hoots that we sometimes hear, or those deep buzzing noises that utterly ruin a song, to him were the only things of any interest whatever. And gradually from amongst them he picked out some, that at first had clearly no connection with any known broadcasting station, or any meaning whatever, and then began to have resemblances to a certain type that he came to know, and from that became definite messages, which he at last decoded.

"But in what language?" I said.

"In English," he answered. "Yes, they must have been getting our broadcasts for years, especially I think Daventry, and I take it they worked out our language. Probably it seemed quite simple to them, though I don't know how they did it. I have pages covered with scraps of messages that I employed to decode the kind of noisy Morse that they use. Whom they were to, or what they were about, I don't know; but, do you know, the very first message that I was able to make out was a message to me."

"To you!" I exclaimed.

"To myself," he repeated. "It was simply addressed to The Airman from Earth. There are people who won't believe that I ever went there; but certainly nobody else did. It could have been meant for nobody else. There it is."

"A loving message from Mars," I blurted out in my astonishment.

"Not very," he said.

And then I read it. And these are the words exactly. "The slugly beast is waiting for you."

That it wasn't quite English did not surprise me; what surprised me was that six words out of the seven were perfect English, and whenever I think it over another thing surprises me more, and that is the vividly horrible picture that the one word that wasn't English at all conjured up in my mind. And the more I reflected on the unreasonableness of this, the more loathsomely crawled in my imagination the vile form of the slugly beast.

I read it over two or three times.

Then I said to Turner: "Something foul, isn't it?"

Turner nodded his head.

"A friend of the thing you shot?" I asked.

"Must be," said Turner; "or why trouble to send me this?"

Horrible pictures crossed my mind as I thought on a situation that I had never dreamed of before.

"What will you do?" I asked.

And a light shone in his eyes, and brightened all his face. "I am going back," he said.

This was only last year and Mars was again at his nearest, after those journeys of him and us through Space, that had kept us apart for nearly seven years.

"When?" I asked.

"It's a dead secret," he said. "If they knew where I was going they would think me mad, and not let me go up. They believe nothing."

"I won't tell a soul," I said.

I saw that Jorkens knew. Turner looked at him as though to ask if he thought that I could be trusted. Jorkens nodded.

"Tomorrow night," said Turner.

"Tomorrow night!" I exclaimed, the nearness of it making me wonder more at the whole adventure than I had done already.

"Yes," said Turner.

It's a curious thing, but I don't believe that even love would have made Turner take that journey. Jorkens never

thought so either. That he was in love with the girl that he left in Mars there is no doubt whatever, though she may have been killed and eaten long ago; but I don't believe that he would ever have gone there again if it had not been for the message, fury alone leading him to that stupendous adventure to which nothing else would have lured him.

"What weapons will you take?" I asked him.

"Revolvers," he said, "and a very light machine-gun; and soft-nosed bullets for all of them."

Something in the gusto with which he spoke of soft-nosed bullets made me quite sure he would go.

"He has a good deal to arrange," said Jorkens. For he had seen, though I never noticed it, that Turner wished to be alone. And then we left, but not until I had got Turner's permission to come down to Ketling aerodrome and see him off on his journey on the following night. The street looked all new and strange to me when we got outside, so absorbed was I with the vastness of Turner's adventure, and so unable to notice most of the things that made up the street I knew; or was it that my imagination, over-stimulated by the mere fact of meeting Turner, saw scores of things in that street that my duller wits had never seen before? I don't know which it was, but the street looked brighter and wider, and full of odd details. Turner had got the message some weeks ago, Jorkens told me as we walked away, and had been working on his aeroplane ever since, and filling in forms about his weapons and ammunition.

"That didn't take him long; did it?" I asked.

"Well, you see," said Jorkens, "they asked him what he wanted all that ammunition for, and he said for rhinoceros, thinking that that would just satisfy them. Unfortunately the man he was talking to knew something of Africa, and he said, 'You don't want soft-nosed bullets for rhinos.' And Turner had to start all over again. And he hadn't much time; he had to attend to his aeroplane."

"What's he doing on that?" I asked.

"He has the old rocket-attachment," he said, "to increase his speed enough to get clear of the pull of Earth. Once outside that his motive power will be what it was before, the pace with which we are all moving, the pace of Earth round the sun. That will take him to Mars."

"Yes, he told me," I said.

"But what is quite new," said Jorkens, "is his protection against space. Nothing he used last time seemed adequate to him. So this time he is to be entirely shut in by a tiny cabin; he will have his supply of compressed air there, and the walls of it are capable of resisting the emptiness of space. He will be much more comfortable that way."

"And when," I asked with an uneasy feeling, "when is he coming back?"

"That," said Jorkens, "is the difficulty."

"Will he manage it?" I said. "It was a near thing last time."

"He wants to get this beast first," said Jorkens, "and as many of them as possible. It is disgusting that it should be alive at all, eating man." And Jorkens spat. I have seldom seen him so moved. "But the trouble is," he continued, "that he can't stay there more than five weeks, or he'll never get home at all."

"Mars will be getting away from us," I said.

"And it isn't only that," said Jorkens. "You see he's got an idea that at his age and with his physique the time he can live in rarefied air is limited. Yes, it's rarefied there, a rather smaller planet; less air on it. And he's been to a heart specialist, and talked to him all about it. It must have been a curious conversation, for though he told him all about the air there, and just how it affected his breathing, he never told him he'd been to Mars."

"Never told him?" I said.

"No," said Jorkens. "He said these specialists were all in together. So he said he had been living on a high table-land, I think he said in East Africa, and told him he was soon going back, and how would he stand it? The difficulty was the doctor kept asking him how many feet above sea-level, and Turner could only say he didn't know; but he described the feel of the air pretty well, and the specialist pounded his heart, and what Turner arrived at in the end was that five to ten weeks would be about his limit. You see he couldn't live in the aeroplane, breathing his compressed air, because he wanted that for his return journey."

"Heart bad?" I asked.

"No," said Jorkens, "but you can't go to certain altitudes after a certain age, so they say. And the air of Mars seems to be like what we keep on our highest mountain tops."

We were walking back to the club, and now we arrived there, and we went in and talked of Turner, all alone at the time when no one is there, between lunch and dinner. We neither of us dined there that night, we fixed on a train to take us to Ketling next day, and I went to bed early. All night my mind was full, and my dreams troubled, with hideous pictures of the slugly beast.

Well, next day Jorkens and I met at Waterloo Station, and went down to Ketling together in the afternoon. Was it possible to dissuade him, I asked Jorkens. And Jorkens said: "Quite impossible."

After that we talked a little: I for one was too full of uneasy apprehensions.

At Ketling there was Turner, dressed for his journey, and walking about smoking.

"When?" I asked him.

"When Mars rises," he said.

Jorkens talked alone with him then, but, whatever final arrangements they were making, dissuasion was evidently out of the question. Presently a mechanic came up and interrupted them, and I rejoined them then, just as the

mechanic said: "Where are you off to, sir?" And I heard Turner say: "I'm going to investigate the composition of the upper air currents."

And I saw that he had learned to talk nonsense, where truth would have been taken for craziness, which is one of the things that the cleverest men never learn.

And then he turned, and began talking earnestly to Jorkens again. And this time I heard what he was talking about: it was all about his bullets. "At the tip," he was saying, "I have the softest lead that is made, and of course quite hollow. The beasts are all soft themselves; those expanding bullets will play hell with them."

I didn't especially disapprove of this gloating, at least not to the extent of showing disapproval in my face; and yet he must have seen some such expression on me, for he turned to me and said quietly: "You haven't seen these beasts. And you haven't seen the way they treat men."

He was perfectly right, and I told him so.

And evening wore away, and we had a brief meal together in an inn that there was a little way from the aerodrome. There was a good deal of silence at that supper, and a drink or two to the dim future, without much said. When we came out it was night. A few last preparations by Turner, and then all three of us were standing silent, watching the line of the hills. And over the hills came the enemy.

You've all seen Mars rise, so there's little to tell you, except that he was larger than he usually is, and except that we probably looked at him with different feelings with which any other three men had ever watched him before. Only Turner seemed to be regarding him calmly.

And then Turner got into his plane which was there on the landing ground all ready for him, with its head pointing straight to the ruddy light of Mars, like a huge moth eyeing a flame. And we shut the door that was to remain shut on him for a month in that cramped enclosure. Then they started his propeller and the thing ran forward roaring, and lifted and was off to the red star.

He should have had lights, and as only he knew how useless they would be he must have had some difficulty in leaving Ketling without them, but he certainly had none, so that soon we lost the dark bulk of the aeroplane in the night. But before we quite lost the roar of it we heard it curving round to the left and coming back towards us, and very soon it was down again on the landing-ground. We ran up and asked what he wanted, and he showed by signs through the thick glass that he wished to correct his aim. I often wondered if that was really the reason, or if what Turner wanted was to have one more look at Earth. Whatever it was, he was off again almost at once, and this time sight and sound of his plane were soon lost to us, as we stood there gazing towards Mars. For nearly ten minutes we stood there without moving, gazing at the star that seemed crouching over the hills. Mechanics began to look curiously at us. And then, as small as a star, yet wonderfully clear, the brightest speck of colour among a million lights, the first of Turner's

rockets shone out to the right of Mars. Another and then another, gaudily trespassing on the calm of the night. He was gaining the speed that before he left our air was to wrench him free of the ancient course of Earth; for he was aiming a little wider than our orbit, on such a bearing that, hurled through space by the force of Earth's journey, he would meet Mars travelling outside us. In the same way when Earth got ahead, as she would in a few weeks, he meant to return, hurled back by the pace of Mars. But to break free from the ancient journey of either Earth or Mars he needed the power of an enormous speed, to gain which he was firing rockets. When the rockets ceased we knew he was nearing Earth's outermost limit, that boundary-fence of thin air on the other side of which lies nothing whatever. And then after the last of the rockets, a single gay green light fell from the direction that Turner had taken, floating downward as slowly as though it scorned gravity. It was Turner's farewell to our planet.

A month to go, a month to return, and five weeks there, gave us the date by which he must be back if we were ever to see him again. It had not needed Jorkens' or my advice to urge him to bring back copious and incontrovertible proofs of his journey to Mars this time. He was not going to be doubted again. Meanwhile he had told nobody but us two. And both of us kept his secret.

We went seldom to the Club; I think Jorkens felt as I did, that there was only one thing worth talking about, and that was a secret from everybody except each other. So we only talked to each other. I saw a lot of Jorkens in those days. At first we were full of plans as to how Turner was to be

introduced to the world. We came to realize that to bring him before great audiences in London, New York and Paris would be little better than hiding him in a village. The whole world would want to see him. Oh, the plans we made. But as the weeks wore on we spoke less and less of what Turner was to do in Tokio, Delhi or Brussels, and more of the probable outcome of his encounter with the slugly beast, as it called itself. I often told Jorkens, we often told each other, that there was no need for anxiety until the very last day, because he was certain to stay till the very last in order to gratify as widely as possible the quiet calm loathing that he felt for these foul things that had challenged him.

And then the day arrived, a huge red sunset and the air full of the threat of winter. We both of us telephoned frequently to Ketling, wrapping up our inquiries for Turner as well as we could, without any hint of Mars. Ketling knew nothing of him. I don't think I spoke to anyone except Jorkens next day. There was just the chance of his having landed on some distant part of our planet, but when no news whatever came of any such airman in any part of our world we gave up hope in a week.

Jorkens and I still met and talked alone. Every evening in his rooms we used to sit and talk about Turner till midnight or the small hours. And gradually as we talked we put together a theory that those soft flabby beasts, so vulnerable to bullets, must have got some deadly weapon or other means of destruction, before they sent that provocative message to Turner. Piecing together everything we knew about Turner, and everything he had told us of Mars, the state of his health, the rarity of the air, the powers and appetites of those

revolting creatures, and working out the details of what had happened like two men analyzing a game of chess, or planning a campaign, we came to decide that Turner must have been overpowered by numbers, and prevented by something of which neither he nor we could know anything from using his machine-gun and pistols with their hollow-pointed bullets. And now that Mars had passed out of reach of Earth, to be gone apart from us for another seven years, we assumed that Turner was dead, an assumption for which we obtained legal sanction without any mention of Mars. And there was a memorial service for him in London, which many airmen attended, for he had credit at least for the flights that he had made on this earth. All that was known to the clergyman who preached briefly on this occasion, all that was known to anyone but Jorkens and me, was that Turner had left the aerodrome at night, and his end had its place with the fates of those who had been swallowed up in mystery. The clergyman spoke awhile of the vivid present, and then of the mystery that surrounds all of us. Jorkens and I of course were there, and we each left a wreath that day at his old rooms near Charing Cross Road, and the old charwoman that tidies the rooms had left a bunch of flowers there in a glass on his table, which I felt was the last farewell that the world took of Turner.

And then next day there came a message in plain Morse from an unknown station, a message followed by Turner's initials, A. V. T.: several stations got it and many private sets, and no one knew where it came from: and Jorkens got it on Turner's own set that he had kept for him all those weeks, fixed at a certain wave-length that Turner had given him, and

with the stop out night and day. It said: "Victory. Victory. Victory."

[The end of *The Slugly Beast* by Edward John Moreton Drax Plunkett (as Lord Dunsany)]