

THE WORLD BELOW

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

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BELOW ***

THE WORLD BELOW

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

THE ADVENTURE OF WYNDHAM SMITH
THE ISLAND OF CAPTAIN SPARROW
LORD'S RIGHT IN LANGUEDOC
SEVEN THOUSAND IN ISRAEL
THE SCREAMING LAKE
THE SIEGE OF MALTA
THE NEWS GODS LEAD
PRELUDE IN PRAGUE
VENGEANCE OF GWA
THE HIDDEN TRIBE
ORDEAL OF BARATA
MEGIDDO'S RIDGE
BEYOND THE RIM
FOUR DAYS' WAR
THE WITCHFINDER
ELFWIN
DELUGE
DREAM
DAVID
POWER
DAWN

VERSE

THE SONG OF SONGS AND OTHER POEMS
SCENES FROM THE MORTE D'ARTHUR
THE RIDING OF LANCELOT
THE BALLAD OF ELAINE
RESIDUE

TRANSLATION

DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY

POLITICAL

POLICE AND PUBLIC
SHOULD WE SURRENDER COLONIES?

BIOGRAPHY

THE LIFE OF SIR WALTER SCOTT

THE WORLD BELOW

by

S. FOWLER WRIGHT

Author of "Deluge," "The Island of Captain Sparrow," etc.

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Book I THE AMPHIBIANS

CHAPTER I

OF PLACE AND TIME

“Applied science,” said the Professor, “is always incredible to the vulgar mind.”

“You know, George, they really did go—disappeared absolutely—and there’s only one door to the room, and we sat round it. There’s no kid about that,” young Danby added—perhaps recognising that his father lacked somewhat in the amenities of social intercourse.

“If I go at all, I shall take an axe,” I remarked irrelevantly.

Bryant leant forward, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

“Templeton went like a Pirate Chief,” he said, smiling slightly.

It was the first time he had spoken.

“Look here, Bryant,” I said, “tell me what really happened, and I’ll do my best to believe it.”

He hesitated a moment, and then answered slowly, “It’s true enough, what they’ve told you, as far as we *can* tell it. As to theories of time and space, I know no more than you do. I used to think they were obvious. I’ve heard the Professor talk two nights a week for three years, and I’ve realised that it isn’t all quite as simple as it seemed, though I don’t get much further. But the next room’s a fact. We lay things down on the central slab, and the room goes dark, and we go back in two minutes, and it gets light again, and they’re still there. And the Professor says he’s projected them 500,000 years ahead in the interval, and they don’t look any the worse for the journey.”

“And it must be true, because they don’t deny it,” I said flippantly. “It sounds rather a dull game, but not very difficult.”

“Yes, I know how it sounds,” he answered, “and we thought just the same; but it did seem to prove one thing—that it did no harm to the objects of the experiment.

“If they went anywhere, at least they came back safely. So at last we tried it with Harry Brett—and he didn’t. We left him there, and we went back, and the room was empty. It’s just a bare circular room, metal-walled, with one exit. You can see for yourself. It wouldn’t hide a fly.

“The next day Harry’s wife came and kicked up a row, and we got frightened, and told Templeton, and he said he didn’t believe a word of it, but he was going to find out, and so we tried it on him too.”

“And he disappeared in the same way?”

“No, he didn’t. He came out all right, and he said, ‘It’s true enough, but I reckon you’ve settled Brett. But what’s the use of half-an-hour? I’m going back now. Give me a year, and I may find him.’

“The Professor told him he couldn’t repeat the experiment twice the same night, but he could come back the next, and so he did—and that’s the end of it so far.”

“But if he were to be gone for a year, and he went last Tuesday?”

“He wasn’t to be *gone* for a year; he was to be *there* for a year, and be back in two minutes. That’s quite simple. The Professor’ll tell you.”

“But—if the Professor will excuse the remark—it wouldn’t be any good if he did. I’ve read *The Time Machine*, and I know that space is curved, thanks to Einstein’s enterprising investigation. I quite understand that, if I got at the right distance from the earth (and my eyesight were good enough), I should see our Darwinian ancestor shinning up the tree-trunk for the fatal apple, but I don’t profess to follow these mysteries further. When I had to learn science, I always preferred the demonstrations. Now, if the Professor would project a pullet six months old backward, and it returned a chicken——”

Young Danby laughed, and I saw Bryant’s eyes twinkle, but the Professor answered me patiently.

“It is obviously impossible to project anything into the past, which is fixed irrevocably.

“Otherwise there would be no finality, and the confusion would be intolerable. It requires no scientific training of intellect to understand that the ordered experience of life would become chaotic

if, for instance, upon reading of a long-past murder, I could project myself into the past, and intervene to save the victim.

“In such event the murder would both have occurred, and been prevented: which is absurd.

“But the future is different. It is unformed, or, at least, its facts are in a condition of fluidity. We are all occupied in forming them. If I kill an insect, I do not destroy it only, but its descendants also. I also influence the lives of other insects with which they would have mated, and which will form other alliances. From such alliances other insects will be born which would not have existed. The present consequences of any action, even the most momentous, are trivial, because the present is but a moment. Its future consequences are incalculably greater, because the future is infinite.

“Realising this, we recognise that our present actions belong to the future almost entirely, and it becomes a less important possibility that we may be able to project ourselves forward into some future period, and influence its circumstances by the physical methods with which we are familiar here.”

I don't suppose the Professor had finished, but he paused for breath for a second, and I took the chance he offered.

“I'm sorry I came a cropper over the pullet plan. And, anyway, there wasn't much sense in it. It would be too unprofitable to become popular. But why not get the chickens, and project them forward? Nine months ahead, say, and they come back cackling, with the first egg on the table?—‘Professor Danby, the Magic Poulterer.’ There's a fortune there, anyway.”

For the first time the Professor showed distinct signs of irritation. “You may not be a scientist,” he said, “but as a business man you must know that you are talking nonsense. Would you send your chickens into the future without a hen to brood them?

“Would you expect the people of some future age to rear them for your benefit? When they discovered that they always vanished at maturity, would they not kill them a few days earlier?—But this is idle talk. Something of the kind you imagine may follow in the years to be, as the penetration of the future, which is now the subject of

theory and experiment, becomes an exact science, and when it does, such minds as yours will take it as casually as you now do the transmission of speech and sight over the earth's surface, in ways which your fathers would have considered incredible. The scientists who have conquered space have less honour in the mouths of men than Napoleon, who conquered Europe,—and had not the brains to hold it. It is not reasonable to suppose that those who conquer time will be more highly regarded.

“But all this is beside the point. There are two men who have vanished, or so we tell you. We have no proof, and you are under no obligation to believe us. We may have murdered them, though we have no evident object, and your knowledge of our characters should enable you to discount that possibility. If you will take the same risk, be it much or little, I will find the sum you need, which is somewhat large, and which you tell me is urgent.”

I said, “I do need it; and if I don't accept at once, it's because the whole tale sounds too wild for believing. I should like to ask a few questions.

“First, you say these two men have disappeared entirely. I believe what you have told me is genuine, or at least that you believe it to be so. But have you told me all? Is there nothing you are holding back that might influence my decision? No?

“But you say that Templeton returned from his first adventure, and went again the next night. Surely he told you something of his experiences?”

“No; he didn't seem to want to talk,” Bryant answered; “he only said it was too strange to explain, and he must go back and find out. When we pressed him, he said he supposed we thought that, if a stranger to our planet stood in his back-garden for half-an-hour, he would be able to describe the whole earth in detail, from the marriage customs of Alaska to the flora of the Zambesi. You know Templeton's way.

“But he was anxious enough to get back, and he turned up next night with a sack of things he thought he would find useful, and enough weapons in his belt to stock an arsenal.”

“And he didn’t return,” I added, “so the things he took don’t seem to have been sufficiently useful. As I said before, if I go, I shall take an axe; for one reason, because I spend half my leisure in tree-felling, and I know how to use it. For another, it’s a useful tool, and not only intended for the destruction of your fellow-men. Whether I shall find any fellow-men, I don’t know, but, if I go into a strange world, I don’t propose to equip myself as though I intended to engage it in single combat. It seems tactless to me.—But did he say nothing about temperature? I don’t want to stumble into a glacial epoch, without even a fur collar in which to face it.”

“You need have no fear of that,” said the Professor, “you will be at least thirty-thousand years away from the nearest glacial epoch, and Templeton didn’t seem to have suffered either from change of air or an excessively high temperature.”

“He took plenty of clothes when he went back,” young Danby added, “but he said it was much easier to throw off clothes you didn’t want than to put on those you hadn’t got, and he didn’t know where he would be going, ‘it might be up, or it might be down!’—whatever that meant.”

“It doesn’t sound as though he had much confidence in the resources of the future world,” I said doubtfully, “and there are about fifty questions I should like to ask, but they wouldn’t make much difference, even if you knew the answers, which you probably don’t.

“I’ve got to-morrow to make any preparations that seem worth while. I’ll take the cheque now, Professor, if you will be so kind as to draw it,—and I’ll give you a note to-morrow which will clear you with Clara, if I follow Templeton’s example.”

CHAPTER II

THE EMPTY DAWN

The room which the Professor had constructed for his experiments was circular, walled in an iron-grey metallic substance, empty, and, when the door closed upon me, it was in absolute darkness.

Waiting there, I had a curious and disquieting consciousness, as of absolute vacancy, such as a disembodied spirit might feel before its next incarnation, but nothing happened, neither did the Professor return as he promised. I knew that the two minutes were long past, but there was no movement in the room, and no break in the darkness. Had he misled me, I wondered, and was I the victim of some quite different experiment,—perhaps of how much strain the human mind could endure, and yet retain its sanity? And why was the room so much colder?—and the air against my face was damp, as though a mist were rising.

I looked round, and saw nothing,—upward, and the three great stars of Orion's belt showed through the fog, and the upper part of the constellation; and other stars were in the central heavens, but lower down the mist hid them.

If I were indeed transported to some remote and future time, at least the same stars were there, with little change, even of their positions in the heavens.

It was a moment when any source of confidence was needed. I had imagined many ways in which a strange world might appear around me, but I had overlooked the possibility that I might arrive in the night-time. But there I was, standing on something which felt hard and very smooth, and afraid to move a step in the darkness.

How long I stood there I have no means of knowing. The mist increased, and the night continued dark, and very strangely silent.

Fortunately, I had clothed myself warmly, in a suit of close-fitting leather garments, with the fur turned inward. I had brought sandwiches which I had calculated would be sufficient for two days, if other food should be hard to gain, and I ate some of them, and then as the hours passed, I grew too tired to stand, and sat down on the hard pavement beneath me. It felt like very smooth and polished stone, and I reached out on either hand, thinking to feel some joining which would confirm this supposition, but could find nothing. As the hours passed, I tried to lie and sleep, but only those who have done this for the first time on a hard and level surface will understand my discomfort.

Yet I slept at last, and waked again, feeling both cold and hunger, and ate and slept, and waked and ate and slept again, till I became aware that all the food was gone, and still the night continued.

Then fear came, indeed.

Had Templeton come to this, and had he fired his foolish pistols into the mocking stillness of a perpetual and lifeless night?

The silence was absolute.

An ordinary English night is full of joyous, furtive, or defiant sound. A tropic night is full of life and movement, and noon is the time of quietness.

The owl hoots even above the silence of the Arctic snow.

But here there was no faintest distant call, nor any whisper of movement.

Yet I recalled that Templeton had been once, and returned, so once at least he must have seen daylight. Then I realised that the darkness was less dense, and the stars were dimmer.

Dawn approached, but how slowly!

I must have watched for hours while the sky flushed faintly, and still the darkness was but slightly lifted.

Gradually, very gradually, the strange scene opened.

Sloping downward, and stretching as far as sight could reach toward the coming sun, was one unbroken plain of purple-brown, on which were growths of one kind only, compact and round, and

averaging some eight feet in height, like gigantic cabbages in shape, and of a very vivid green.

Behind me rose a high grey cliff, so smooth and straight that I doubted whether it were of natural formation, or the work of some directing intelligence.

Between the cliff and the great plain there was a strip of smooth and lucent paving, about twenty feet in breadth, on which I had rested while the long night passed.

As the familiar sun rose slowly, a gradual gold spread over the vivid green that sloped toward it, till the whole expanse shone with a dazzling splendour; and as the rising light struck across the path on which I stood, it showed a shining band of opalescence that stretched right and left to the horizon limits, beneath the background of the dark-grey wall.

The sky was of a deep unbroken blue, and the whole scene was one of great though alien beauty.

I had imagined that I might find myself lost amidst the inexplicable complexities of a civilisation different from anything of which I had heard or known, or perhaps amidst enormous jungle growths, and beasts of unfamiliar terrors. But here seemed only an interminable and barren weirdness, offering neither menace to life nor any means by which to support it.

So I thought, in a double error, as I was to learn very quickly.

The sun was by now almost completely visible, but there was no cry or stir of life to break the silence, nor did any bird cross the blue expanse above me.

The need to explore the new world in which I found myself was urgent. There was no hope from inaction amid such surroundings. The cliff on one side was a wall unclimbable. The purple soil, from which I could see that a slight steam was rising, offered no invitation to lose myself among the great green globes, which seemed to be its sole fertility. There remained only the opal platform on which I stood, by which it seemed that I might go on, to right or left, for ever.

With nothing to direct my choice, I turned southward, and strapping on the knapsack in which I carried such things as I had

brought with me, but from which my stock of food was exhausted, and shouldering the woodman's axe, which was the only thing beside a heavy clasp-knife which I carried as tool or weapon, I walked briskly forward.

CHAPTER III

DEATH?

I had gone no great distance, and the sun had yet scarcely cleared the horizon, when I came to a high cavity in the cliff-wall.

It was of such height that an elephant would have looked a pigmy as he passed inward, and of a shape too regular to have been formed without the tools of some controlling mind.

The level sun shone into it, and illumed it, a very spacious tunnel, for a considerable distance. Then it bent out of sight. I went inward a few steps, and hesitated.

Anyone who, on a strange and lonely road, has reached a place where it branches in two directions, without knowledge or sign to guide his choice, will understand my feeling. Still in doubt, I walked back to the cave-mouth, and then, down the middle of the opal way, came something very swift and light. Someone who was neither man, nor beast, nor monkey. Someone who ran without effort, but as in urgent and silent fear.

She did not see me until she was level with the gap from which I watched her, and when she did, she leapt sideways with incredible agility. The leap took her to the very edge of the opal way, and her left foot pressed for a second on the purple soil beyond. As it did so, with the speed of light itself, the nearest of the bright-green globes shot open in a score of writhing tentacles, of which one caught the slipping foot, and dragged its victim down.

There came one scream, intense and dreadful, high and shrill, and then I watched a lithe furred human-seeming body which struggled against the clinging, twisting arm which dragged her in.

The tentacles were very long and thin, and of a brick-red colour. The one which reached her first was not thicker, toward its end, than

a man's finger, but for a moment only was there any doubt of the issue.

Then a stronger tentacle got a firm grip of its victim's body, and as it did so the scream came again, but shriller, louder, and more exultant, and I realised that it was the plant that screamed, and not the prize it had captured.

I don't think I should have interfered but for that second scream of triumph, but there was something in its tone so hateful, so bestial, that an impulse of pity for its victim broke across the blank amazement of my mind, and with the feeling, as thought that answered thought, I knew that she was calling to me to help her.

The axe lay ready to my hand on the cave-floor, and I picked it up and ran forward.

I brought the blade down on the nearest tentacle with such force as would have severed a branch of a well-grown tree, but it only dented a skin that was soft and flexible, but tough, like rubber.

As I swung the axe again, a long arm caught me round both ankles and pulled. Had I not been so strange to it, had it better gauged my strength and weight, or had it not been occupied with its earlier capture, I suppose that the next minute would have ended my experience, but as it was, the clutch only stirred me to a desperation of terror that brought the axe down with double force, and the severed limb fell quivering to the ground.

As it did so, the creature screamed again. It was a cry of the most utter terror, abject and hellish beyond any possibility of words to tell it.

And the forest answered.

It answered in a hundred voices that screamed, and clamoured, and questioned, and replied.

I had never known before the strength which panic and loathing may give to human muscles.

Backward writhed the frightened tentacles, their victim dropped and forgotten, and every axe-stroke that followed gashed or severed one of them, and where they were cut through, a wine-red semi-liquid jelly slowly welled from the gap.

I think as the creature contracted and closed its petals I might have stayed the blows if it had not screamed for mercy on a note which gave me a feeling of nausea, and a lust to kill, so that I struck till the great flesh-like leaves were gashed and shredded; till, as the cries continued, I realised that the centre of its life was underground, beyond my power to reach it.

Then I lowered the axe, and looked round.

Dimly I was aware that my heart was beating wildly, and that I was breathing with difficulty.

Still the forest was screaming around me in deafening tones of fear and hate and menace.

I looked back to the comparative safety of the cave I had left, and I saw the one that I had saved slowly dragging herself towards it, and as I did so I was conscious that she knew my thought, and answered.

I became aware for the first time that the soil on which I stood was hot, and that my feet were scorching.

I threw the axe towards the cave, and went to help the one that I had ventured to rescue, and doing this, I had a strange feeling of repulsion, as from an alien body, and of attraction, as to a kindred soul.

I knew that she was mortally injured, and feared that I must horribly hurt the limp body as I picked it up.

I was startled by its lightness, and surprised that it made no sound.

As I lifted her, I was conscious again of the interchange of wordless thought, but when I answered mechanically with a spoken word I was rebuffed by the expression of repulsion and wonder which crossed her eyes.

But as I laid her down in the cave-mouth, wondering what I could do to aid her further, her thought answered mine clearly, "Do not touch my body. It is dead."

Then our minds met, and for some moments wrestled abortively, till I realised that I could not understand unless my own were willing, and blank, and receptive. Nor could she understand my thought unless it were consciously approached to hers.

After that, we conversed in silence for some time, but very slowly. So wide was the gulf of separation in knowledge and experience, so baffling the mental shorthand by which agreed fact is implied without expression, so difficult was it to avoid the continual byways of explanation which only led to others, that it was a long time before I could receive even a blurred outline of the urgent facts which she was striving to give me.

By this time I realised that she regarded me as something strange and beast-like, and that any noise from my mouth would intensify this feeling against me, and confirm the judgment. I knew also that she recognised me as sympathetic, and in some measure intelligent, however physically repulsive—a repulsion made more acute by the clothes I wore, of which I was made to feel a sense of acute shame, so strongly did her mind impress my own with a conception of their indecency.

I thought that she regarded me much as we should do a half-tamed dog, ferocious, but amenable to kindness and reason, and of a possible loyalty.

I knew also that she regarded her body as a broken and negligible thing, and that her mind had concentrated on persuading me to undertake, and enabling me to understand, an errand which the accident had interrupted, and which was of a very urgent nature.

So I sat there at the cave-mouth, while the sun rose clear from the hateful vivid green of the forest, that was still vocal with fear and excitement, while I slowly took my first and very difficult lesson in the new world I had entered.

“And now,” she thought, “if that be all, and you understand, I shall be very glad to die. You will not touch me when I am dead? If you are a beast that needs such food, you will find that the jelly in the tentacles will supply you. You must wait here till the twilight.”

And then she turned over, with a movement of surprising ease in the broken limbs, and curled up, and I knew that she had left the cave.

And I sat there thinking of all she had told me, and felt a great loneliness, and a great fear.

CHAPTER IV

THE OPAL WAY

I sat there a long time, trying to reconstruct her tale, and to find some possible explanation of its apparent paradoxes. Why should I stay there till the twilight came? I had learnt that where I sat I was in the very shadow of death. I knew that the way was long, and the message I had undertaken was of the utmost urgency.

Some reason for delay there had been, but it was like a dream which eludes waking thought. And how, in light or dark, could I cross the great chasm where the pavement ended? I had asked her this, but she had replied as though she did not understand my difficulty. The bridge was where it was not. There was no meaning in that. Perhaps my physical limitations were beyond her understanding. Surely, if I tried that road by night, though I should avoid the terrors on either hand, I must fall into the abyss beyond, and perish.

I resolved that I would go forward, at least as far as the path was clear, and, at the worst, I knew that there were other cavities, such as this one, in which I could take refuge with no greater danger than was behind me here.

But again my resolve faltered. I *knew* that there was some reason against my going, though my thought could not recall it.

Why should I go by night?

Patiently I recalled the visions which had crossed my mind as our thoughts encountered.

But there was nothing there to guide me. Only there were gaps I knew in the cliff-wall, and these were associated with the idea of deadly danger, but of what kind I could not discover. Her thought had gone forward with the message I was to bear to her kinsfolk on the dim grey beaches. These I saw clearly, and strange and mist-like as the vision rose, there at least was the lapping tide of the

unchanging sea. I would go also to these creatures which were intelligent, though they were not men. Creatures which could understand, and perhaps show friendship, though they might think of me as the uncouth Caliban of some forgotten age.

Why should I wait for the dark? Safety to them might be to me the deadliest peril.

I would go now.

But first for food, and—*was there no fresh water in this accursed place?*

The thought struck me with such fear as I had not felt till then. There had been rain in the night, or at least a heavy mist, but now the sun shone with increasing strength in a sky of absolute and cloudless blue. There was a slight steam rising from the hot dark-purple powdery soil of the forest. The cliff-side was hot to touch. There was no moisture on the opal pavement now.

Had I to wait till the long-distant night and the cold mist returned?

Well, I might live till then, if I must, but at least it was a new reason for exploring further.

As to food—the severed tentacles lay on the soil before me. I had been advised to try them. Raw? I looked at them more carefully than I had yet done. They had not bled, as severed limbs would do on the earth I knew. But not plants.

Dare I go again across the burning soil, and would the monster dare to renew the conflict? Every moment there had been less sign of the havoc the axe had made. The hacked and shredded petals were growing to their old form again, but now they lay half-open to the sun, as did the whole of the forest.

Should I fear to approach it? And could it also read my thoughts, and would my fear give it confidence?

If that were so, I must school myself to feel courage. Is it not always the unknown that inspires terror, and was I not as strange to them as they to me?

My thought stopped to watch a new thing that was happening. Very cautiously, one of the petals moved aside, and very slowly an

uninjured tentacle crept out across the soil. Was it feeling in the hope that its first victim still lay there? Did it hope to retrieve those broken tentacles? No, not that; for it touched one, as it seemed by chance, and shrank back, and trembled, and crept forward a different way.

Well, I would resolve it confidently. Axe in hand, I went forward. As I did so, I commenced to sing a lively tune that my subconscious mind suggested to the occasion.

But before the first line ended, it was drowned in the shrill scream of the monster, and the creeping arm leapt back to safety.

And again the scream was taken up and re-echoed by a hundred voices, hideous and deafening beyond description; and with no more thought of danger I went forward into that deadly space, among creatures that could destroy me in a moment, but that a song could terrify.

I walked quickly over the steaming soil, which was much hotter than before, picked up a piece of tentacle, perhaps six feet in length, and flung it on the pavement. Then I took it into the cave to examine it. The skin was tough and flexible, with a curious fibrous growth inside it, with hollow cells intervening. Then there was a thin membrane, and inside this a ruby-coloured jelly-like substance, outwardly firm, but semi-liquid towards the centre, from which a few drops fell as I turned it.

I tasted this jelly and found it very sweet, but otherwise unlike anything to which I can make comparison. I ate a little, hesitating, and then decided to sling my snake-like larder over my shoulder, and have a good meal later, if I felt no ill-effects from my first adventure.

CHAPTER V

THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE

I had now resolved to go forward while I had the use of daylight to guide me. Yet, so pliable is the human mind, I felt already the reluctance with which a man must take farewell of familiar things, to face the perils of a homeless way.

I glanced again at my companion of an hour, and with a more detailed consideration than I had previously given.

Slim and graceful still, the body curved in death.

Very close and soft was the fur that covered her, silver-grey on the back, but changing forward into a deepening chestnut. The legs were well and finely shaped, but below the knee of each there was a slender snake-like appendage, ending with curving fingers, like a tiny monkey's hand, which could close round the opposite limb and bind them together. The feet also were delicately shaped, but deeply slit into three webbed toes, of which the central one was the longest. Others—one at each side,—set far back, were curled up normally, but could open sideways with a thumb-like claw. The feet were furred equally with the legs, the silver-grey of the undersides lying so closely that it looked almost like a shining skin. They showed no sign of damage from the long rough journey that I knew they had made, nor was any road-dust upon them.

The limbs were coloured in the same way as the body,—silver-grey behind and chestnut-brown before, and the hands were almost human, but for the webbing which had shown between the open fingers.

The head was to me the most singular, being furred like the body, and of a similar colouring. The eyes were of a very human quality, and I had seen them to be alert and intelligent. Now they were covered by a heavy lid which rose upward, and in its turn was

protected by a thin film which closed down, and was lashed like a human eyelid. The ears were set far back, and were covered by a furry flap which could be closed at will to shut out air or water.

The mouth was lipless, a thin slit, with no sign of teeth. The cheeks were covered by retractile pads beneath which was a gill-like device for water-breathing.

The tail, which could curl up beneath the body till it was practically invisible, was forked, with two more of those tiny monkey-hands at its extremities.

I saw, or guessed, these details and their significance imperfectly at the time,—the more so for my pledge not to touch the abandoned body,—but it was evident that it was adapted for land or water living with almost equal excellence.

I recognised that the novelty of what I saw was not surprising, but rather that there was so little structural change in the form of animal life over so long a period of earthly time. Still there was the vertebrate body, the limbs, the head; still a general similarity of external and, presumably, of internal organs.

I looked at the sinuous, graceful body, and wondered what it was that repelled me.

To an impartial intelligence it might be considered more beautiful than even an ideal human body, and the ideal in the human race is not the majority.

Surely, it was more so than the average of our domestic animals.

Was it the unfamiliarity only, or was it the doubt of humanity, which repelled me?

But repulsion, from whatever cause, was countered by a very different feeling, which made my feet slow as I left the cave, and my glance go backward.

Then I turned resolutely to the task which I had undertaken.

The day was very still. There was no cry or motion from the great cliff-height above me. There was no flying life that crossed the unbroken blue. The forest had stilled its fear, and the monstrous growths were sprawling open upon the steaming soil. I wondered what control it might be which held them so far backward that none

could reach a deadly arm across the path I kept. Perhaps the nearer soil was too shallow for the growth they needed.

I went forward in this quiet peace for about four hours, stopping twice to eat from the store I carried, which I found, though only semi-liquid at the centre, had a gratifying quality of quenching thirst almost with the first mouthful. I suppose it to have been formed largely of water, as many solids are, and to have been soluble to digestion to an unusual degree. But it is a matter which I have no competence to decide.

I know that I must have covered more than twelve miles in the first four hours, with times for rest included ... and then came the abyss.

The cliff-wall ended, and ran back in a black and barren hill, immense and desolate in the daylight.

The forest ended abruptly on the edge of a chasm so deep that, though it must have been nearly a quarter of a mile to the further side, the great depth made it look narrow.

Far below, dim and snake-like in the distance, a great river wound, between deep shelving banks that looked moss-grown, but were covered with (perhaps familiar) trees.

I stood upon the edge, which sank like a wall, and I saw no possible way to go forward, or to clamber down.

I knew that there was a way which I had been meant to take, and more than once I walked from side to side of the path on which I stood, bending perilously over an edge which fell almost sheer to not less than five-thousand feet below.

As I did this, the rope-like tentacle, which I was carrying over my shoulder, slipped forward. I made one effort to clutch it; then, conscious of my peril, let it go, but I was overbalanced already. With an involuntary cry, that echoed and re-echoed through the barren heights, I fell forward.

CHAPTER VI

THE FROG-MOUTHS

Was the abyss an illusion only?

Dizzy and blank of mind, with a heart that beat to choking, and with a bruised and injured knee, I lay upon a level vacancy, and the cause of the accident lay, as on nothing, beside me.

How long I lay there I have no conception. I believe that as my heart-beats slowed, and my senses cleared, I fainted from a revulsion of terror, and, reviving, I lay afraid to move, and gazing with half-delirious eyes into the appalling depth beneath me. But memory is indistinct, and it is a terror which I recall with reluctance.

Soon or late, at last I realised that the path, though invisible to me, must run out across the gorge, and timidly, and then more boldly I felt to right and left, and wriggled back, and stood once more upon the evident platform.

I remained there for a long time, seeking courage to go forward. With a knowledge of what to look for, I fancied that the sunshine caught a faint gleam of opal light that crossed the chasm.

How should I venture to tread it? How could so frail a bridge extend so far without support or suspension? Would it sway beneath me as I advanced? Would it break at last, and drop me, a dead thing, before I reached the silver streak below?

In vain I tried to stimulate myself to the adventure. What hope was there if I did not cross it? Was I not pledged in honour to the attempt, and might not the path of honour be the path of safety also? Here, without apparent reason, an old line of forgotten verse intruded,—

“Be bold, ‘be bold’ and everywhere ‘be bold.’”

My mind searched backward to place it. In that remoteness of time, when all material things were unimaginably far, the imagination which formed the greatest romantic poem in the English tongue could reach to inspire me. I saw the vision of Britomart, her shield lifted over her face, go forward into the certain-seeming death of flame, against which her trusted weapons were useless.

With no conscious change of resolution, I rose slowly and stepped forward, sounding my way by tapping to right and left with the axe-head, and giving that snake-like tentacle a push that sent it over the invisible edge into the depths below.

As I felt my way, I tried to look downward to watch my steps without gazing into the gulf beneath me, but when I found it impossible to do so, in a sickening terror I closed my eyes and felt forward blindly, or opened them only to gaze at the further hills, which I was so slowly approaching.

And in this way, when I was more than half across, I first saw them, and as I did so I recalled in a moment the forgotten warning that had eluded my mind before. These were they which must be avoided at all costs, even at that of waiting in the deadly cavity till night had darkened.

They were descending the cliffs with an awkward waddle, comic enough to watch from some place of security, their bodies showing dead-white against the dull grey background.

I could not tell certainly that I was their objective. They would reach the level some distance to the right of the end of the bridge I was crossing. The cliffs on that side left some margin by which they could reach the bridge-head, but if I could pass that, I saw that the cliff ran on as before, flush with the path, and with a similar expanse upon the left to that to which I had become accustomed. If, I thought, I could reach the bridge-end first, I should at least have a clear course, if I could outrun them. If I were caught here, I had no hope whatever.

It is strange how a more urgent fear may drive out one which had seemed invincible. By some optical difference the path here was very faintly visible, a thin ribbon of opal-coloured transparency, and the fact that I could fix my eyes on the point at which it reached the solid ground gave confidence. I ceased to feel my steps, and ran forward.

Doing so, I thought for a moment that my time was ample, but when they were on level ground their gait changed. They were coming with great bounds, and straight for the bridge-head, to pass which was my only hope of safety.

I saw them more clearly now. They were as white as an ant's egg, and in shape like a squatting man. There were more than twenty coming with bounds of thirty feet, but with a distinct pause between each leap.

I was running hard now, and as I did so I shouted what I meant for a bold defiance, and the sound echoed and re-echoed up the gorge, and came back like a wail of terror from the depth below.

As I left the bridge, I saw the foremost coming on my right hand, not a hundred yards distant. In another moment I was on the path that ran on as before, the high cliff on my right, and what I had taken for a similar forest to that I had been passing hitherto, on my left hand.

I knew that it would be useless to run further. No human speed could equal those gigantic leaps. I had no mind to feel one of the loathsome brutes upon my shoulder as I ran.

Fear more than courage, desperate fear it was, which turned my feet, and swung the axe to meet them. As I did so, I was aware that the cliff-wall was open. Not an irregular cave-hollow, but another of those masoned tunnels towering high overhead. Then the foremost of my pursuers came down floppingly not two yards away.

I saw a hairless, dead-white, ape-like, frog-mouthed form, a width of jaws in a flat skull, and small malignant eyes, that had in them a malevolence different from anything I had known, or to which I can make comparison. Its hind-limbs ended in large round pads of flesh which splayed out as it hit the ground, and took the force of the

impact, and appeared, with a jerking motion of the strong forelimbs against the ground, to give the impetus to the next leap.

All this I saw as I realised that for a second's space it could not recover itself and leap again, and I swung the axe and struck. As I did it the thought crossed me that if the blade caught in the skull I should be weaponless, and I brought it round to take the side of the neck as though I felled a tree.

If they were strong brutes, they were not agile. The sharp blade cut straight through the throat some inches deep from side to side. The creature made no cry or motion, and no blood came from the wound. As I recovered the weapon, I stepped quickly back into the archway.

It was twenty feet wide or more, and disproportionately high. An upright bar of a grey metal thinly veined with red divided the entrance for six feet upwards.

There were a dozen of them by now that were close around the entrance, or that had leapt short, and were coming along with an awkward shambling motion.

I stood within, with the poised axe, desperately alert and watchful, and they squatted motionlessly around. Even the one I had cut still sat with intent gaze fixed upon me,—no, not on me, suddenly I realised, it was at that red-grey bar that divided us. And then I knew that it was not fear of me, but of it, which held them back, and that they dared not enter.

And as my own fear relaxed, I looked around, and saw that I was at the entrance of a very lofty passage which ran curving downward behind me. Step by step I went backward, still facing them, till the turn hid them from view.

There I waited. Perhaps in time they would retire, and leave me a free exit.

After hours, it seemed, I went forward again, but they were there still, only there were so many more that all the space was crowded.

I was conscious now that I was tired to the point of exhaustion, and thirsty beyond patient endurance. To stay there was not hopeful. I gathered my remaining courage, and commenced to explore my refuge further.

CHAPTER VII

CAPTURE

Very fearfully I went forward. The fact that those fierce beasts did not dare to follow was itself a warning. One thing was certain. I was in the presence here of an engineering capacity such as I had not seen previously, unless it were in the opal pavement. The passage sloped down steeply in a steady spiral. It was of ample width, and of great height. The floor was not earth or rock, but a smooth rubber-like substance that gave pleasantly underfoot. The walls were smooth and hard, coloured a light grey, having a polished surface. The ceiling was opalescent, giving a faint but sufficient light, which was reflected from the polished walls.

I went down, expecting always that the steady turning descent would bring me into some great hall or chamber, or at least into a level passage, but it did neither. I went on because I was too tired to stop, or at least because I was too tired to think of climbing upward, and to stay was hopeless.

There was no least change in the monotony of floor, or wall, or ceiling, till I felt that they must surely go on for ever, till I swayed dizzily as I descended on that continued curve, till I lost consciousness of time, and went on half-asleep, and half-believing myself to be in some nightmare of illusion. And because I was so dazed, when it came, I almost missed it.

It was a niche, or rather a cavity, in the wall, flatly paved, and having a great jar standing in it. I think the instinct of my parched frame told me it was water. The jar or basin was of the height of my shoulder, and about ten feet across. I bent my head into it and drank, and knew the joy of life as I had not imagined it to exist before.

I stopped myself sharply with the thought that it might be something different from wholesome water, in this place where all

was strange, but I had drunk well by then. I looked round and saw a heap of large cakes of a dark-brown bread-like substance. There were nine of these neatly piled, and behind them was a white slab in the wall, on which there were three blue paintings, like Chinese picture-writing, one under the other, each about a foot deep, and too high on the slab for me to examine them nearly.

I shredded off a great slice from the bread with the axe, and found it good, and sat down and ate heartily.

After I had eaten, I felt so refreshed that I thought that I would rest for a few minutes only, and resume my exploration, but I must have fallen asleep, I don't know for how long,—I had been awake already beyond the length of my accustomed day,—but I woke as from a long night's rest, hungry and thirsty again, and I ate and drank awhile, and hesitated whether I should turn back, and hope for a clear passage, or continue down, to find I knew not what of fear or horror at the end. But the thought of those squatting forms above was not encouraging, and to go down is easier than to climb, and so at last I decided to continue downward.

For many hours I continued. Always there was the steady spiral of descent, the opal light, the high wide dove-grey walls, the steel-grey flooring, which looked so hard, but was so soft and springy to the tread. And always—I should have mentioned it before—a steady current of air came upward. I cannot say “blew” upward, it was too gentle, and too absolutely regular. It was of an exhilarating freshness, and like a cushion on which to lean forward, in a descent which might otherwise have been too steep.

So I went on, never knowing what might open before me at the next step of the turning way, but with a mind which became dulled with the monotony of the passage, so that I went on at last in a semi-conscious, dream-like condition that took no count of time,—*there was a sound behind me*. There was something with a heavier tread than mine that pursued me downward. With an instinct of unreasoned terror I commenced to run. And so doing, I kept ahead, but I gained little. I looked back, but the curving passage was bare. Only I heard the tread, which I could not distance.

A sense of the uselessness of flight steadied me, and I recalled my resolution to meet the unknown boldly, as the safest way.

I stopped, stepped back against the wall, and waited. Then he strode past, and was gone in a moment. He was a man of giant size, with a skin yellower than old ivory, and of a curious smoothness. He wore no clothes, but had a sack or basket hanging upon his back, and round his waist a belt with bright metal studs or clips, from which, three on each side, six of the frog-like apes that had pursued me hung by a leg, swinging and writhing, and snapping with fierce teeth against the flanks of their captor,—teeth which made less mark on the polished smoothness of the skin than if it had been the ivory to which its colour compared it.

So much I noticed as he passed. He gave no sign that he saw me.

I was still standing there when I heard him returning.

This time he picked me up, as a gardener might pick up an earwig, and dropped me over his shoulder into the basket he carried.

I fell among moss, of a coarse growth, like sea-weed, but very soft and yielding. It was of a sage-green colour, and of a very pleasant odour, which I cannot describe. A new scent is, like a new colour, beyond imagination.

I burrowed deeply into the softness of the moss, and feared and wondered. But the present comfort was very great, and I reflected that I had not been hurt, and that for such strength so to lift me meant that I had been picked up very gently.

I think I should have slept, had he not lifted the basket from his shoulders, and lowered it to the ground, closing the top, which drew in with a short thong, as he did so.

For a few moments I lay still, and then wriggled through the moss till I could see out of the opening, which was wide enough for a considerable view, though not sufficient for me to escape.

I saw that we were in a cavity, like that in which I had rested previously.

There were the same furnishings, and on the wall-tablet the giant was painting a fourth mark, below three which were there already.

He had taken off his belt, and thrown it into a corner, with the six captives still fastened to it.

He now pulled one of them off, and taking it between thumb and finger, shredded the four limbs. While he did this, the creature made no sound, but the wide jaws snapped continually.

Laying down the limbless body, he proceeded to peel and eat the limbs as one might shred off the skin of a banana. They did not bleed, the flesh being like a stiff jelly, of a bright-red colour, and veined with a gristly white substance, giving an appearance like the flesh of a pomegranate.

Hideous as these creatures were, it shocked me to see this callous tearing of one that still lived, apparently with undiminished vitality; but the eater's face, as I now saw it, had no suggestion of savagery. Rather it was melancholy and preoccupied, and as he ate he talked continually to himself in a plaintive monotone, though with an organ volume.

I reflected that men who are otherwise humane will swallow a living oyster, of the skinning of eels, of the fish that are boiled alive in Indian kettles, and of a hundred cruelties to which custom has inured mankind, and thought I understood, however incompletely,—which, of course, I did not.

The limbs being gone, he picked up the trunk, and, twisting off the gnashing head, he threw it down and proceeded to complete his meal. Such offal as there was,—it was unlike that of any creature familiar to me,—he collected neatly, with the peeled skin, and the severed head, and opening the bag in which I lay, threw them in with me. I realised afterwards that it was for the orderly deposit of such refuse, among the aromatic moss, that he carried it with him.

Afterwards,—but not then. For as he shook and closed the bag the severed head rolled against me, and the snapping teeth ripped the leather of my left sleeve from wrist to elbow. Panic seized me at this, beyond reason, and I was more terrified of one severed head than I had been before of the whole animal. How, I thought, if we were both carried in the bag together, and it were shaken against me? Already I felt its wide mouth closing on my flesh, and biting deeper while I

strove to shake it free, with no body to strike at. How if there should be five more heads tumbling about me? And how soon did they really die? Terror edging my wits, I realised that because their bodies had not the thin fluid of familiar blood, the head could only be very slowly affected by the separation. Then how long might—? I struggled up to the mouth of the bag. It was drawn too tightly for escape, though I could see through it as before.

My captor lay stretched full length. An arm moved restlessly. More than once he muttered the same words. *E-lo-ne, E-lo-ne*, so it sounded, with a hopeless, falling cadence, infinitely sad.

Evidently I was forgotten, if I had ever held his thought beyond a moment.

After a time he slept.

Then I struggled to kick back the moss, and gain a space to stand upright, and swing the axe, and desperately I attacked the side of the bag.

It proved unexpectedly easy, and then difficult.

The first stroke cut down a long slit with a rasping sound, and the light shone through it. The next stroke made a parallel slit, and I thought that a few more would bring my freedom. But I found that, though I could make many downward slits, I could not squeeze myself through them, and to cross-cut was a different matter. I hacked long and desperately before I contrived a ragged hole, through which I crawled to freedom.

As I escaped, my fear left me. I did not dread the sleeping giant one tenth as much as the contact of the unbodied head, with its snapping jaws, and small malignant eyes.

Deliberately, I drank and ate before I turned to take the upward way.

Of that long toil there is little that is worth a word, with so much else for telling.

Somewhat the rising current of air must have buoyed me. Coming to the higher resting-place, I slept long, and ate and drank before and after.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BIRDS

When I came again to the surface-world there was no sign of life around, but a great stillness, and the dawn was breaking in an unimagined splendour.

On my left hand, not distant, sank the ravine, black and terrible. Beyond it was the distant forest of the nameless things. But before me, to the reach of sight, the ground sloped downward, and was covered with a level-surfaced growth, so close that I could only guess its depth, but showing only a sea of leaves, not larger than a man's hand, and of a bright green, as though varnished; and these leaves the dawn-light altered to reflected gold, so that my dazzled sight recoiled from a splendour beyond endurance.

It was as though one should look straight at the noonday sun, to find a glory not of one small-seeming orb, but of stretched leagues, and myriad facets, of an equal brilliance.

But at length, as the sun rose, the light changed and faded. A thin mist moved over the surface of the unending field of green, but was not dense enough to hide it.

The green growth came to the very edge of the opal path, and looking down I saw a tangle of sinuous macaroni-like stalks that twisted restlessly, having leaves only at the top, on the close and level surface; and as I watched, tongues like pink worms pushed upward, and licked and wavered in the air, and drew backward. As the day advanced, thousands of these pink tongues were thrust upward and withdrawn continually, giving a wavering pinkness to the glossy green. It might have had beauty to familiar eyes, but to mine it had a loathsome strangeness, so that I was reluctant to walk beside it, and for some time I sat at the cave-mouth and pondered. I was half tempted to descend once more and face what might be in the depths

below. Certainly, there I had found water and something akin to human food, and evidence was in that mighty tunnel itself of such work as no brute creatures could contrive or fashion.

I reflected, was it not reasonable that there should be a less highly cultured life on a planet's surface, subject to wind and rain and all inclemencies, than in the sheltered security of its vast interior? Was it not an amazing thing that the men of my own time, fatuously imagining communication with incredibly distant worlds, had been contentedly ignorant of their own, ten miles below the surface; had made facile and contradictory theories of its interior, none of which the few known facts supported; and because they found some increase in the temperature for a trivial distance downward, had been content to conclude, without attempt at verification, that this heat increased indefinitely. How diligently they searched the secrets of the most distant stars, while they had scarcely scratched the surface of the one on which their lives depended!

So I thought, but instinct conquered. I was a creature born to the wind and rain, and not to the hidden depths beneath me. Even though these bordering growths were but the kitchen-gardens of the intelligences below,—as indeed they might be,—in a moment I saw it, wondering that I had not seen it sooner. Great stretches of one plant in weedless soil. Even if the life around me were but as that of insects, useful or noxious, or of beasts of food for their keepers,—still here at least was the sun, and something of the stars I knew.

Here too, I had met the only creature with which I had changed thoughts, however strangely, and to whom I had made a voiceless promise. At the thought, I rose and went onward.

As I thought of it, the idea that I was in a vegetable garden of subterranean giants gained in plausibility. The memory of that unrailed invisible bridge, which to my imagination had seemed as thin and fragile as a sheet of mica, made me doubt for a moment, till I remembered that it spanned the whole space without support from beneath or above, and had not swayed when I crossed it, and that it was of a sufficient width to give breadth of foothold even to the huge

bulk of my recent captor, if he were able to walk in confidence across it.

With this thought came a wonder of what different world might be upon the higher level of the cliff-top, which now seemed to me as no more than the side of a trenched space of tillage, but I knew that my pledged way was straight onward, even could I have climbed the abrupt wall, which gave no foothold.

On my left hand, as I went on, the sea of varnished leaves still sloped downward, stretched away to a now misty horizon, and I began to compare its sameness unfavourably with that of the familiar world I knew, till I considered how little I had yet seen, in comparison with the extent of the probable land-surface which lay beyond me.

If a visitor to my own world, from some distant planet, were set down for a few days on the Antarctic continent, how different would be his report from that of one who spent the same time wandering in the Sahara desert, or amid the steaming heat of the Amazonian forests, or the cotton-mills of Lancashire. And there were indications already that I had reached a world where life extended deeply below the surface of the land, and where the sea had its nations also.

Only the air seemed vacant, and I was soon to see that that conclusion was premature.

I had come to a place at which the cliff-wall, though still too steep to climb for the first ten or twenty yards, sloped backward considerably, so that I had a wider view of the sky above me, and looking up I saw a flock of birds of the appearance of pigeons, having a similar habit of flight, but larger, that moved above me, not flying as at ease, but darting wildly from side to side, as though in avoidance of some deadly danger.

The next moment the cause of their agitation became visible. There were a number of huge black flying shapes which pursued them. But the inexplicable thing was that the hunted birds did not fly from their enemies across the open sky which stretched away to the horizon.

Rather, as though held back by some invisible wall, they swerved and dodged backwards and forwards, while their pursuers, with huge black slower-beating wings stretched across the sky, were always heading them back, but seemed themselves to be of no mind to follow them closely.

For some time I watched the duel, while the black hunters gradually closed upon their intended victims, till they had no space left to manœuvre, and were becoming crowded overhead, yet still with no bird going over the invisible boundary within which the deadly game was played.

Then came the last act of the drama. The desperate quarry turned and tried to dart backward, through the dark line of the beaters.

Many—unless they had other enemies beyond my line of sight—must have succeeded. Many were struck by the heavy wings, so that they spun upwards, stunned or dead, and a long neck shot out to snap them as they descended.

Screams of syren-like exultation deafened the sky.

Then a cornered bird must have crossed the invisible boundary which they had avoided so desperately.

Like a stone it fell instantly. For a moment, as the glossy leaves parted, and the pink tongues dragged it in, I had the sight of a dove-like bird, of a wedgwood-blue colour, but with a very long and slender beak, curving slightly downward. In size it resembled the large pigeons, called runts, which are bred for eating in Italy.

It was the most familiar-seeming thing, except the friendly stars, that I had yet seen.

But I had no time for such thoughts now.

Its attacker, perhaps misled by the error of the bird it followed, must have got at least one of its wide-spreading wings above that fatal vacancy. Down it came also, though more slowly, turning in the air, striving with desperate flutterings to recover balance in a space between the cliff and the region of its terror, which was too narrow to give its wings full freedom.

It came down on the path quite near me; the great flapping vans making a wind against which I stood with difficulty.

Then it closed them, and gained its feet, and looked round, with a monstrous long-necked head reaching out to either side like a hen's as it did so.

It was not black, as it had looked to be in the sunlight, but of a dull-brown colour, inclining on the head and neck to a dark yellow. It was not feathered at all, but the skin, which lay in loose folds and ridges, which it could inflate at will, and which had no doubt served to break its fall, was of a leathery texture, and the wide-spreading wings were of a similar material.

It had one eye only, but of two facets, or perhaps I should say that its eyes were contained beneath one eyelid. The eye, or facet, with which it looked, would sparkle and light up with intelligence, while the other remained dull and vacant.

When it saw me first, it had, I thought, an instant of terror, turning into a vast perplexity. For some seconds the head remained twisted in my direction.

I had learned something in the lesson of confidence, and I looked back as steadily, but with a thought that if it wished to come my way it should have all the space available to pass me in comfort.

Whether it understood my thought I could not tell, but at length it turned its head away, and from that moment showed no consciousness of my existence. No doubt its own troubles were sufficient.

It had its head lifted now, and was calling loudly, with a whistling scream, to which a call replied from the cliff-top, and looking up I saw that the edge was lined by the great birds, now perched upon it, with long necks craning over.

I began to recognise its dilemma. For some reason it was evident that the air above the plain had no power to sustain its flight. Why, I could not imagine, but the fact was clear. On the other side was the cliff-wall, and between was the width of the opal path, on which there would be less than space to have spread its wings if it tried to rise and fly along it, even if it could rise from level ground, of which it might not be capable. The cliff here receded somewhat, as I have said, and I wondered whether it would attempt to scramble up it with

beak and claws, and such help as its wings could give. But the recession was not regular. There were perpendicular crags which might well have baffled it. Anyway, after much consultation with its friends above, of which one seemed to have the most to say, whether from leadership or affection, it decided to make its way backward the way I had come, where it may have considered that the width of the gorge, or the easier rocks from which those frog-faced brutes assailed me, would give it access to the space it needed.

So it turned from me with a rapid shuffling walk, while its companions moved along the cliff-top beside it with continued screams of advice, or encouragement; and it was with no reluctance that I proceeded in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER IX

THE TUNNEL OF FEAR

The nervousness of the great bird while (as it were) trespassing on the opal pavement, confirmed my impression of the prestige enjoyed by the subterranean dwellers, among the creatures of the outer surface of the world into which I had entered. Its initial terror of myself, until it had recognised me as something distinct and inferior, was sufficiently significant.

So far, I had seen only one of these dreaded beings, from whom I had escaped with an ease which might not be repeated. How often, or at what times, they were likely to appear on the surface, I could not know, but I had learnt in that first dream-like interview, that the entrances to their excavations were of special danger, and I knew that these were not numerous.

Anyway, I had no choice but to push forward. It was the more urgent because the claims of thirst and hunger were becoming unpleasantly assertive—indeed, at this time, had I crossed another of those subterranean entrances, I think I must have adventured down it at the call of this primal need, but no such opportunity came, and before the sun had reached its meridian, I saw the end of this stage of my journey.

I had learnt, in my first instructions, that the path that led down to the grey beaches was one which must be traversed with the utmost rapidity. I did not guess its length, nor could I foresee that in all the strange and dreadful adventures which were before me, there would be few indeed to exceed its horror.

I knew, from the depth of the gorge I had crossed, that I was high above the sea-level. I saw that the garden-ground (if such it were) sloped down, for many gradual miles, to an indistinct horizon. I

looked continually for the break in that sea of pink and glossy green which would enable me to cross it.

When it came, I did not see at first, my eyes being drawn to the steaming tank upon my other side. For here the cliff curved backward, giving space for an artificial lake of heated water, from which a steam rose continually, such as almost hid the cliffs upon the farther sides.

I found it too hot to drink, but I filled a tin cup which my knapsack held, and waited for it to cool, till my thirst overcame me.

It had a bitter and unpleasant taste, but I was in too great a need to be cautious. While I cooled a second cup at greater leisure I looked round and discovered that I had reached the place I was seeking.

I saw, on my left, the entrance to a long straight tunnel sloping gently downward. This entrance was reached by a terraced drop in the opal roadway. The tunnel had a floor of yellow sand, which was divided by a narrow conduit down which an overflow from the heated tank ran smoothly, and very swiftly, owing to the slope at which it flowed. The sides of the tunnel were of a smooth grey material, not concave but flat, converging upwards, till they almost met at the top, but not quite, there being a slit of perhaps two inches dividing them, through which a certain amount of light entered the tunnel.

It had a sinister appearance, and as I sat for a time regarding it, I considered what I might possibly have to fear if I should endeavour to penetrate it.

The purpose of the great lake of heated water behind me appeared to be evident. It must be the source from which the great expanse of ordered growth was irrigated, and perhaps fed. The stream that came through the tunnel might be a mere overflow, which was drained off into the sea, or it might be used for the filling of subterranean pipes lower down the slope. In either case, it did not greatly concern me,—or so I thought, not foreseeing how greatly I should need its help in the coming peril.

The yellow sand on either side supplied a sufficient space on which to walk upright beneath the shelving walls.

It was dimly lit from above, and obscured by the steam which rose from the water, but I could see that it ran straight on for a long distance. Actually, it was a length of about twelve miles, as I learnt afterwards.

It appeared that, being entered, it would offer no exit until I reached the further end, however far it might be.

But there was no appearance of any possible danger, and I knew that it was the way which I had been directed to take. The only warning I had received was to traverse it as rapidly as possible, and it certainly did not appear to be an inviting avenue in which to linger.

Perhaps it was the fact that I must emerge from it on the threshold of a new experience, the nature of which I could only guess very dimly, that made me rest so long, even when I waked from the sleep I needed, before I entered the passage, but I remember that I did it with a great reluctance, and started at a pace which, though it might not be equal to the light swift running of my instructress, was sufficient to take me a long way forward in safety.

After a time, I noticed that my feet were becoming warm, and realised that the sand must be heated, though not so much so as the soil on which I had walked previously. I did not think it to be sufficiently so to constitute a serious danger, or discomfort, but I considered that it might be a different matter to a foot protected only by its own fur, and, supposing that I had found the explanation of the warning, and that it did not affect me, and being somewhat short of breath from the long spurt I had taken, I slackened to a quieter walk, —and as my right foot came down, a pink streak shot out of the sand a few inches from it, and smacked against my ankle, with a sound like a whip lash. I jumped, with a cry of horror, or at least I tried to jump, and came down on my hands, for the grip held, and I was powerless to break it. The pink worm did not twine round my foot, but lay up the side, holding on, leech-like, by power of suction. It was trying to drag the foot into the sand, but, for the moment, that was beyond its power. Wrenching desperately, I tried to get loose the axe, for which I had expected no use, and which was slung on my back, under the knapsack, for convenience as I ran. When I got it clear I

realised that I could not strike hard against my own ankle, and to an attempt at cutting, my assailant showed the resilient rubber-like quality which seemed common to several of the forms of life with which I was becoming familiar. With a despairing effort I strained my foot a few inches from the ground, and drove a hard blow beneath it, at which the severed worm fell writhing on the sand.

But now there were two others round my left foot, and their united strength was too great for me to lift it to enable me to deal with them in the same way. I gave up the axe, and hacked them free with the clasp knife. Then I saw that the ground behind me, and for several yards in front, showed similar worms that had pushed up through the sand, and waved and felt around for the origin of the vibrations which had disturbed them.

No doubt they had been rising behind me all the time, but I had passed over the ground so quickly that I had always been in advance of my danger, and unaware that it threatened me.

I suppose that the roots of the plants without,—if plants they could be called,—grew under the wall of the tunnel, and lived among the sand, though the conditions did not allow of the leaves shooting up in such soil, or in the absence of the light they needed.

I noticed with some relief that the surrounding tongues could not reach me while I remained motionless, and I concluded that they must be in some way rooted, or growing from a common source, which kept them in their places securely.

I watched for perhaps half an hour without motion while the long tongues gradually quietened, and then thinking that the time would soon come when I could make a rush to pass them, I made a careless movement, which stirred them to fresh activity, and the weary waiting had to be commenced again. At last, when most of them had withdrawn, and the rest were quiescent, I made a sudden rush, and though more than one shot upward as I passed, I ran through them successfully.

For some time I ran on at my utmost speed, and exhausted myself proportionately. For another mile, perhaps, I kept to a panting trot, and I began to see the pink heads thrust up as I passed them. I

looked back and saw them already high in the air a few yards behind. The sight gave me a fresh spurt, but it could not last. I could see no end to the tunnel. In fact I could see a very moderate distance only, owing to the steam in the atmosphere, and the narrow slit through which the light must enter. I had no means of estimating its length. It might be five miles. It might be fifty. Soon my pace slackened. Soon I was hacking with my knife again. Then there was the weary motionless waiting, till I could again go forward in safety.

The next time my foot was caught I fell forward, and before I could rise, a dozen of them were round me. One held me by the right wrist, pulling till the hand was sunk in the sand, despite my frenzied efforts to free it. I was carrying the clasp-knife open in this hand, but I caught it up with my left and hacked through the sand, and at last cut the pulling worm that held me. I turned to others that were straining at my sides and legs, and one by one I cut them through. Then I noticed that my right wrist was streaming with blood, and thought at first that the knife had slashed it, till I saw that a broad line across the back was mottled with punctured wounds, where the worm had sucked it.

I sat there for a long time, with neither strength nor courage to adventure farther. I thought of going back, but I felt that the distance would be beyond my strength to traverse.

The distance ahead *might* be less,—it seemed my one hope. (It was actually much longer, if I estimate correctly how far I had then gone.) Anyway, it would be uphill back, and that would defeat my speed, and I supposed that the creatures might be more alert after I had disturbed them. I wondered if I could tap the ground in front of me and cut them down, one by one, as they pushed upward. But I had had no food for many hours, and I was already conscious of exhaustion. Water I could have, and I drank again, after cooling it. I thought of wading in the central stream, but even could I have kept my feet in that swift smooth current I supposed that the heat would be unendurable. And then came a thought which animated me with a fresh hope. Could I leap to the other side? It seemed too broad to be possible,—and I could get no run for the jump, unless I took it at a

slant, which would make it longer. I had no more than space to stand upright for about a yard from the water's edge. I could step two paces back if I crouched.

The sand had become quiet now. I would go forward while I could, and try the leap when the need grew urgent. Was it wise to wait till I should be again too exhausted to try it? On an impulse I leapt. In the nervous fear of falling into the stream I leapt too far, and my head struck the opposite wall, though not severely.

There was no relief on this side. The jar with which I struck the ground roused my enemies with such celerity that I barely escaped them. As I ran I thought I had gained nothing, till I realised that if I were hard pressed I could always win a moment's freedom, or a fresh start, if I jumped again.

It was not much, but it was something.

Of the rest of that passage I do not wish to write in detail. I do not wish to recall it.

It is enough that the time came when a point of light showed in the distance, and when I staggered into the daylight. Of the scene that lay before me, I was not clearly conscious. I was at the utmost point of fatigue of nerve and body. I lay down and slept till the day,—which now covered a period of more than four times that to which I was accustomed,—was sinking toward sunset.

CHAPTER X

THE AMPHIBIANS

I awakened at last to a confused memory only, recalling how I had leapt short and fallen into the steaming water, which, when it reached that place, must have cooled. Vaguely I remembered how it had swept me down, and of a half-stunned instinctive effort to regain my feet, but of how I got out, or whether I had struggled long in the water, or been able to wade down it, and so escape the danger of the sand, I could not recall with certainty. I think I must have been on the sand for the last few yards, or I should have been swept over the edge by the stream, which fell sheer five hundred feet into the sea beneath. For I was lying on a level opal path such as I had traversed previously, with this difference only, that the cultivated ground sloped upward behind me, and the cliff upon the other side sank steeply to the sea.

The sun was still hot,—more so on this lower level than on the higher ground I had left,—and it had dried me while I slept, but I was stiff with wounds and exhaustion, and faint with hunger, and I found that I could only stand with difficulty. My boots were soaked with blood, and the laces were torn away, so that I had to use some string from my little store of necessities with which to fasten them.

If I wished to reach the end of my journey alive I knew that I must do so quickly; but I looked round in vain for any path to help me.

Beneath me now was the unchanging sea, blue and smooth, with a touch of white where the ground shallowed it. Three miles out, it may be, showed the long line of rocks for which I had been told to look.

Beyond, I knew, must be the grey beaches which I was seeking.

But how could I cross the intervening water? It was a difficulty which might not have occurred to a creature no more at home on

land than in the water, or perhaps less so. But I was not gilled or web-footed.

Sign of life there was none. Not even a bird was winging across the unclouded blue.

Even to descend the cliff was impossible.

I might explore the path either to right or left, and with no choice between them, for it ran straight on as far as I could see in either direction, and the cliff-wall showed no change.

And then my eyes were attracted by a dark spot, a blur,—a slowly lengthening blur, which came from the black rocks, and was gradually stretching itself toward me over the water.

My perception was quickened by past experience. Here must be another invisible bridge, by which something large and formidable was crossing toward me.

In fact, as I quickly proved, the bridge stretched out straight before the place where I was seated, and I had only to remain, and whatever was coming must inevitably encounter me.

Almost too worn for fear, and recognising the futility of evasion, I resolved to do so.

I had arrived at so low a point that only active help could aid me. If that which approached were hostile or indifferent the result would be similar. So I sat and waited.

It was not very long—for the approach came swiftly—before I was able to guess that it consisted of a long column of creatures similar to her whom I had first met. They stretched for half a furlong in mid-air, advancing at a rapid trot, and as they came nearer I recalled their mode of conversing, and tried to adjust my mind, to get, if possible, into sympathy with them.

After a time I succeeded,—at least in hearing their minds, though they did not respond. I suppose that this was because they were all thinking as one, for normally I found it impossible to establish conversation in this way, except by mutual willingness.

I found that these creatures, who had no use for articulate speech, and to whom sound was an outrage, possessed at once a finer music

and a higher poetry than our clumsier arts had even reached out to imagine.

For they made the music in their minds, or recited it, if it had been composed earlier, and its notes, that rose and fell, were the very thoughts that inspired it. It was now a marching chant, and a war-song of a kind, as I heard it,—

*“We have offered our lives on the palm of one hand,
(Is it Wrong that hath willed? Is it God Who hath
planned?)
To be taken and lost at our Leaders’ command.
We who are but God’s thought——”*

So far I followed it, and then the unison broke, for they perceived me, and doubted.

Nothing more of their thoughts could I learn till they had reached the spot where I sat, and were filing past it. I saw that they were in all respects similar to the one with whom I had been first acquainted, except that the fur of each was trimmed or patterned in a distinctive manner, until, when the first score had passed, there came a group of five who had no such marks upon them, but were in that, and in all other respects, like the one I first met. Of these, one detached herself from the group and came toward me, while the others passed onward.

I had learnt enough of their conversing to make my mind at once blank and receptive to receive her question. I say “her,” not because these creatures showed any divergencies of form to indicate a bisexual species, but because the slim bodies gave me an impression of femininity, which makes “it” an inadequate pronoun. She asked,—“You bring a message? We have received it already, but I should like to hear it from you.” I replied, “It is this, *‘I could do nothing. She is in the fifth killing-pen on the left. There is no watch on the higher side, and it can be climbed with little peril. The weapons are not guarded, but the pens are. Bring all you can, except those who pass the fish forward. You must leave my body till the return, for the fault was mine.’*”

She replied, her mind an open curiosity concerning me as she did so, “You have remembered well. And she tells me that you saved her body, for which we are grateful.”

I answered, “I thought I left her dead in the tunnel. Has she come here before me?”

“We hope her body may still be there. It is dead now, but it should not be damaged beyond remedy.”

My mind wondered vaguely, and her own answered. “You are a strange animal, and as ignorant as you are dirty. There are two coming which will bring you food, and which you must first eat, and then continue with us, for we could not leave you in safety, and your body, apart from its deficiencies and that its clumsy coverings are damaged, appears to be useless until food has restored it.”

Her thought was without hostility; it was kind in tone, however offensive in substance. She was clearly startled on realising the mental protest with which I received it. She went on, “You have been useful, and what we can do for you we will. But if this wild inevitable folly does not destroy us, I suppose that we must give you up to the Dwellers, for you seem to me as one that comes from the other lands, whom we are unable to harbour.”

I have tried to translate the thoughts she gave me into English words, but it is not easy, and the difficulty is particularly great where people or places are mentioned. For in the language of thought it is evident that proper names can have no place. The clumsy device of names is a necessity of articulate speech, which Adam first discovered when he attempted language. Consequently, when I write of the “Dwellers” I use the best word I can apply to the idea she gave me, which was that of a dominant race, by whom the earth—or that part of it—was held as men hold civilised lands to-day, and without whose consent no other creature can remain in security. There was a subtle implication of a shadow beyond, against which they were leagued in common, but it was too formless for me to understand it....

Had dogs continued, I wondered, through five hundred millenniums?

The two creatures which trotted at the rear of the column, and which now paused at her signal, were shaggy, web-footed, with the flapped gills with which I was already familiar, obviously amphibious, with seals' eyes, and of the bulk of a walrus. Why should I think of dogs? But the identity of a dog is not the result of a physical pattern, or how should we call a Great Dane by the same name as a Skye Terrier?

Not for the first time or the last, I wondered less at the differences of this strange world than at its similarities to the one behind me.

Round the neck of each of these creatures hung a bag containing food, intended (as I learnt later) for their own eating. Of this she directed me to take some for my own use from the nearer one, and when I hesitated, with mingled fear and repulsion, the sea-dog thrust out an unexpected length of narrow tongue, that curled down, snake-like, into the bag, and drew out an object the size of a swan's egg, but covered with a tough flexible skin of mottled grey, and held it toward me.

At this my guide threw me a thought of sharp impatience, and enjoined me to eat it quickly.

I took it then, and broke the skin, and found it contained a semi-liquid substance, of a slate-grey colour, which I tasted doubtfully, and then ate with eagerness, for it was sweet and of a delightful taste, and had a quality which appeased both thirst and hunger.

CHAPTER XI

THE PROBLEM

I ate quickly, for the impatience of my companion's mind was affecting me like a physical pressure, and we then set off rapidly to overtake the troop, which had now disappeared in the tunnel, my energy being stimulated to the swift exertion, either by the force of my companion's will, or by the strange food which I had taken.

As we ran, our minds met and contended, making little progress at first, for her curiosity was keen, and was of a kind which, being without anxiety, and regarding me only as a strange animal which had lost its way, was not easily turned, while I was acutely conscious that I had here a friendly intelligence which, if I could use the time to advantage, might give me information of vital importance, to enable me to move with safety through the unfamiliar ways to which I had committed myself.

Consequently we each strove for some moments to obtain information rather than provide it, but in the end she gave way, thinking she would gain more by humouring me, and that my questions could hardly fail to disclose much of my own identity.

I then asked her how it was that the troop, the rear of which we had now gained, was able to traverse the tunnel in safety. I recognised that the pace at which they moved must give some advantage, but I should have supposed that, though the first might pass, the roused worms would strike at those that followed. She replied that the combined will-power of the troop held them down very easily, on which I mentioned my own experience, and admitted that I had made no effort to use my will-power against them. She replied that this was natural in such an animal as I, and that I had possibly allowed anger, or even fear, to enter my mind, so

descending to their own level, and rendering it easier for them to attack me.

I could not deny this, but asked why she regarded me so contemptuously. She replied that, as I was a strange creature to her, she could only judge me by the degree of intelligence which I exhibited, but that a species of any eminence could hardly be content to exist in bodies so ugly, so awkward, and so badly made. She added that many of the lowest creatures of the ocean-floor possessed bodies which were complete and sufficient without extraneous coverings.

I replied that the human body was not necessarily insufficient, but that clothing might be worn from a sense of shame, or as an ornament only.

She said that she understood the sense of shame, which she should feel very strongly herself if she were burdened with such a body, but if I regarded my clothes as ornamental, it was a point on which we must differ; and, in that case, the wearing of clothes confessed me to be an inferior, even among my own kind, as a Leader naturally would not enter into such a competition.

I was puzzled by this reply, and she instanced the fact that she, and other Leaders of her kind, did not pattern their fur, which would bring them into unseemly competition with those below them—a competition which would lead to envy if they succeeded, or ridicule if they failed to outdo their rivals.

I then asked a number of questions intended to guide me as to the conditions of the world I had entered, and it will be most convenient to give the facts,—as far as I was then able to understand them,—in the form of a direct statement rather than in that of the conversation which gained them.

I learnt that the country in which I found myself was an island continent, of about the size of Australia, but in the northern hemisphere, as the stars had told me. It was controlled by the Dwellers, who had lived below its surface for a long period of time, of the duration of which I could form no idea, nor could I obtain any information as to the depth or extent of their subterranean excavations, for the sufficient reason that no Amphibian had ever

penetrated them. The island continent was surrounded on every side by a great ocean, beyond which was a world containing such inhabitants that the Dwellers had first gone underground to escape them, and then, at a later period, planted around the whole extent of the coast a girdle of strange growths, above which the air had no sustaining power, and which had protected it so effectively that for an enormous period of time they had been left in undisputed isolation.

In some remote antiquity they had entered into a treaty with the Amphibians by which it was agreed that they should be left in possession of the numerous rocky islets which surrounded a large part of the coast, on three conditions;—they were to keep certain subterranean reservoirs filled with fresh fish continually; they were to hold no intercourse with the farther world; and they were to make no attempt to penetrate inland, either above or below the surface.

Until recently, these conditions had been observed with exactness. They had, beneath the ocean, an undisputed dominion of enormous area; they did not even cross to the farther sides of the fish-tanks they filled, from which the Dwellers netted the shoals of fish which they had herded into them; they made no attempt to penetrate the protective belt which surrounded the surface area; and they entirely avoided the other continents of which the land surface of the earth consisted.

For the whole period since this treaty was made—I could only marvel at their longevity—they had been ruled by a Council of Seven, whose headquarters were beneath the black rocks which I had observed to seaward.

The Council decided all matters affecting the welfare of the community by thinking upon them until they arrived at unanimity, and these decisions were always accepted without dissent.

But there was one of the seven who had not been present when the treaty was made. She had been long absent, and was supposed to have been dead, but she had subsequently returned from the exploration of the caves of a range of submarine mountains at the farther end of the earth, in which she had met with such adventures

as had detained her for a long period. Not having been a party to the treaty, she had not felt herself bound in honour, as had the other six, to observe it. Nor, being of the seven, did she feel controlled by their authority, as did the rest of the community. She was of a disposition which loved the adventures of strange ways, and, from the first, had wished to explore the interior of the forbidden continent. For a very long period she had been held back by the wishes of her companions, and by the fear that she might be the cause of disaster to them, but at last a time had come when the impulse had been irresistible, and there had been none near to restrain her. She had spent the night on the forbidden land, and had returned at dawn with a strange tale of a silent country, where all things slept, and where trees and grasses grew, such as they had never seen, or remembered only with the vagueness of a distant dream.

After this escapade they watched in doubt lest the Dwellers had been aware of it, but the days passed in safety, and at length she ventured again—and again—always returning before the dawn, until the tales she brought enabled them to visualise a land inhabited by many species of creatures, such as the Dwellers permitted to run wild, or conserved for their utilities to themselves, and of a fertility which was alluringly different from the ocean meadows in which they were accustomed to wander, but in which all creatures slept in the night-time, and even the Dwellers did not appear upon the surface of the land they owned.

After a time it appeared certain that these expeditions might be taken with impunity, providing that the night were chosen, and a return made before sunrise. But the time came when the desire to see the moving life of the daytime overcame her. She remained in hiding, she saw much, and the next time she stayed away for three days. Acting with great caution, and with the advantage of her past experience, she returned in safety and unsuspected; but in the meantime a companion, alarmed at her lengthened absence, had started out to find her. On learning this, she at once set out again, though the day was then dawning, and the open paths had to be taken at a new peril; she found her would-be rescuer herself

captured, and apparently in the greatest danger, and on her return to obtain the help which was essential, had encountered me, with the result of which I knew already.

Conscious that her body was damaged beyond immediate remedy, and aware that her separate mind could not communicate with her friends unless their own should be receptive, she had entrusted me with the message which I had tardily delivered. But in the meantime, she had found it easy to establish intercourse with minds which were anxiously awaiting news of herself and her companion, and it was on the information that she had supplied that the expedition was started.

It was a deliberate breach of the treaty on which their security was founded, but with two of their number in jeopardy, and the body of one lying where the Dwellers could not fail to find it sooner or later, they had felt that they had no alternative but to attempt the enterprise.

Among the various creatures which lived upon the surface of the continent, it appeared that there were certain ferocious animals of the lowest kind, gregarious in their habits, collected in mountain strongholds, and having bodies which were like those of fish in this respect, that they decayed after a short space of years, sometimes even rotting while the unfortunate animals remained within them, and being continually replaced by young of the same species which grew up around them. They did not appear to have any life apart from these bodies, though my informant could not tell with certainty whether they actually ceased to exist when their bodies perished, or were incarnated in their descendants.

These creatures had carnivorous feasts at regular intervals, in anticipation of which they hunted the wild things of the land, and set traps for them, into one of which the unfortunate Amphibian had fallen. As one of these feast days was shortly due, she was now penned up, not merely in anticipation of death, but that her body might be destroyed beyond remedy, in which case I understood that the path of reincarnation might be both long and difficult.

The problems were, therefore, first, to remove the body which lay in the tunnel entrance to a place of safety, where it could be repaired, and its owner could resume it; and second, to rescue her companion either by force or subtlety, bringing their faculty of thinking in unison, and of combined will-power, to operate against opponents who were not expecting attack, and who relied upon their savage strength and weapons to maintain their own security, and to hold the prey that they had captured; and third, to do these things, if either were possible, without the knowledge of the Dwellers, whose means of information were only vaguely guessed, but who were known to come out on the surface in the daytime.

CHAPTER XII

THE MARCH

We were now clear of the covered way, under a sky of brilliant starshine, holding a course through the darkness that never wavered or slackened, even when the gorge was crossed by the invisible bridge.

Here it occurred to me to ask how, if the country relied upon its girdle of strange growths for its immunity from the outside world, it could afford to risk invasion up so wide an unprotected channel as the gorge supplied, but I could learn nothing beyond the suggestion that its enemies would probably be too stupid to discover the gap, (if it really were unprotected), which seemed a strange supposition when applied to a power so dreaded, and the information that this gorge was remembered as the scene of a great battle before the protective girdle had been planted, in which the Dwellers had been destroyed in hundreds, but in which one of their enemies had also perished, and the remains of its body had blocked the channel for many years afterwards.

I had thought of the Dwellers hitherto as dominating by their strength and size, as well as by their evident physical knowledge and engineering skill, in both of which my present companions appeared to take little interest, but I now had a vision as of a world in which a race of ants of superior intelligence might revolt successfully against mankind, and of a warfare in which they had been trodden down, as a man might stamp on an ant's nest. But the truth, as I learnt later, was somewhat different.

My companion now pressed for some account of myself, and I answered many questions, finding her more ready to believe that I was the product of an earlier civilisation than I should have anticipated, but that this information made it appear the more

necessary that the Dwellers should be informed of my existence, and the less probable that they would regard it with complacency.

She explained that it was known to the Dwellers that the earth had been the scene of countless civilisations, through aeons of forgotten times, all of which had successively destroyed themselves by the misuse of their own discoveries, and that their whole energy was directed to overcoming this recurrent danger, which had appeared to operate with the certainty of a fundamental law. To them I might well appear as the seed of death which nature had sent forward to frustrate a purpose which might otherwise have defeated her own intention. On the other hand, she suggested kindly, my obvious ignorance and insignificance might be my protection, as I had so evidently been born upon the earth in one of its more barbarous epochs. As to their own course regarding myself, they would do what they could, but—and her mind shut suddenly, though not before I had caught a glimpse of her difficulty.

For if they were discovered in the present enterprise, even if it did not in itself cause their destruction, they might find themselves at open war with the Dwellers, in which case there would be no purpose in surrendering me, while if the expedition returned in success and secrecy, they might wish to give me up rather than risk another cause of difference,—but how then could they secure that I should withhold my knowledge of the events which were now proceeding?

It appeared to me to be a position in which they might well decide to destroy what was, to them, nothing more than a strange and inferior animal; nor did the alternative appear more attractive in its probabilities, for if they were at war with the Dwellers, would they not retreat to the ocean-floor which was their familiar resort, and where, I supposed, their enemies would be unable to pursue them, and how could I adapt myself to such an existence?

I decided that I could only act as circumstances developed, and that, in the meantime, it was both duty and policy to give such service as I could to those who had shown me kindness.

Meanwhile, the rapid march continued. There was a moon now, the first I had seen, a thin bowl of silver in the eastern sky, more

brilliant than that to which I had been used—a difference which may have arisen only from the fact that I was in a more equatorial region than that which I had left behind me.

By its light the path became visible, a faint opalescence beneath us, and, later, the black entrance to the tunnel of my first adventure.

Here we halted for the recovery of the body that I had left within it. But after some space of silence, a sense of grief and oppression invaded me, which I knew was felt by all those around me, as the news spread from mind to mind. The body was not there.

Whatever had happened to it—and that it had fallen into the hands of the Dwellers was almost certain—I understood that the inquiry must be delayed till the further object of the expedition had been accomplished, or at least attempted.

The sea-dogs, which had been brought for the purpose of conveying back the body, were now ordered to return, and the forward march continued. My guide had rejoined the other Leaders of the expedition, assigning me to the care of the rearmost of the troop, beside whom I went forward, keeping up the pace with difficulty, but afraid to fall behind, and aware from the thought which combined us that there was still much ground to be covered before the darkness lifted. When I had continued for about half-an-hour, during which some miles must have been covered at the rapid trot which was maintained without alteration upon the level surface, a knowledge of my exhaustion must have entered the mind of my neighbour, for I found a small webbed hand passed into mine, and with it a thrill of nervous energy that enabled me to continue, till we shortly turned to the left, and took a rough uphill path, on which we slackened to a walk, and were soon climbing over rough boulders, and up sharp ascents where hand and knee were needed.

For a mile, perhaps two, we continued up this arduous way, at times with a glimpse, right-hand, of a gorge of black forbidding precipices, silvered in the moonlight, but most often with sight of little beyond the immediate rocks among which we clambered.

Then we became aware that a high wall of overhanging cliff confronted us, into which those who led us had disappeared already,

and, guided by my companion's hand, I entered a narrow gulley, whether natural or artificial I cannot say, but which extended for many miles through the mountains. It was not more than five feet wide from wall to wall. A narrow line of sky showed its stars, where the gulley opened on the mountain slope some hundreds of feet above us.

We emerged at last at a great height, on an open slope, on which trees grew, but not thickly. They were tall and somewhat slender, silver-grey in the moonlight, as a poplar shows its leaves when the wind lifts them. Here we continued a long time, going forward, as I thought, not directly, but keeping always where the trees were thickest. Once, far below, we had a view of the gorge from which we climbed, narrow here, but opening out to seaward many miles away, a vision of mysterious and incredible beauty which the next step ended.

I judged now, by the moon's height, that we must have travelled rapidly for about twenty-four hours of my accustomed reckoning, and that the night was half over. When the sea-dogs left, I had been given a store of the food they carried, and to this I had resorted more than once already. My companions appeared to be equally independent of fatigue or food, but my condition was different. I had been without sleep for a long period, and I was aware that it was only the vitality that I received from my companion's hand, and the fear of the contempt of my new associates, that dragged me onward. These might not have availed me much longer, but now we had approached a dense wood of a different kind. I was instructed to lie flat and crawl forward under boughs too thick and low for any other method of progression. At once we were in darkness, with the great boughs close above us, and beneath us a bed of soft resilient moss, which must have been nearly a foot in depth, over which we crawled and wriggled quite easily, but which yielded to our weight unless we moved forward. It was warmer here,—the night air on the higher ground had been cold since we left the gulley,—and there was a strange and pleasant fragrance from the boughs above us, so that when an order was passed to rest, I sank into the soft moss very

willingly, and had I known that it would close over and suffocate me while I slept, I think that I should scarcely have had the strength of mind to reject its embraces.

CHAPTER XIII

THE KILLERS

I could not say if the others slept, for I knew nothing more till I waked bewildered in a dim golden light, with my comrade of the night touching my hand to rouse me. The rest of the troop had begun to move forward already.

I was sunk deeply in the soft moss, which was of a very close texture, and of so dark a green as to look black in the shadow. The branches overhead spread low and wide, as do those of a beech. The leaves also were beech-like, but of a golden yellow. Not the yellow of Autumn, but one of an abundant vitality. I noticed the fragrance which had soothed my exhaustion when we entered. It gave me now a sense of contentment and physical well-being such as I had never experienced.

It must have been full daylight without, for the light did not increase farther within the wood, but here it was a golden twilight only. I was able to look clearly for the first time at my companion. The human mind is so ductile that already the slim furred form gave an impression of familiarity. Not being one of the Seven, she had the distinctive patterning by which each was individualised. In her case, a zebra-like striping on the back, produced by trimming the fur shorter, as it was of a darker shade beneath, the silver-grey marking of the back being superficial only.

We conversed freely as we crawled forward for some hours over the springy moss. I met here with a mind of a ready friendliness, and a very lively curiosity. I suppose, by our reckoning, she had lived for an enormous period, but the mind that met me gave an impression of an invincibly child-like quality,—but it had other characteristics which I was to learn more slowly. The impression which I gave to her was, no doubt, somewhat different.

Her keen delight in the new world,—as new to her as to me,—through which we were passing, contended with her curiosity to learn the still stranger world of which I could tell her, and gave little time for me to learn of her, or of the life to which she was native. But she gave me glimpses of an existence which found its pleasure in wandering through a marine world which was as much more extensive than the dry ground as it is to-day, and which I judged to have changed but little. One episode she gave me vividly because of the indelible impression which it had made upon her. It appeared that her kind can wander freely among the huge savage creatures of the ocean-depths, exploring its heights and valleys, and penetrating its caves with impunity, because they can control every form of life it contains by a will-power which works without effort. She had attempted, in a spirit of mischief, to allow various savage creatures to attack her, intending to forbid them at the latest second, but she found invariably that though their minds were confused by a feeling of her complacency, the respect of her kind was too deep an instinct for them to disobey, until she tried the trick upon a species of shark of an exceptional ferocity. Vividly I saw it, under depths of green water, from which all weaker forms of life had withdrawn in terror. The savage rushes of the hungry fish which she had foiled at the last moment with a thought of derision, and the snap of his disappointed jaws. And then,—the instant's diversion of mind in its too-confident certainty, and the half-second too late,—the passionate repulse that sent the great fish cowed and grovelling to the sea-floor a hundred feet below,—and the consciousness that her right arm was hanging torn and useless. And then the long swim homeward for two thousand miles to the only place where help could be given, and how she had told her tale to the Seven, and they had decreed that the arm should never entirely heal, so that it should be a warning to her and all her race for ever. And in evidence she showed the scars, where no fur grew, and I understood that the scar of a healed wound was something beyond the previous experience of her kind.

Of the swimming of the great tunnel she told me also, which extends for several thousand miles from one sea to another, through

an intervening continent, and of strange forms that lurk in its labyrinth of caves, such as the open oceans have never seen,—labyrinths in which you may wander for many months, seeking in vain for an exit.

Of such things I learnt much, but I noticed that her mind was little fixed upon the object of the expedition. That she understood that it was very dangerous, and might terminate her bodily life was clear enough, and that the thought of such potential sacrifice for her Leader's rescue filled her with a pleasurable exhilaration that was stronger than fear, this I understood; but of the thought of any possible aggressive violence to achieve her end, her mind seemed as incapable as her body seemed ill-adapted for such a purpose. Frequently her thoughts were of the movements in the moss below, which must have teemed with life, though it did not annoy us in any way; or of the occasional sound of wings in the boughs above us; or of the straight and narrow paths that cut through the moss continually, down which we once saw a small form disappearing, looking like a beetle running upright on its hind legs, and of the size of a field-mouse.

But though her mind was not anxious as to the result of the expedition, I soon had evidence that those of her Leaders were differently occupied.

A thought came down the line to halt, and for me alone to go forward.

This I did, till I came to an open space in the forest. Here I found the five Leaders seated where the moss-carpet extended somewhat beyond the trees, and for a moment they waited while my mind was held by the beauty of the sight which met me.

The trees which surrounded the glade were of one kind only: beech-like in growth, though the branches spread and drooped with greater regularity. The gold which shows faintly on an oak in springtime was here the dominant colour, tinged with green if the wind lifted the leaves, which were of a fine transparency, or deepening to the background of a Tuscan fresco, as it sank again into quietude. The moss, which extended on all sides outward from the

trees for a short distance, showed dark in a strong sunlight. Beyond this, the glade was covered with a short growth of coral-pink, on which blue pigeons, such as I had seen before, were feeding, and showing no concern at our presence.

Grace of line and harmony of colour—everywhere I found them, as in the world I had left. Surely beauty is more fundamental than righteousness! Or may the two be one only?

If there were any difference in the new world, it was only that nature produced her effects with greater economy of material, massing her colours, and content to display a few varieties of plant or tree only, where I had been used to the combinations of hundreds. But I recognised that I had seen too little to justify such generalisations. It would be as though a man were to spend a few days on the Norfolk Broads, or in the Highlands of Scotland, and imagine the whole surface of the earth to be similar to the scenes he witnessed.

But the Five were waiting. My guide of the previous night addressed her mind to mine, and the others arranged themselves to perceive us. I was first asked if I were willing to give my aid to the object of the expedition, if it should be of any utility. It did not appear to occur to them to offer any reward or inducement, and in reply I consented unconditionally.

I was then asked to explain the purpose of the axe I carried, with which I had defeated the vegetable octopus of my first adventure. This led me to inquire why its victim had not been able to save herself by the power of will on which they relied for their protection, to which I received the answer that it would have been of little avail, as the whole forest was against her, and was conscious that it was carrying out the duty for which it had been planted, whereas she was breaking the treaty with its originators. I recalled the way in which it had quailed before me, but it was pointed out that I was not under the obligations of the Amphibians. None the less, I felt that the incident gave me some increased prestige in the minds that considered it. The fact was that my hatred of the creature as an octopus was blended with the contempt which I felt for it as a

cabbage—the first idea persisting—and that this attitude toward something which they regarded as formidable, both in itself and in its anger, impressed them inevitably.

But I soon modified this advantage. In explaining the uses of the axe, I offered to demonstrate it by felling one of the trees around us. The idea that I should destroy life for an illustration broke upon their minds with incredulity, that gave way to contempt. For a moment they regarded me as morally unfit to be associated with their enterprise, but recalling that they were contending against creatures even baser than myself (if that were possible) they decided to interrogate me further.

It was first explained to me that the spirit of her whom I had rescued so unsuccessfully was now guiding the expedition, and I was asked to put my mind at her disposal, so that I might see the creatures against which we were operating. On doing this, I received a vision of a forest path, on which three of them were walking in single file. They were about three feet in height, and in appearance they seemed to me such caricatures of humanity as might be the outcome of a nightmare dream. In colour they were a bright worm-pink, and of a surface which was repulsive beyond the resource of any word we have to describe it. Their heads were bald, but of a darker colour than their bodies and limbs. Their eyes moved continuously with an alert and restless malignity. Their lips—or rather the orifice of their mouths—elongated into a narrow tube about twelve inches long, through which they could take nourishment by suction only. Through these tubes they could make whistling sounds, by which they communicated with one another. They could stand easily on their legs if sight or reach required it, but squatting was their more natural posture. Each of them carried some kind of rope or cord in considerable quantity.

There was a fourth that followed, of the same form and colour, but of more than twice the size, and of a ferocity more brutal, though not more malevolent, than that of those who preceded him. He carried a powerful bow of dark wood, bent for use, and with a shaft ready for the cord.

It was conveyed to me that these were not adult and young of the species, but that the archer was of an exceptional growth, of which they had two or three only in each generation.

In the vision, I could hear plainly that others of their kind were whistling to them through the trees, to whom they replied with notes of rising excitement. Soon I perceived that one of the frog-mouthed apes that I had already encountered was being driven towards the party that I watched. I understood that it had been separated from its companions, and headed off from the safety of its native rocks. It now came bounding in a heavy bewildered terror toward the waiting archer.

Remembering how my own axe had cut through the throat of one of these creatures without apparently disturbing its equanimity, I was curious to see how a shaft could discommode it. I soon learnt. The hunted creature saw its new foes, and turned sideways. As it did so, it crossed the bole of a giant tree, and at the instant the archer wrenched the bow back to his ear, and the shaft flew. It drove through its victim's neck, and deep into the trunk behind it. Before the shaft had ceased to quiver, the three that bore the ropes leapt forward and were twining them round the now struggling victim, binding it first to the trunk, and then, heedless of the gnashing teeth above the fastened neck, till every limb was useless.

By now the beasts that had driven it were arriving, and with an inferno of exultant whistlings the worm-pink crowd had loosed it from the tree, and drawn the shaft out of its neck, that they might drag it with them, now roped beyond movement. I watched it drawn for some miles in this way, clear of the woods, and up by rocky paths, until a high plateau was reached, a mile-wide shelf of rock, beyond which the mountain rose abruptly once again. On this shelf was their stronghold. A low, continuous, smooth-sided back-sloping stone-seeming wall, very broad at the base, and rising to a sharp ridge, swept crescent-shaped from the cliff, and enclosed the larger half of the plateau.

To this wall there was one barricaded entrance only, through which the hunters dragged their victim. Many more of their kind, of

all sizes, were within the enclosure, but the sight of the captured prey was evidently too commonplace to attract their attention, and I saw that they squatted in the sun, or moved on their own errands, in complete indifference, while it was dragged toward a large cistern of boiling water, which was sunk in the ground, and into the centre of which a stone pier jutted. By carrying their ropes round the sides of the cistern they were able to draw their victim along this pier, so that it fell off at the extremity into the boiling vat. It was bound too tightly to struggle, and sank at once to the bottom, where it continued to move spasmodically as long as I observed it. I understood that it would boil there for many hours till the contents of the tough skin should be reduced to a semi-liquid form, such as its captors could draw in through their sucking mouths, and the whole sight filled me with a loathing for these bestial forms, and for the cruelties they practised. I did not reflect that the boiling of living fish, which is common in Asia, or of lobsters in our own country, is a far greater cruelty, being exercised on creatures of higher sensibility, and with far less excuse, as they could be killed without difficulty, which was by no means certain in the instance which I was observing.

I saw also that the centre of the crescent did not contain any buildings except such as were of a public character. Of these one confined the selected victims of the approaching feast, and this was built over one end of the boiling tank, and guarded by one of the giant archers, with a number of assistants round him. There was one other giant lying with a leg discoloured and useless against the cliff-wall, in an evidently dying condition,—shortly, no doubt, to share the fate of a dead body of one of their number which I saw flung over the farther side of the plateau, where it fell abruptly to a great depth.

I saw that the wall was hollow, with many doorways on the inner side, and that it formed the dwellings of the settlement. There were many young, moving in a more lively manner than the adults, and including two of the archer kind, which, though evidently immature, were already larger than the rest of the tribe.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HALT

I was recalled from this contemplation by the pressure of the minds around me, and my first thought was to ask why, if the Dwellers were supreme, they allowed the existence of such foulness. I was answered that it was all as strange to them as to myself, but I learnt later that the blood of creatures of a malevolent kind had a chemical quality which was required for certain purposes in connection with the defence of the continent, and that these creatures were deliberately bred to supply it.

I was then asked whether I were familiar with the weapon carried by the archers, and could use it if necessary. I replied that the bow had long been regarded as a deadly weapon in the world from which I came, but that in my own time and country it had fallen into disuse. I was not entirely unfamiliar with it, having consorted with some who had used it in competitions of skill, in which I had done indifferently well, but the bows I had used had been little better than toys when compared with that which I had now seen, and the memory of the depth that the shaft had been driven into the hard wood made me doubt whether I should have the strength to bend it.

This information was received with quiet satisfaction. I began to have an increased respect for these Amphibians, as I recognised the serenity with which they faced a problem which might well seem insoluble, under conditions which were in some respects more alien, and must have been far more repugnant, to themselves than to me.

I noticed the unhurried care with which they arranged the facts as they perceived them, and that while they had outlined an intention of effecting the rescue by the power of their own wills, without arousing the opposition of the will-power of their opponents, they were careful to avoid any detailed plan, until all the available information had

been obtained to guide them. I began to understand how it was that they could rely upon arriving at unanimous decisions for all their actions, and the unquestioning faith with which these decisions were received by their followers. I felt that if the Dwellers were to appear at that moment with the threat of some overwhelming penalty, it would not radically disturb the equanimity of the minds that met them.

I was next asked whether I thought I could descend the cliff that rose at the back of the settlement in the moonlight, as the vision had shown it, and replied with certainty that I could not do so, either by night or day. I am without any special aptitude for climbing, and I think there are few men who would have attempted that descent under any conceivable circumstances.

I was then directed to await my previous companion, and the crawling march continued. As they passed me, two and two, I was able to estimate their numbers, for the Leaders had been at the head, and my own place was at the rear of the procession. I found that there were over three hundred whose lives had been committed to this enterprise.

On rejoining my companion I asked her whether this were the whole of her tribe or nation, to which she replied that there were many more, but that they could not have been summoned without delay, being scattered in many oceans, and a proportion of those available had to remain, that the Dwellers might not notice the absence of their accustomed service.

Only, I learnt, at an annual date which the stars showed them, did they all congregate, to sleep for three days' space in the feeding-tanks, and gain strength for the year to be.

I gathered that my own method of continual eating, and the swallowing of waste matter, which my body promptly rejected, placed me definitely with the lower animals in her thought, though not unkindly—or rather with the sea-dogs and the fishes, for of a lower terrestrial creation she had little previous knowledge, and it was, indeed, stranger to her world than to that from which I had wandered. I wondered how she regarded the Dwellers, of whom the

one I had seen was certainly more of my own kind, but I recognised that she had other reasons to respect, if not to love them.

I next asked what might be the natural longevity of her kind, and if there were no old, infirm, or children that had been left behind, but to this she replied that they were not fishes, and their bodies did not alter or decay as the years passed. Obviously, if their bodies were damaged beyond remedy, they withdrew from them.

How, I queried, if they were not subject to birth or change, could one so disembodied hope for any new incarnation, and by what channel could it be gained?

But I could only learn that she was unperturbed by the suggested difficulty. Beyond this, her explanation faltered, or my mind was deficient to comprehend it. But the longer that I conversed with my companion, while the slow hours passed, and the crawling march continued, the more I realised that life persisted to the same ends, by the same methods, through all its physical changes, and even these—how slight they might appear to a detached observer!

In the softened golden light of this unending forest, could I have said certainly that I was not in some untravelled part of the world I knew? Nothing was too strange for that, except perhaps the Amphibian whose hand I held, and whose nervous strength it was which enabled me to go forward. And even she—was her form as grotesque, even to my human mind, as that of many beasts or reptiles which I could have seen in my own garden, or behind the bars of menageries? And was she not, of all the things around me, becoming the most familiar through the mental intimacy which was growing up between us?

In this great forest there was an atmosphere of enduring peace; it was a lake of stillness, rippled by softly-rustling unseen wings above us, or, more faintly, by the stir of sligher life in the moss below. Frequently we crossed the narrow roads I have mentioned, and as I looked at them more closely I was confirmed in the opinion that they were the work of the beetle-bipeds, one of which I had seen for a moment, for the moss on either side was trimmed with formal regularity, for doing which the mandibles of such a creature would be

well adapted. The moss would be far too close in its growth for them to penetrate it in any other way, and yet not close enough for them to walk over it without sinking, so that it would otherwise form an insurmountable barrier. I was confirmed in this opinion when we passed an open glade which was white with low regular mounds of mushroom shape, from one of which I had a glimpse of two of these creatures issuing, and passing rapidly out of sight behind it....

I began to think of the Amphibians as being independent of sleep, as they were of food, but as the morning advanced an order came that we were to move sideways to the left (the two in front of us moving to the opposite side) until we were at the edge of the forest, which we were then approaching, and there to rest, and await the order to undertake the more arduous part of the journey, which must be accomplished while the daylight lasted.

Meanwhile all minds were to be concentrated upon the object of the expedition, which I now learnt was their method of sleeping, the mind being rested upon one thought only for a previously-decided period, a method surely superior to our own, in which it wanders blindly through disjointed recollections, and in vain conceptions of foolish or repugnant things.

A number were, however, directed to remain alert and wakeful, and to watch for any menace which might appear from the open country before us, from which only (it was assumed) could any danger threaten.

Being now on the extreme left of the line which the last movement had extended in echelon along the edges of an out-jutting spur of the forest, with our Leaders at its advanced point, I was asked whether I were able to assist in this manner, and was directed to watch as long as I could do so without exhaustion, and then to arouse my companion.

The halt would continue until the sun had reached its meridian. The mind of one of the Leaders would remain receptive to any report I might send it.

Even if I had not undertaken this duty, and recognised its importance in a land which was as potentially hostile to my

companions as to myself, and which was even stranger in some of its aspects to themselves than to me, I could hardly have failed, for a time at least, to remain awake and aware of the strange beauty of the scene which was extended beneath me.

My companion sank at once oblivious in the deep moss, which yielded to our weight when we halted, and in which I took a sitting position, enabling me to look out from beneath the boughs which spread low overhead, and were sufficient to screen me from the outside observation of anything which did not approach very closely.

The ground before me sloped gently down to a deep and very wide valley. Far to the left were low hills; to the right front was a distance of wilder mountains, with snowy sides, height beyond height, with a suggestion of the foothills of the Himalayas. The valley undulated, and was heavily wooded in some places. It had wide plains, but without sign of cultivation, or of moving life.

The sky above us was the unclouded blue I had seen previously, very deep now in the strong sunlight. Far off,—and sight went far in the clear air, across the lower land,—there was a wide low forest with a silver hint of lake beyond it.

In colour, the whole scene gave me a first impression of a splendour of gold and blue, with dark hills around, and snowy mountains above them, but as I looked more closely I saw that there was an undertone of green, as in the old familiar landscapes, but with this difference, that where I had been used to the dark blue-green of trees and hedges breaking the yellow-green of the corn and grass-lands, here yellow-green, deepening to many shades of gold, was the prevailing tone of the woodlands, while open slopes and plains were covered with a blue-green verdure, in some places with no more hint of blue than in the leaves of a rhododendron, at others brighter than a peacock's neck.

This was the general impression of a wide stretch of country, which might show differently at a closer view, or with a change of season. When I looked immediately in front of me I saw that the moss extended for two or three feet only from the forest-shade, and beyond this was a blue-green growth, of an orchis-like kind, which

covered the ground where it sloped gently before me. Here and there, other plants struggled for existence among it, including one of a trailing habit which I noticed for a very fragile and beautiful flower shaped like a campanula, and approaching a very deep orange shade, but different from anything I had seen, and I have therefore no word by which to describe it.

Last, and nearest, I noticed, a bare yard to my left, where a low branch shaded the moss a little in advance of the trees around it, a ground-nest of beaten moss, of the size of a hand-bowl, and in it three small black puppy-like creatures, curled close, and sleeping in the shaded warmth of the morning.

Surely there was little change in the new world from the world behind me!

Here I watched for many hours, as the sun rose slowly. Once a huge bird crossed the sky, coming from the lower hills and disappearing at last over the distant heights of snow. It was many times larger than those which I had seen previously. It flew with strong steady strokes, but was too distant for more detailed observation.

Then I noticed a dark object moving slowly up the slope toward me, and grazing as it came.

Its body was of a dull blue colour, and was of the size of a sheep, or somewhat larger, but as round as an orange. It walked on two legs only, and there was no sign of forelimbs. But for the absence of any head I might have imagined it to be some kind of chicken, and looked round for the apparition of a monstrous hen.

There was a face set in the front of the round body, consisting of two eyes which surveyed the world with a twinkling and mischievous humour, and a mouth, of which the upper lip was elongated, like an elephant's trunk, but to somewhat different purpose, and proportionately longer. Hard and thin and snake-like, it had the under side serrated with sharp bony ridges.

With this trunk it felt doubtfully over the surface of the herbage on which it fed. Then, finding a patch that grew to its liking, it pushed its trunk into the close growth, which appeared to resist its passage,

with a rasping, tearing sound, till it was curled round the selected tuft, and then it pulled, and the sharp edges cut and tore the fibrous growth from the resisting roots, till the trunk turned inwards, to push its sheaf into the gap of the wide slit mouth, that was scarcely large enough to receive it, till the trunk had pressed and packed it in. And like a thrush that has won his worm after much pulling, the mischievous eyes twinkled with a humorous satisfaction.

Care or fear, it seemed, it had none, nor any thought of enmity, as it came with leisurely steps and jovial roving eyes towards the edge of the wood where we were lying.

I passed the information to my Leader's mind, but received no instructions to do more than observe it. Closer it came, peering beneath the branches, its trunk moving so near to me that in a sudden panic I gripped the axe to strike, if it should attempt to molest me. But it only gazed with eyes in which curiosity appeared to be overcome by amusement at my comic aspect.

Indeed, it was this derisive glance which first made me realise at all adequately the appearance I must present in my tattered clothes to these creatures whose bodies were so much more easily cared for, and sufficient for their environment.

I thought that I had met with the humorist of the new world, and did not guess that I was on the threshold of tragedy.

My companions rested undisturbed, and it did not appear even to realise their presence, at which I was puzzled for a moment, thinking that they must be as strange to it as myself, and not understanding that the calm indifference of their minds, and the serene tranquillity of that of the Leader to whom I had reported its presence, were impregnable bulwarks against any form of molestation from a single animal of its order of intelligence.

Its eyes wandered from me, as having exhausted the amusement I offered, and fell upon the nest beside me. I thought that it surveyed the sleeping inmates with a greedy but doubtful interest. Right and left, with swift apprehensive glances, went the twinkling eyes, then a long trunk thrust in, and one of the sleepers was caught and swept

into the gaping mouth-slit, too quickly for me to have interposed, had I wished to do so.

I had a thought that it was not its accustomed food, and that it had acted rather in a spirit of practical joking, amused to imagine the consternation of the returning parent, and the vain search for the missing puppy. If that were so, it was a jest of the shortest.

Even as the mouth closed, I had an instant vision of a lithe shape, like a small black panther, that sprang down from a nearby tree at the wood's edge, something in its mouth like a snake curled close, or as a wire-worm shows when the spade exposes it. Then, on the instant, as it reached the ground, it saw, and dropped its prey, and leapt, a lightning bound of twenty feet, for the back of the robber.

Swift as it was, it was too late for its purpose. With the speed of fear, the jester had rolled on to his back with drawn-up legs, and it was the long toothed trunk that met the panther with a blow that flung it sideward.

The foiled beast drew back for a moment, crouching to spring, in its eyes a ferocity that left no doubt of its purpose, while in the glance of its opponent there was a consternation that had yet in it something that was grotesquely comic, like a fat man's pathos.

Twice the panther leapt in, and was flung back with a reddening line of torn fur on the glossy back. Again it sprang, and held on for a moment with tearing teeth, while the trunk slashed it. Then it struggled clear with a torn side, and a forelimb that dragged awkwardly. But where its teeth had been in the blue-black skin, a jet of pale red fluid squirted up in the sunlight.

It was more cautious now, if no less resolute in its purpose. It circled round, crouching and watchful, but the cunning frightened eyes never left it, and the back-drawn trunk was ready. When next it sprang, the wounded limb told, and it fell short, and drew back with a torn ear and a bleeding jaw. I cannot say whether that gave it the idea, or whether the chance of battle befriended it. I should not have supposed it likely to succeed by cunning, when strength and agility had proved unavailing. But so it was. It leapt, and the trunk shot out to meet it, but the leap fell short, either through sleight or weakness,

so short that it came down on the very end of the trunk, as it missed the intended stroke, and the strong jaws snapped upon it. Back the captured trunk wrenched desperately, and the panther was dragged some distance forward, but by now the uninjured fore-paw was holding also, and the back legs were straining to keep their ground, against an opponent which had no grip of that on which it lay. The serrated teeth were on the underside of the trunk, and as it slapped down, missing its stroke, it was caught on the upper surface, which was smooth and soft, so that the teeth sank deeply. And then, inch by inch, the panther bit upwards, biting till, foot by foot, she left it limp and useless behind her.

And gradually, as she bit, the struggles weakened. All this time that thin jet had sprayed upward, and from the appalled eyes the twinkling intelligence was gone out, as the panther leapt at last on the ball-like body, and ripped it open with strong claws that found no resistance. With each tear, the thin blood jetted out like a fountain, till the round body collapsed like a prickled bladder, in which the victor's head was sunk with a growling contentment, so that I thought that, panther-like, she was already making a meal of her opponent's body, till the head emerged again, and in her mouth was the recovered puppy.

Purring gently, she laid it in the nest, licked it all over, still alive, and seeming none the worse for its first adventure. As she did so she saw me, and the light of battle glared again in the fierce eyes for a moment, and then died, and, regarding me no more, she lay down and licked her wounds, and cleansed her damaged fur to something of the glossy smoothness on which her comfort and her pride depended.

While she was occupied in this way, I realised that it had become time to arouse my companion, and having done this, and communicated what had occurred, I sank into a sleep of exhaustion, from which the strangeness and excitement of my surroundings were powerless to hinder me.

CHAPTER XV

THE PLAN OF ATTACK

I was awakened by my companion from a deep sleep, out of which I was aroused with difficulty, and found that it was high noon, and the order had already been passed that we who were on the left hand of the outlying spur of the forest, around which we had rested, should cross to the other side, from which the next stage of the advance would be taken.

This we did, forming a second line behind those who were already in that position, and halting there while final instructions were given to us, to the effect that we were now approaching the most hazardous part of the journey, and that speed and silence, with readiness to obey any orders we might receive with instant alacrity, were essential.

We were directed to avoid separate intercourse, and to concentrate our minds upon the path we were taking, while holding them at the disposal of our Leaders, and under no circumstances to allow any emotion to control us, unless it were the ordered feeling of the expedition, and were operated in unison.

Although these orders were not directly applicable to myself, I was conscious of an increasing willingness to adapt myself to the methods and controls of my new companions, and was not insensible to the relief of mind which arose from the knowledge that the will of every member of the expedition could be brought to operate in this way.

It is true that all my habits were alien from a method of warfare which moved against unknown hostilities, such as were certainly capable of physical violence, without weapons or any evident means of self-defence, trusting, apparently, only to a mental attitude for its protection, and leaving me to wonder how any aggressive action

could be even attempted. But I had already realised that the Amphibians had powers of intellect which, though different from my own, were very far from contemptible.

I was inclined to wonder whether my own complacency might not be the result of some subtle exercise of their will-power upon my own mind, which was probably so, though not in the way in which I supposed it, their influence not being the result of any mental violence or assault, but resulting from my gradual recognition of the assured serenity with which they possessed their souls against any pressure of surrounding circumstance, a serenity which had no root in obtuseness or indifference, but, with their leaders at least, was consistent with an unsleeping vigilance and forethought, and a chivalrous willingness to sacrifice themselves at the call of their companion's peril.

We were now told to advance out of the forest in double file, all emerging at the same spot, on the right front, which was immediately before me, so that I watched the whole of the front line as it crawled to this spot and moved out into the sunlight.

Last of this line came the Five, an order passing ahead of them that I should be in readiness to follow. I was conscious of a strong reluctance to leave my zebra'd companion, of whose vitality I had taken so freely, and to whom I was drawn in consequence in a strange inhuman intimacy. But they answered my thought instantly that this was not intended. We were to move out together, immediately behind them. Being in the rearward line, we had been able to see little beneath the low and level branches till the moment came for us to go forward. Then the first sight that met me was a round blue-black body, from which two humorous twinkling eyes surveyed me satirically. For a moment I thought that I had encountered the most amazing reincarnation of this amazing world; at the next I recognised that there were two other similar creatures a short distance away, and that I was not encountering a reproduction of the one I had seen collapse so thoroughly, but only others of the same species.

Beyond these creatures, I had a moment's glimpse of a different landscape from that which I had watched from the other side of the spur. Here the ground rose, the upward slopes growing steeper, toward a bare and desolate mountain grandeur. The next moment I saw the last of the Five leap lightly downward into a deep and narrow trench which cut through the ground before us, and I followed more awkwardly, my companion gaining my side as I did so.

I am conscious in this narration of the paucity of proper names,—of the use of no arbitrary sounds to distinguish the kinds or even the individuals of the strange beings amongst which I was moving, but the fact is that, unless I am to invent them, I have none to offer. It is the evident difference between mental intercourse and oral or written speech that such signs are imperatively needed in the latter, while in the former they would be worse than useless. The thought that brings the picture of the individual or place itself has no use for a sign by which to describe it. But of these I felt the lack even before I attempted to write down my experiences. It is the inevitable result of the constant use of a spoken language that we acquire the habit of substituting words for realities, even in the processes of our own thought. I found in the minds of my companions no names for each other, nor any vaguest desire for such a method of differentiation, but I accustomed myself to this omission with difficulty, and am fully conscious of the disadvantage under which I am now writing.

It was now the nearest of the Leaders—the one with whom I had held intercourse previously—who addressed herself to my mind. She commenced by informing me that she was about to describe the plans which they had formed, because they included a part for myself of the first importance, but of which they believed I should be capable.

Though I knew that I should undertake whatever might be suggested, if it were within my capacity, yet the feeling that I had been called up like a dog to receive my instructions, and the instinct of my commercial training, prompting me to make a bargain for my ultimate protection, complicated my reaction to this suggestion. “Are

you less than a sea-dog?" queried the mind that met me, but perceiving that I intended assent, it became indifferent.

It appeared (I attempt no explanation) that the member of their number whom I had first met, on whom they were depending for guidance, could only communicate such knowledge as she had gained before she had left her body; and beyond that was only able to help them by the doubts or dissent with which she had met the various plans which they had put before her. They were therefore in ignorance of events that were now transpiring, but were able to receive detailed descriptions of the ground they were about to traverse, and of the experiences or observations she had made thereon, one of which had been shown to me in the vision which I have told already.

The plan now proposed had been received with assent, though doubtfully, and they had finally decided to adopt it.

She explained that trenches, such as we were now following, extended for many miles along the lower slopes of the hills, and through the valleys, bisecting each other, and dividing the ground into fields of very large area. Whether they were the work of the Dwellers, or were constructed by our present opponents,—whom I should not have supposed to be sufficiently numerous or intelligent for works of such magnitude,—was not known, but it was certain that the latter made use of their extensive existence to herd some of the creatures they ate, which were not of sufficient agility to leap the barriers. In this connection the blue-black monstrosities I had encountered were used by them as watch-dogs or drovers, being themselves immune from slaughter in return for these services. It was certain that these creatures would carry the news of our presence to their masters as soon as they were able to do so. While they had been in our immediate vicinity the will-power of our Leaders had been sufficient to restrain them, but this would not last in a case in which it was exercised against the instincts and obligations of the creatures themselves; and a suggestion from my mind that we might destroy them was dismissed contemptuously.

They would, however, continue to watch for a while, and would know, from the direction which would shortly be taken, that the expedition was turning into the mountains. Their masters would know that no danger could threaten from that direction for a space of one or two days, as the distance to be covered was not less than five hundred miles, and part of it was over very difficult surfaces, whereas we were only about one hundred and thirty miles from their stronghold, if the direct course were taken, and the trenches which I have mentioned, which were well drained on the higher slopes, provided a road along which the Amphibians could have proceeded with great rapidity. The distances were, of course, conveyed to me visually and not by terms of measurement.

The way through the mountains was, for the Amphibians, sufficiently hazardous, and would be, for me, impossible; and the Five had decided that it would be best for me to proceed with my one companion by the easier way, where it might be anticipated that my presence would not be suspected, and myself to attempt the rescue, by peaceful stratagem if possible, or by force if it should be necessary to do so.

My companion would supply the nervous energy necessary to enable me to cover the intervening distance in the forty-eight hours which yet remained before sunset, while, if any physical violence were necessary to effect my purpose, I should be acting according to the laws of my own nature, and against creatures more or less on my own level of conduct.

The enclosure which it would be necessary to enter I had already seen in the vision. It was the custom to place all the hunting weapons of the tribe during the night in a central building, which was not guarded, as no attack was ever anticipated from outside, particularly during the long night, when all the creatures on the earth's surface rested. The building in which were the killing-pens was guarded day and night by one of the giant archers, lest its victims should attempt escape, and for other reasons which I could not follow.

The main force of the expedition would arrive, if all went well, on the top of the great cliff which overlooked the enclosure, at the

commencement of the second night. Had I found it impossible to attempt a rescue, or had I failed, they would then proceed by other methods.

Should I succeed, I was to place myself under the orders of the one I rescued, who, being one of the Leaders, would naturally assume control of myself and my companion.

I was given a few minutes to consider this plan, and to make any inquiries which might occur to me, while our course continued in the same direction.

As I reflected upon it, I was conscious of many points which invited criticism. It appeared that the whole expedition was being led into the mountains for no very evident purpose, while I was to take the individual peril and responsibility of the rescue for which it had been designed. If the mountains offered even greater perils, it were the more reason why a different procedure would be adopted.

On the other hand, we were operating under conditions which were in some respects as strange to them as to myself, and for which they might be said to be even more unfit. I was, at least, the only one who carried anything that could be used as an offensive weapon, and there was some justice in the reflection that I came from conditions of life from which the argument of violence was less alien than it was from theirs. Also, the fact that I could not pass the dangers of the mountain way, if it were really so, was unanswerable, and the fact that our opponents could not expect an attack from that direction for so long a time, certainly suggested that I could best be used in the interval in the way they had planned. Whether they expected me to succeed, or regarded me simply as a forlorn hope, or even as a feint attack to disguise a deeper purpose, I could not know. I considered that if I should be successful in effecting the rescue undetected, we might be far on the return journey before the dawn, but that they would arrive after it had certainly been discovered, and with their enemies between them and their retreat, in which case they would have their full share of the peril.

I had, at least, no better plan to propose, and I shortly signified that I had no further questions. I was then told that I must restrain

any impulse of violence which I might feel, unless there were no alternative possible, as it developed action on a plane which they despised, and on which they were unaccustomed to operate, and might bring us into additional and incalculable trouble with the Dwellers also, if they should become aware of our expedition, or were already cognisant of it. It was to descend to the level of the Killers themselves.

I write "Killers" as the nearest word I have in which to describe the thought with which she defined our opponents, but it is quite inadequate. Scorn was in it, and loathing, if such feelings can be entirely passionless and judicial, and in it was the whole summary of what they were and did, but centrally there was the conception of them as things that killed continually, and that enjoyed killing, and as such I translate it. These worm-pink horrors with the sucking mouths were too low for any emotion to stir in regarding them. She looked on them as I, whom she regarded as a beast only, look upon one of my own kind who can kill birds for pleasure.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SENTRY

We now came to a place at which another trench extended on the right hand, at right angles to the one we followed, and striking upward toward the mountainside that now rose above us with an abruptness that appeared unscalable. Looking up the straight line of the trench we could not see the defile by which those heights were entered, nor was it easy to imagine that this bleak forbidding precipice was only the first of a wilderness of loftier ridges, from the top of which it would appear almost as low and flat as the plain around us.

We watched the long column of our companions as it proceeded up the narrow trench, at the end of which we saw it emerging on the open hillside, where it must have been visible for many miles to any watchers on the plains below. Then we turned, not without a feeling of loneliness which increased the intimacy of our companionship, and went on at a gentle walk—for the time at our disposal required no haste—in the direction which had been indicated.

Yet the leisured pace had a consequence which might have been disastrous, and the exact result of which I am still unable to determine.

We were engaged in a pleasant intercourse, in which I was realising that the apparent apathy of my companion's mind in regard to the issue of an expedition for which her Leaders were responsible, which had previously surprised me, did not preclude a keen adventurous delight in an enterprise which had now been entrusted to our own initiative, when I was conscious of a shadow that fell for a moment across the floor of the trench before me, into which the midday sun shone directly downward.

Looking up sharply, I caught sight of an egg-shaped body and two jovially derisive eyes that withdrew at the instant of their detection. Instant also was my thought of the consequences if the news of our coming should go before us, and with that thought I loosed my companion's hand, and jumped for the side of the trench. The abundant vitality which that grasp supplied me lasted long enough after I had loosed my hold to enable me to grip the edge of the ground two feet above my head, and swing myself on to the surface.

Rising here, I confronted the detected spy not ten feet distant, gazing at me with a glance of humorous contempt, from which doubt and even consternation were not entirely absent. Its body was less round than that of the panther's victim, being like an egg balanced on two legs, with the thicker end in front, from which the twinkling eyes looked out, with the long trunk curled beneath them.

I realised suddenly that I was not beyond reach of this weapon, and that I was likely to be swept back into the trench with little ceremony, even if no worse befell me. But the next moment I was aware that my companion was beside me.

Whatever brain was in that blue-black body, or courage for the facing of meaner things, it had no will to meet its new antagonist. Nor did the order which she gave it to avoid us even disturb the quietness of the mind that formed it. Accustomed for so long to an unquestioned supremacy over all the creatures that the oceans held, it could not occur to her as a possibility that such a one could resist her will, or disturb her serenity.

Fear was in the cowed but cunning eyes as it moved backward, but when it had retreated for fifty yards or more it suddenly threw up its trunk in a defiant gesture, as of one released from a reluctant hypnotism, and commenced a rapid run toward the farther end of the valley.

As it did this, I realised that I was losing it, and that our lives and the success of our enterprise were at issue.

I unslung the axe from my back, and started in pursuit. But my feet sank deeply in the soft herbage, and I found that speed was impossible. At times, too, the ground itself gave way beneath me, and

I stumbled forward with difficulty. Struggle as I might, I saw that the distance was increasing continually.

My companion's mind called me to return, but I would not heed it.

Then I saw that she also was running, but far out on the left as though she were leaving me.

I was still wallowing forward in a stubborn stupidity when I realised her purpose. She was endeavouring to cut it off, and, running far more swiftly and lightly than either of us, she was soon in a position to do so.

But having gained the advantage, she appeared content to hold it, not closing in, but edging the chase continually toward the higher ground.

I did not understand her purpose till I found myself running upon the hard surface of the hillside, and gaining at every stride. The chased beast knew it also, and turned to face me.

My hunting instinct was roused now, to reinforce my judgment of a compelling necessity, and I was determined to kill it. But I had sufficient caution to pause outside the range of the sweeping trunk that threatened me.

It did not throw itself on its back, as I expected from the conflict which I had witnessed previously, and I began to realise that it had been running not so much to avoid me, as to carry the news to its masters. It might be in awe of my companion's mind, but toward myself it very certainly had no such feeling.

I became aware that it was advancing upon me.

My companion had paused at a distance, and made no motion to assist me further.

The trunk was waving now within three feet of my face. I swung the axe as it was raised to strike. The sharp blade grazed the tip, and it winced back swiftly.

For some moments we faced each other silently, neither willing to retreat, nor to come within range of the confronting danger. I was on the point of springing in, and risking all on one stroke, when the memory of how the blue-black body had punctured where the claws

tore, suggested that I could throw the axe with sufficient force to disable it.

But the throwing of axes is an occupation in which I was quite unpractised. Trying to fling it over the trunk that waved and fainted before me, and with sufficient force to effect my purpose, I misjudged entirely, so that it skimmed the smooth back only, and fell ten or twelve feet behind it.

Reckless, I ran forward to recover the weapon. My antagonist might easily have struck me off my feet as I did so, but it had turned also with the same object.

Not having to turn, I was a second quicker. I stooped for the axe with the consciousness that my opponent was already upon me, and as I seized it I threw it desperately backward.

The next moment I was struck to the ground. I felt the clothes tearing from my back, and turning round I tried to come to grips with the trunk which would otherwise beat the life from my body. As I did so I was conscious that the attack had ceased.

I looked up, and saw my companion standing above us. My antagonist cowed away from her with terrified eyes. The axe I had thrown had stuck into its back, and remained there.

Very quietly she took the haft and drew it out. As she did this a fountain of thin red blood, such as I had seen before, shot up and sparkled in the sunlight.

I rose up, and we stood side by side looking at the creature that made no more resistance, but lay dying before us.

She handed me the axe in silence.

A moment after, she gave me her hand again, and we returned to the trench together. But though I tried to speak, her mind would not answer. She had closed it against me, and for many hours we continued thus, her mind a blank wall of negation at the advances I made continually.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ETHICS OF VIOLENCE

Dusk was already rising in the narrow trench, though the world was still bright with the colour of a sun that set early over the mountains, when she addressed me in the medium which is fifty times more swift than speech, and a thousand times more accurate in its transmission of the thoughts which form it.

“How could I answer you till there was peace in my own mind?” she asked me. “I was confused by violence. It is a thing we do not practise, either for defence or aggression. You appear to me to be partly as we are, and in part as the lower order of created things, and with such a body as is more base than either. For the first time in all my life I could not tell what was right to do—to withhold, or to aid you. It seems to me that you must have much sorrow.

“But now I have thought of what is right. It was to you that the charge was given. You were to avoid violence if it were possible. It was left to you to judge of that necessity. The responsibility is not mine. From now you will have my help when you ask it. When I thought this, peace came, by which I know that I have thought rightly.

“For yourself, it came to me, as I saw your mind when you fell, that you have a brave spirit in a body of deplorable weakness. It is full also of strange passions, which you can scarcely control yourself, and for that reason the lowest creatures can defy you. But I saw the spirit that is imprisoned within you, and for that I respect you.

“When we return we will ask the Leaders that all shall think together that your body may be destroyed, and you may escape from its misery.”

I answered, “I am glad that there is peace between us, and some measure of understanding, and for your promise of future help I

thank you also. But in the world from which I came my kind is supreme of all created things. Here you despise me, yet you yourselves are not supreme in your world. You fear the Dwellers, who, as I understand, eat and use violence as I do. I understand that you supply them with fish, which seems inconsistent with your objection to the slaughter of meaner creatures around you.”

She replied, “I know that you are telling me the truth as you see it; and some kind of supremacy you may have in your place, though it must be, indeed, a strange one. I cannot suppose that there are other creatures with bodies weaker than yours, more quickly tired, or more awkward. Are all its animals wearers of those tattered things in which you conceal yourself so quaintly?”

I replied, “Our bodies are doubtless better adapted to their familiar conditions than for those in which I now find myself, as our clothes are also. The lower animals—with some unimportant exceptions—have no outer coverings. Should we dispense with our clothes we should consider that we had descended to their level. We wear them from shame, from self-respect, and to enable us to endure the climatic changes, and the severities of the colder portions of the earth on which we dwell.”

“I can well understand,” she said, “that you are ashamed to show your bodies to other animals, or even to each other, but can you really say that you cover them from climatic changes? Your face and hands are bare, which would be of all parts the most sensitive. If you can harden them to such exposure, could you not harden the remainder of your bodies also, and feel the joys of sun and wind and water, as all creatures should?”

“The custom of wearing clothes among my own kind,” I answered, “is very ancient, and is universally practised. Whether it be for warmth or ornament, or from causes more difficult of definition, it would be impossible for any one of us to break it. He would be persecuted or destroyed by his fellows. You must understand that we have no individual freedom. In my own land this loss of discretion has been reduced to an absurdity, there being so many laws to be obeyed that it is impossible for any one—even those who give them

unceasing study—to know all that there are. Also, we pay men to make more laws continually, so that, in theory, we may be brought into yet closer bondage, but in practice that is a thing which is barely possible, and as new laws are made, others fall into disuse and forgetfulness, because it is beyond human capacity to observe so many. We do not want more laws, but we have started a machine in which we ourselves are involved, so that we have no power to stop it. Many of us despise the laws that we have already—so far as we understand them—and break them whenever we can do so to our own advantage, and with sufficient secrecy. Others respect them so greatly that they will do mean and base things without shame, if the law require them, thinking it to be sufficient apology.”

“It is too strange,” she answered, “to be understood, unless it be told more fully, and our time is too short for that, but I have not replied to your question concerning the fish-feeding of the Dwellers. I see clearly what you mean, but it is a thing which had been done from the beginning. It was arranged by our Leaders, and we have not thought to question it. It is true that the Dwellers, though they are superior to your kind beyond comparing, are of more animal bodies than we. They must be fed, and their food, in part, is the fish, which themselves live by the destruction of others, and are destroyed by them continually. We divide the shoals and drive those that become excessive into the great tanks which extend beneath the mountains, where the Dwellers do with them as they will. I neither doubt nor excuse it. The mackerel that we drive, or the deep-sea salmon, will eat even of their own kind, and the fruits of death are in their own entrails while we drive them. They obey us, as is natural, without protest, and this thing which we do has never troubled our peace.

“You say that you are supreme, and we are not. I think you can have supremacy only amidst a very low creation. It is something which, until now, we have neither sought nor heeded. In all the oceans we have held it without challenge.

“But I think the difference is not there. It is that you are not sure of yourself. Your own thoughts, or even your own body, may resist your will. You are like the state of which you tell me, wherein laws

are confused and changing, and may be broken by those who make them.

“Of all this we know nothing, and therefore, were I in the midst of the Dwellers, whose powers are terrible, I should walk in greater freedom than you could do in your own land, whatever be your supremacy among inferior things. But I am hindering your mind from the adventure which is before us. It is yours to direct it, as our Leaders rightly saw, for we are contending against creatures who are more of your own kind than ours. Let me know what is your purpose, and I will give you all the aid I may, either with mind or body.”

As she concluded thus, we reached the place where the trench we followed stopped abruptly before a rising bank, and we knew that we were at the end of the divided fields, and could no longer travel in the same concealment. Steps led here to a trodden path, which we left immediately for the lesser risk of a hillside which was covered with gigantic boulders, between which we moved cautiously upward, while the day was slowly dying, the western sky showing, for the first time in my experience, something of the sunset-light of my familiar world, in a cloud-born glory of yellow and purple light above the mountains.

My companion answered my thought: “It is the season of storms approaching. In three days’ time there will be cloud, and great winds, and hidden skies. It is nothing to us, but for those that live on the earth’s surface it must be distasteful.”

I made no reply, for at that moment my glance fell on a Browning pistol which lay amongst the loose stones I was treading. In the compelling strangeness of the experiences through which I had passed I had given little thought to those who had come here before me, but I remembered now the arsenal of weapons with which Templeton had returned and vanished.

I looked round, as though expecting him to appear before me. In the growing gloom I searched round for some further sign, but could find nothing. I opened my mind to my companion, but she could not help me, though she searched with keener eyes than mine. I reflected that we were a long distance from the spot on which I—and

presumably he, but was that certain?—had first arrived. If he had travelled so far, he might have gone farther. The abandoned pistol was ominous, but perhaps he had only thrown it away because his ammunition was ended. Possibly he had left it there, intending to return. Possibly he dropped it by accident. Anyway, it was useless to me, and I laid it down where I found it.

And as I rose, my companion's mind, to which I was becoming increasingly sensitive, interjected urgently: "Do not move, or fear. Look up to the right hand."

The ridge of the rocky hill we climbed stood out sharply against the sunset light behind it, and above it rose the head and shoulders of a giant form. He had stepped over to our side of the ridge, and stood above us, one hand on the crest, as a man might lean his hand on his own gate, and was gazing around, as one who is more occupied with his own thoughts than with a familiar scene beneath him.

So he stayed for a moment, and then descended the hill with giant strides, as the Titans may have moved when they found the earth too small, and thought to own the heavens.

He might have crushed us under foot, as a plough-horse treads a crouching mouse in the furrow, but we stood quiet and unmoving as he went past without seeing us—or so I thought, but my companion differed. "You cannot know the thoughts of the Dwellers," she told me. "They are not as we, or as you are. They are terrible in power, and, sometimes, in forbearance also. But they are beyond our understanding."

My own impression was different. I saw a Titan indeed, but one of my own kind, and one, I thought, who was preoccupied with a great perplexity. But whether he had seen us I could not tell.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE ARSENAL OF THE KILLERS

The moon had not yet risen, but the starlight was brilliant, as we climbed the path that led to the stronghold of the Killers.

As we approached it in the darkness it looked larger than it had appeared to me in the vision, and our task more formidable.

At this high altitude the night began to be cold already, and I supposed that the temperature might fall very low before the dawn of the next day. I began to understand why I had found the stillness of the first night so absolute, and why all creatures sought for rest and warmth during a night-time so much longer than our own, and in which the change of temperature might be so much greater.

But I had more urgent considerations to engage my thoughts. To rescue the imprisoned Amphibian from a guarded prison in the midst of the stronghold of the Killers, whether it were attempted by force or strategy, appeared about equally hopeless, but the Leaders had laid this task upon me, and whether they really believed me capable of performing it, or had used me as a pawn in a larger purpose, I was equally committed to the adventure.

My comrade also laid the responsibility upon me, as she clearly had the right to do. I had her promise of unquestioning aid in anything for which I might call upon her, and I had learnt to rely more than a little upon her fearless serenity of mind, as well as upon the abundant physical vitality which she shared with me so freely.

On the other hand, the more I relied upon her powers of spirit or body, the more menacing became the fact that I was braving those who had entrapped one of her own kind, of superior grade to herself, who apparently could not escape unrescued.

Whether they had received warning of our coming I could not tell, but I reflected that even though a report should have reached them

that the regiment of the Amphibians had passed into the mountains six score miles away, they would not only suppose that no fear from that quarter would be possible for a day at least (or much longer if they should judge by their own speed of progression), but might not even think that any hostility to themselves were intended, nor might it occur to them as possible that an attack would be made in the night-time, when they might suppose the custom of rest to be universal.

Even if they knew that two of us were wandering on the lower slopes, we might only appear to them as prey to be sought in the morning, and, I thought, with a sudden lightening of humour, they might be right in their estimate.

On the balance of probabilities, I thought the better course would be to approach them boldly, and try what might be done in secrecy while the darkness was round us.

Indeed, when we gained the plateau, caution lacked opportunity, if we were to advance at all. For outside the enclosure it was bare and flat beneath the starlight, and a rat could have found no shelter.

Having crossed the open space as quietly as we could, we walked for some distance along the outside of the enclosure. It was a back-sloping wall, or roof, as I had seen it before, having no door or window in all its length; but knowing that there were doors along the inner side, and that the Killers slept within it, and not knowing how lightly they might do so, or how thin might be the wall that divided us from them, we now moved very silently till we came to the gateway. Here we paused in surprise, for it was not only unguarded, but open.

There was a double gate that opened inward. Sockets were faintly visible in the ground, into which vertical bolts could be driven to secure them.

You know how a fox will use all its cunning to find some illicit entrance to the poultry house, but will turn away from open door or window, lest a trap be concealed behind the apparent negligence? So I felt as I looked, and saw something dimly on the ground behind the gateway, and hesitated, and remembered that the night was long,

and haste was needless, and asked my companion how soon would be the moonrise.

In the end, we went back and waited under the edge of the plateau.

It is commonly held that the capacity of the average woman for logical reasoning is inferior to that of a man, but that she has a compensating advantage in a superior ability of intuitive perception, and may even reach a more correct conclusion in some instances by such unreasoned cognition, than a man will do by the exercise of a superior logical faculty.

Whatever impressions of femininity my companion might give in other aspects, it is certain that in this comparison she was more masculine than myself, and the light which I had given her into the workings of my own mind—for, in view of our understanding, I had been careful to open it to her as I had considered the various possibilities which might affect the success of our enterprise—had aroused a wonder which she now expressed with her usual clarity.

“It appears,” she considered, “that there is a difference between the processes of your mind and mine. When I encounter a difficulty which requires decision, I reflect upon it systematically and thoroughly. It may be a long time before I arrive at any possible conclusion, but, when I have done so, it is final. You appear to make choices, and to decide plans, without always having recognised your reasons—if such there be—even in your own mind, and you would be unable to explain them to another if you wished to do so. This method appears to be the cause of much hesitation, worry, and discord, by which your mind is drained of its energy to no sufficient purpose, and of actions which are contradictory or indecisive. There are even times when you appear not to be acting either by reason, or by your own will, but to have surrendered your personality to the body which it inhabits. This is repulsive to me, because I cannot conceive of a reasoning spirit being reduced to a baser servitude. Fear is good, and it would be a poor kind of body which did not give you that warning. But your body is not content with warning, it attempts control, and if you refuse obedience, you do so with

difficulty. I think that this arises because your mind is not sure of itself, and your body lacks respect for its weakness. Then your physical impulses fight among themselves for supremacy, and you have no power to rule them. When I look into your mind I see also that it has little knowledge, as it has little control, of the body in which it dwells, of which the major functions are carried on quite independently of its volition, and of the existence of which it may even be entirely ignorant.

“In all these respects you might be considered inferior to ourselves. I think you are so; and I recognise the admiration you feel for our larger measure of control, both of ourselves and of the creatures that surround us. Certainly I would not be like you. It would be as though we should be eaten by our own dogs. But when I see how your mind endures amidst such surroundings I am unable to despise you. I seem as one who swims with a friendly tide, and can make no boast, though she outdistance one who fights onward amidst contrary and contending currents. Therefore, I think God may judge you the prize at last, though He has given you a body that is lower than that of a sea-dog, and a mind that has no power to control it, and that walks in circles.

“I see further, that your own methods of inductive reasoning, casual as they are, may be more appropriate to the fluctuating barbarism of the conditions of life to which you are native than would be those to which we are accustomed, and I know surely that you can use your own methods to better purpose than I could possibly do.”

By this time a crescent moon was rising behind us, among stars that shone with a frosty brightness, and a cold wind moved over the plateau as we crossed it once more, so that I shivered in the torn and shredded garments that I had sewn together, as best I might, when the halts had permitted.

We came again to the vague menace of the open gateway. In the clearer light we saw that objects lay on the ground immediately within it, reminding me of the twisted bands of hay which farmers sometimes use for the binding of fodder, and before them were

shallow shining oval depressions, as though moulds had been lifted from them.

Neither of us could make any guess as to what they were, or of what they might be significant, but of one thing I was certain, they had not been there when I saw the Killers draw their roped prey through the gateway; nor were they appropriate for a free passage.

There is a fear that comes when the nerves revolt from a danger which they perceive, which my companion had deprecated, but there is another that arises from a reasoned caution, which it is often well to heed, though the physical frame would disregard it.

I knew that my comrade's mind approved, when I turned from that unknown fear, and continued along the wall to select a spot at which we should attempt to scale it.

Of itself, it gave no choice, being everywhere of the same height and smoothness, and leaning at the same angle. Everywhere, so far as my observation had shown, it was inhabited by the Killers, but whether in separate cells, or whether the numerous openings led into one common living chamber, I had no means of telling.

The only choice lay in selecting the nearest spot to our objective inside the enclosure, and this we did as far as memory and judgment enabled us to determine it.

The sides of the wall or dwelling, were about ten feet high, and sloping together at such an angle that the inner floor (without deducting the thickness of the walls, of which we had no knowledge) must have been about eight feet in width. The walls inside must have narrowed rapidly upward, suggesting that the Killers required little space for comfort during their long night's rest. Of ventilation there was no sign whatever.

The outer side, being quite smooth, was far too steep to be climbed, and we scaled it at last by my companion leaning against it while I mounted her shoulders and gripped the ridge. When I had a firm hold she caught my foot and climbed up very lightly, and then, with her help, I was soon astride the ridge, and the descent was easy. Our only real difficulty was to do it in silence. We had to move along the ridge for a short distance before descending, as we found

ourselves directly over one of the apertures by which they entered. It was fortunate for us that we took this precaution, for when we had reached the ground, and moved cautiously across the doorway, we found that it was closed by a door which slid down from the inside, but not entirely so. It came to within about three inches of the ground, and beneath it protruded three of the long suckers, which were the mouths of the Killers. Moving onward, we saw that similar suckers were thrust out from every doorway, which at least explained in part the omission of any higher apertures by which air or light could reach them.

There was a wide bare space between the outer wall in which they slept, and the buildings we were seeking. Of these there were eight in all, each of which must have had its place in the social economy of those loathsome creatures, but we were concerned with two only, and of the others I learnt nothing, either then or later.

As we had been told that the building in which they stored their weapons during the night was left unguarded, I had determined to proceed there first, and if I were able to enter it without detection I had resolved to remain, while my companion went forward alone to the killing-pens, and endeavoured to establish communication with her imprisoned Leader. I calculated that she would be more easily able to do this than I, and the distance separating us would not be too great for her to communicate with me, so that I should know exactly what was occurring. If she were disturbed, she could return to me more quickly than any Killer could pursue her. If a diversion were necessary, I could easily make sufficient noise to draw the investigation in my direction. For two to go in the first instance would double the risk of detection, without any compensating advantage. If my aid were desirable after the first reconnoitre, and no alarm had been raised, I could easily join her. If an alarm were raised, I supposed that they would make first for the place in which their arms were stored, and in that case it was our only hope of safety that someone should be there to bar the access.

So I reasoned, not entirely at ease in thinking that I had allotted her a part which might prove the more perilous, but yet seeing that it

would be a double folly to reverse our undertakings, and content that she knew my motives, and approved the plan.

I think, in her own way, she was as keen as myself that we should effect the rescue before the Leaders came to interpose their own methods, or take direction of those which we had already formulated. I know that it was in a state of controlled excitement, which approached the ecstatic, though it left her mind in its accustomed serenity, that she went with me hand-in-hand across the moonlight space, which we did not cross till we had reached a point at which the other buildings would hide us from any watchers at the killing-pens, if such there were.

By this means we reached the arsenal in safety, and stood beneath thick walls of some smooth hard substance, having a low flat roof, and a door at one end which showed no handle or fastening of any kind upon the outer side.

I still think that the plan I made was in itself the best that could have been devised from the facts as I knew them, but I admit that I was less cautious here than I had been at the outer gate. Perhaps the silence, and the fact that we had advanced to this point so easily, had given me a feeling of too great security. Anyway, I can only tell what happened, and you must judge it as you will.

I passed my hand down the door, in the shadow of the jamb, feeling for a catch which the light might be insufficient to show me, when it yielded to the slight pressure I gave, and opened gently. Then I pushed it wider, and we entered together. We stood for a moment in the entrance, side by side, looking into the dark interior, which was only very faintly lighted by two small windows at the sides of the door. The long side-walls, the far end, and the roof, were without lighting entirely. The moon shone through the two small windows, and patterned a bare floor with the horizontal bars that crossed them.

We stood there for a moment, and then my comrade slipped quietly from me, and vanished in the shadow of the darker side of the building.

Thinking to sample some of the weapons which I knew to be stored there, I stepped inward, loosing the door as I did so. Smoothly and swiftly it closed behind me, with a slight ominous sound, to which the night gave full value. It had a menace of finality, and my heart paused as I heard it.

The next moment I recalled my courage and stepped back to reopen it. My foot sounded loudly in the stillness, and something moved in the dark roof that was not more than three feet overhead. With nervous haste I felt down the inside of the door, but, as upon the outside, there was no indication of lock or latch or handle. I thought to prise it open with the axe-blade, but it fitted so closely that I could only find the crack with difficulty and to force the blade in was impossible.

Was I to be imprisoned here till the light came, and then hurried out to such a fate as I had seen dealt to another of their captives? Or did the stealthy movement above me imply an even nearer menace? I raised the axe, and brought it down with all my force on the door, in the hope that it would split beneath it, and careless of the noise I made. Noise there was in the narrow chamber and beyond it also, as I was soon to learn; but the door did not even shake to the blow. It was of so hard a substance, whether of wood or metal, that I realised that it would be the axe-edge only which would suffer should I continue.

The movements overhead were louder now, and I had the impression that something was about to spring down from the darkness. The fear of the unknown was upon me, which is of all fears the most dreadful.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DUEL IN THE NIGHT

I think we do less than justice to the alchemists of the dark ages of Europe, and to their opponents also. We are accustomed to regard them as charlatans, and to brand those as superstitious fools who burnt them. There is a folly of credulity, but there is a folly of incredulity, which is far greater.

If they asked their patrons for money which would enable them to turn lead into gold, the scientist of to-day is approaching the same point of research which they must have reached when the possibility dawned upon them. Perhaps his own progress would have been more rapid had he been readier to assume that their theories were deserving of as much respect as his own. It is not many years since it was announced as a momentous discovery that bubonic plague is distributed by rats. This was known to the Egyptian priesthood, and the information was available in one of the oldest books in the world for any one who cared to read it. But that was a superstition only! No doubt there are other "superstitions" in the same book which we shall believe when we have rediscovered them.

On the other hand, it was realised by those among whom the alchemists practised that they were the repositories of an esoteric knowledge, the extent and power of which could be only dimly imagined, and of which there was no guarantee that it would be used beneficently. Even now, a scientist will present his fellow-men with a more nutritious infants' food, or a deadlier poison-gas, than has been previously invented, with the same fatuous complacency. The evil eye may have been fact or imagination. I do not know. It is no more inherently improbable than wireless telegraphy.

But it is the unknown that terrifies. I do not suppose that the Killers were exceptionally intelligent. All the evidence is against it.

Yet this episode of the closing door, because it was beyond my understanding, was more daunting than would have been a far more urgent danger of a familiar kind. I stood there in a panic fear which it shames me to remember, feeling that I was surrounded by those who watched and mocked in the darkness.

I think, also, that the increasing cold of the night, and the loss of my companion's vitality, may have assisted to depress me. Anyway, I stood there for some time, afraid to move, in a terror more abject than anything I had felt since I waited for the first dawn, on the mystery of the opal pavement.

Nothing happened. The noises ceased in the roof. The moon clouded, and the narrow windows darkened.

At last, I stepped up to one of them, and saw that a fine sleet was falling without. For the first time, with a start of shame, I recalled my companion. I had promised to keep my mind in touch with hers, and had forgotten her entirely while I shrank from shadows.

The next moment we were in communication. She had been waiting to report, and to hear from me, in a natural doubt as to the meaning of my silence, but her thought showed no agitation, and learning that she was in apparent security, and that her own report had no urgency, I first explained what had happened. What she thought I cannot say, for her mind closed for a moment. Then it answered quietly: "Shall I come back and push it open again? Perhaps I had better tell you first what I have seen and heard.

"First, there is the open tank, which was boiling, as when you saw it. There are few bodies in it. I suppose it is kept boiling continually. Beyond this are the killing-sheds. There are two of these. Each consists of ten apartments. One is empty. The other is filled. Each compartment consists of four walls of metal bars, and a roof of a very hard material. Probably it is the same as the door that has shut you in. The floors are of bars only. The boiling water extends beneath. Three days before the feast the bars will be withdrawn, and the victims will fall into the vat. I have spoken to my Leader, and this she told me. The feast is four days from now. She will say nothing, as the Leaders have decided it, but I think she has no desire to be rescued.

The other nine cells are filled by victims that the Dwellers have given them. She says that these are creatures that have offended the Dwellers. They are like my description of you, but with wings.

“There is one entrance only, from which the two sheds branch. It is at the further end: an open archway. One of the archers guards it, with six of the smaller Killers. They were all sleeping when I first approached, but the noise you made woke one of them, and he roused the others. Four of them have scattered now to search round the buildings. If one should come to the arsenal it will be well that he find the door closed. If it be pushed open, you will know that it is he, not I, and you can strike quickly, if you wish to do so. The smaller Killers carry a strangling-cord, and a short javelin. It is two feet long, and for a third of its length it is sharpened on both sides. It is balanced for throwing. The smaller Killers are without intellect. They have only greed, and cunning, and ferocity. The archers are in every way more dangerous. The smaller Killers obey them. They cannot communicate by thought, but signal to each other by whistling noises, which they make through their suckers.

“I am in no danger. I can move more quickly and silently than they can search in the shadows. I am lying now in the steam of the vat, which is dense on the side to which the wind moves it. They have searched here already and will not....”

My mind broke in: “The door is opening. Wait.”

I stood with the axe lifted to strike, as the door moved softly.

The drift of sleet was over, and the moon shone again on the entrance.

Cautiously, as the door opened, a head came round it, about three feet from the ground. I brought the axe down with all my force, but the Killer dodged very swiftly, and avoided it, slipping past me into the dark interior.

Losing its mark, the axe glanced off the edge of the door, barely missing my foot, the side of the axe-head striking the ankle-bone so sharply that I lost my footing and was on my knee for a moment. As I slipped, I heard the whizz of the javelin that passed above me. The

Killer had turned and thrown it so quickly that it passed out over my head, through the gap of the closing door.

As the door clicked, I sank lower, listening for a sound of my opponent in the darkness, and thinking with a moment's satisfaction that he had now lost his weapon beyond recovery. Then, with fear, that he must be surrounded by other weapons, of which he would know the positions, and that any moment a javelin might transfix me.

I think it partly redeemed the dishonour of my previous cowardice, from which all the trouble came, that I thought at this extremity to warn my companion not to come into the same danger. I could not have imagined that I should be saving my own life as I did so. Quick as a thought came the answer: "I will wait as you wish. I have told my Leader. She says, 'Do not move. Put your hand on your neck with the palm outward. He will not think of other weapons until he has tried the strangling-cord. It is forbidden to use the weapons of others, and his sense is small.'"

Deadly peril and quick thought are comrades ever. At the instant, something soft and slimy flicked my face, and drew backward. It was round my neck the next moment, but my hand was there already.

Soft and slimy, and very cold, it tightened, not with a steady pressure, but by a succession of contractile spasms, through which I realised with a new horror that the cord itself was as living as the arm that threw it.

But for my hand, I should have been strangled instantly. As it was, my utmost straining hardly sufficed for breathing, and I knew that I must act quickly. The Killer, supposing that I must already be reduced to impotence, was endeavouring to drag me toward him by the living rope he held.

An idea came to me. I loosed the axe, and drawing out the clasp-knife, I opened it with my teeth. Then, with a sudden wrench of the left hand, I got space for a moment to thrust it up within the ring, so that as the pressure came again it closed on the sharp blade and helped to cut itself as it did so. I pressed the knife outward with all my strength and the next instant the deadly noose had parted.

I snatched at the loathsome cord as it writhed backward, let the knife drop, caught at the axe with my free hand, and allowed myself to be dragged forward.

Simple in conception, I realised now that my idea was more difficult in execution. My opponent no doubt considered me to be strangled and insensible. My intention was to take him by surprise, and to strike him down with a sudden blow. But where he stood was in absolute darkness, and I did not know the length of the cord. If I rose too soon, in the half-light of the central chamber, I should defeat my purpose, even if I were not an easy mark for any weapon he had available. If I waited too long it might be equally disastrous.

Fortune helped me. He moved his foot as the cord shortened. He was within three feet of where I lay as he did so. I loosed the cord, so that he staggered back as the weight left it. Then I leapt, and struck. The blow must have caught him fairly on the side, but (as I knew afterward) it did not break the skin. The body gave way before it, and was flung against the wall, with a great rattling of the arms upon it. I struck again, missing him, I think, but with a blow that swept the wall and scattered the javelins.

Pandemonium followed. With a high whistling squeal he fled down the dark hall and, knowing it to be my one chance to give him no time for recovery, I followed blindly, with sweeping blows that got him more than once, and raked the walls of their weapons. It drowned the rustling in the roof, which had gone unheeded through the more urgent dangers, and which had been accompanied at times by a plaintive chattering noise, by no means formidable.

It is curious that it was while I chased him thus, in the height of the uproar and physical exertion, that my mind found leisure to recall my companion, and to tell her what was happening. She answered me with the unhurried speed which was her characteristic in moments of crisis. "The whole settlement is awake. I think they hear you. They are running across the enclosure. The five here, which are armed, are also coming. I cannot join you, even now, unless I run very swiftly. Shall I come?"

I answered, "If you will," and knew that she was already running across the open, at a pace no Killer could match for a moment.

It was just then that I really got him. My earlier blows had only thrown him from side to side, buffeted but not broken, while he retaliated more than once with a thrown javelin, not without result, as was shown by a foot that limped, even in the midst of this urgency. But this time the stroke caught his left leg with the wall behind it, and cut it cleanly through. He fell on the floor, in a place where the moon still lighted it. As he did so, I struck again, and the soft toughness of the elastic body, which gave way so easily in a free space, burst when the blow came with the hard floor beneath it. The contents ran out over the floor like an over-ripe tomato, or so it seemed in the moonlight. It was an uglier sight when the day found it.

The door was moved swiftly, and my companion was beside me.

CHAPTER XX

THE BOW

The next moment a rush of the Killers broke upon the door through which she had slipped, but it did not yield. With far better sight than mine in the darkness, and with a cool detachment of mind, which did not seem to be affected by her ecstatic delight at the swift movement of the adventure, she had noticed instantly that, though the door had no fastening, there were slots in the wall—three each side—and heavy bars propped against it to fit them.

Lightly lifted, the first bar fell into place as the rush of the Killers reached the entrance.

As she placed the other bars she told me, “There is one of the great bows, and a bundle of shafts on the wall behind you—You don’t see at night as I do?—They’re about the only things that *are* left on the wall.” (Her mind smiled as she thought of it.) “Do you always make so much commotion when you kill anything? The archer shot me as I ran. He shot straight. I heard the shaft coming behind me. My mind became like yours. I was uncertain what to do, and had no time to think thoroughly. I did not know whether I had will-power enough to turn the shaft. I leapt up. It passed between my thighs as I did so. It cut the fur of one, but without breaking the skin.” “That isn’t serious,” my mind interjected, with a thought on my own wounded foot. “It may be,” she answered. “I should have bent aside. It’s absurd to be caught in such a way, because my thought failed me. I never understood so clearly before how you live and think. It must be all chance and guessing. The shaft went on into the crowd of the Killers that were running from the sleeping-places. They all whistled with fear. They are great cowards. I could not see that it struck any of them.”

As our thoughts crossed, I had felt along the wall, and found the bow. It was five feet in length or more, bent for use, and of such strength that I doubted whether I could handle it. I found the shafts, and fixing one on the cord, I stepped to the left-hand window, risking any missile they might throw, but protected somewhat by the darkness behind me. It was about four feet from the ground, and about four feet broad, but not more than a foot high, and with two horizontal bars crossing it, about four inches apart.

As the ordinary Killers were about three feet high, they were below its level as they crowded round the door. There was an excited hubbub of whistling and whining noises, their suckers wagging in every direction as they all talked at once and found no listeners—or so I thought.

Then they were silenced by the higher note of the archer behind them. Evidently he gave them an order to move aside, for they quickly cleared on either hand, till the space was bare before him. With his five supporters beside him, their javelins in readiness, he advanced, bow in hand, toward the window.

I thought that I had better get my shot in first, if I wished to have any further interest in the adventure. I noticed with a flicker of amusement that my companion's mind was of the same opinion. I thought she was learning fast—or was she coming down to my level?

It was a very bow of Ulysses. I pulled it back with difficulty, and the arrow leapt from the cord with little aiming. It rose high over the heads of the advancing line, and—amazing fluke!—it struck the other archer—(there were only two of these monsters who were adult and vigorous)—who was coming up behind them, and whom I had not seen at all till the shaft hit him.

He was not seriously hurt, as we learnt afterwards, but had that one arrow ended half the pack the immediate result could not have been more decisive. Right and left they scattered, with a discordant clamour of whistling signals, till the whole space was empty before us.

I was feeling the relief natural to a timid nature at the withdrawal of an instant danger, and an illogical satisfaction at the result of my

clumsy shot, when my mood was changed by the realisation of the laughing gaiety of my companion's mind.

If I were in a world of strange sights and chances, it was in many ways more native to me than to her, and a condition of existence in which you directed your body to do something within its capacity and it did quite differently, had a weirdness beyond her experience or imagination.

"It seems to me," she thought, still mirthfully, "that your life in any world must be a succession of unexpected happenings, and I begin to understand why you seem to me both so brave and so cowardly. I would gladly give a hundred years of my life for a day in your company. But we may give more than either of us wish, if we disregard what the Killers are doing. You should judge their ways better than I, being more nearly of their kind; do you think they will attack us again, and how?"

I answered, "They are not of my kind at all, but very loathsome vermin. I don't think they will attack us again very quickly. I suppose we have most of their weapons here. Also, this place seems to be designed for defence—though against what we have no means of knowing. The bars on the inside show its intention. I suppose they kept their arms here because they would retire here in any emergency. Then, we are in a world which is not used to action in the night. They may feel the cold more than we do. The fact that we have wounded or killed one of their leaders at the first attempt will dispirit them. Unless there be another entrance, which is our greatest danger, I think we shall be safe till the light comes."

She replied, "But shall we wait till dawn without action? How will that help us? At least, if you are right, we shall have time for clearer thinking. Let us go to the farther end."

She led the way, for it seemed that her sight was little less in the dark than in the daytime, telling me, as she did so, that she saw no sign of any entrance, and we rested at the farther end.

Even if we decided to wait till dawn, the prospect was not pleasant. It could not be a less space away than three nights of my familiar time. I became aware that my left foot was very painful, and

that the boot was full of blood. I was hungry also, tired, and very thirsty. The night, even in this shelter, was very cold. Outside, it was fine again, and the moon still shone through the windows.

I knew that my companion felt no need of food or drink, and the thin striped body seemed indifferent to heat or cold, and while I had held her hand, and shared her vitality, the call for food had been dormant in myself also. But I had fought out this last struggle unaided, and it was long since I had eaten, though I had drunk deeply at a spring on the hillside as the dusk was falling.

“Your foot is hurt,” she thought, “can we mend it?” I took off the boot—what was left of it—and pulled away the remains of a clotted sock, but it was too dark for me to see the wound. With a feeling of relief unspeakable, I knew that the small webbed fingers were on it, with a vitality that thudded through the whole of my exhausted body. She said, “The javelin must have struck aslant, across the front of the foot, and entered where the string held the boot together. It did not cut deeply enough to keep its place, and must have fallen as the foot moved. I think it will heal quite easily. I suppose you are of a kind that grows again without difficulty. I know among the sea-creatures that the lower the form of the body the more easily it unites or grows, if it be torn or shredded. May I clean and close it?”

I know it was done very delicately, and the wound was trivial. A small furred finger cleaned and searched it, so that it began to bleed freshly. “I am going to tear a little skin from its sides, because it is so unclean. Do you mind?” she asked. Of course, I assented. It felt to me that it was more than a little. I think the vitality that her hand gave made the pain greater.

“If you slept,” she suggested, “and I kept my hand here, I think it would be well in a short time, and your body would be fit for use. It is no good to us now.”

I have noticed among my kind, that there is nothing that draws us together so intimately as the common sharing of any physical danger; perhaps it was from this cause in part, perhaps in part that the method of our communication established an intimacy of a kind of which—however commonplace to her—I had no previous

experience, perhaps, also, that the very difference of our minds attracted me, but, from whatever cause, I was aware of an attachment to this creature, who, I told myself, was less like a man than a seal, and had no sex as we understand it, such as I had never felt for any earthly woman.

As I lay there, at the gate of sleep, the slim webbed hand that pressed my foot was the dearest thing that any world contained, and half-a-million years had no power to divide us.

And then—for one incautious instant—she let me see her mind, and I knew how she regarded me.

I remember once, at a call of urgency, I volunteered to assist a shepherd who was ministering to some neglected sheep, which had been bitten by blow-flies. The grubs had hatched in the wounds, and had burrowed inward. The sores had festered, and some had become cavities several inches deep, laying bare bone and flesh, or going down to the vital organs themselves, and in them were a mass of grubs that burrowed and fed.

Some of the sheep lay dying, others might be saved if prompt attention were paid to the wounds.

I still remember acutely the repulsion with which I touched and cleansed, and dressed them. Others might have felt it less, but from such things I am constitutionally averse.

But the feeling was mild to the repulsion with which she regarded the foot on which her fingers rested. It was different in quality, because she had a mind which saw clearly what should be done, and a body that did not dream of rebellion; but it remained that she regarded the foot she touched as something more grotesque and repulsive than her familiar fishes, which swam in the clean flood, and that she felt as I might have done, had duty called me to minister to one of the Killers—to touch the worm-pink sliminess of the loathsome body while it waved its sucker in a whistling gratitude for my attentions.

She knew her error instantly. “I should not have shown you. All is well. Sleep. I will think of it thoroughly. Besides, I must communicate with our Leader.”

Then her mind closed entirely; and after a time I slept.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BAT-WINGS

When I waked, the long night was far spent, and the moonlight had left the window. My companion's hand was still laid closely upon the injured foot, and as I stirred, her thought met me.

"I have much to tell. Lie still, and listen.

"First, of ourselves. It is true that your body is, to me, a thing both absurd and repulsive. But should this divide us? My own body does not wear out, and, if injured, in most cases can be repaired, though not easily. I know that I exist independently of it, and that I am separate from it, even though I am in it, perhaps, for ever.

"Your body is of little use, and you control it imperfectly. It needs constant repair, and it is of a kind that wears out very rapidly. What you do afterward, or whether you continue at all, is doubtful even to yourself, though in that, I suppose, you are misled by your body's impermanence. Whether you could be provided with such a body as mine, or whether you could use it, I do not know. My Leaders might, but in such matters we have little knowledge. The Dwellers know much of these things, as you will understand from what I am about to tell you. If you have the courage to ask them, they can tell you much, if they will; but they may destroy you at once, if they think it needful.

"Still, you have little to lose, for such a body cannot be of much account, even to its owner, and it may be worth attempting. If you should succeed, we could be companions for always, for it seems to me that there are ways in which you are greater than I. If I dislike the body in which you live, it should have no power to divide us. I may dislike the killing-pens, but do I therefore dislike my Leader because she is in them? I know that you dislike my body also, because it is

strange to you, though it is in all ways better made, and is perfect for the uses for which I need it.”

I answered, “I do not think my body is of little account, and I have no mind that the Dwellers should destroy it, till I have an assurance of something better, which you cannot give. It is true that in some ways you repel me, and that I know best how well I love you when we are both in darkness. But what you say is right, and generous also. My foot feels well, and I am refreshed and rested. Tell me what you have learnt, and we will decide what can be done before morning finds us.”

She replied, “I have been told much by my Leader, and some of the things are very strange. You may understand them better than I do. She is in no fear for herself, and might have escaped before, had she been in haste to do so. She was caught in a deep pit, the top of which was covered over, in a way the Killers use to capture their prey. As she fell, she found that many of the strangling-cords, of which you have had some experience, closed round her. They are like living worms, having no head, but with an instinct to bind anything which they strike, or which strikes them. The Killers know how to carry them safely. It is from these that we have most to fear, if we should be attacked again, or should ourselves attack them. They all have these cords, which they keep with them both night and day.

“She was not strangled, but was so tightly bound that she could not escape when they found her a few minutes later. Had there been more time for thought she would certainly have seen a way to escape them. She found her will had no power whatever against the cords. They had no minds that she could subject to hers. There is such life in the oceans—too low for us to influence it. That is a mystery to us, but I cannot talk of it now.

“When the Killers arrived, she confused them for a time by the serenity of her mind, but, as more collected, and they became very eager to capture her, as a strange prey for the coming feast, she found it increasingly difficult to hold them back, and she determined to save her power and to see what they would attempt.

“They then bound her with many ropes and removed the cords, (which relax after a time, and are useless till their vigour returns), and carried her to the pen, where she has remained ever since. As its only exit is through the bars of the floor, and the vat beneath is flooded with the boiling water, they left the ropes loose, so that she was soon able to free herself. In this they showed their stupidity. Because the boiling water would kill such things as themselves they supposed that it would kill her. So she resolved to wait till the bars should be withdrawn, and learn what she might of the strange world she had entered.”

“Do you mean,” I asked, “that the heat of fire or water has no power over your bodies?”

“No,” she said, “of fire I know less, but water of such heat would destroy us if we were to attempt to breathe it. There are boiling springs beneath the ocean, and it was in one of these that the one damaged her body beyond remedy, of whom I told you. But we often swim those springs in safety. No water of any temperature can penetrate our fur, nor can it be injured by such means. We have, therefore, to swim with closed gills and eyes, and with other precautions. We cannot breathe or see, nor dare we attempt either until we are quite sure that we are in cooler water again.

“My Leader’s intention was not easy. It was to dive blindly into the boiling water as soon as the bars were withdrawn; to swim to the nearest side of the vat where it extends beyond the pens that are built above it; to clamber out of it, and trust to her speed for safety. She had considered every possibility, and had decided that she could do it, so that it concerned her mind no further. Our coming has altered this.

“It was the thought that I may have to swim in such water, and shall be injured, that caused me to blame my own folly when I allowed the arrow to graze me. In such event the scars on my right arm would give me trouble sufficient, though they are not as a fresh wound.

“Being in the pens, and having resolved on her own course of action, she attempted to establish communication with the creatures

which were in the other compartments. She found, after a time, that she was able to do so. She learnt that they are not creatures of this age at all, and they are so like you in mind—(though in some ways baser)—that when I told her of you she first supposed that another of their kind had escaped the custody of the Dwellers.

“They told her this. In the interior where they live, the Dwellers have captive specimens of the inhabitants of many bygone ages. These they keep under such conditions as approximate to those from which they come, so that they may study their habits and acquire their knowledge, if they should have any which may be worth recording.

“Sometimes, part or all of a collection of these specimens are condemned to destruction because they do something which the Dwellers regard as intolerable, though it may be, to them, a natural action.

“The nine creatures now awaiting death have been condemned in this way. My Leader tells me that they are not worth saving, as you will agree when you hear their own account of their condemnation.

“They say that they were the controlling race on the earth’s surface about 200,000 years ago. When I learnt this I remembered that you had said that you came of a race 300,000 years more ancient, and I asked my Leader to inquire whether the Dwellers had any specimens of your race also.

“They replied that they did not know, as they had never left their own reservation until this undeserved (as they considered) catastrophe had fallen upon them, but from their own knowledge of the civilisations which had preceded their own, they should think it unlikely. They said that the time mentioned was one at which there was a race of men existing for a short period, too transient and too barbarous for the Dwellers to be likely to consider them worthy of any study. Of all the myriad creations that the earth has known before and since, they were in some ways the most abortive. Although they only occupied, at their most numerous time, about one-half of the earth’s surface, they are believed to have destroyed themselves for fear of their own fecundity. They killed each other in

many violent ways, and rewarded those who devised fresh methods for their own destruction. The stench of their diseases rose in the sky till the other planets protested, and there would certainly have been a Divine intervention, had they not destroyed themselves, as I have told you.

“All this may be true, or not. You can judge of that. The creatures that tell it believe themselves to be much better, but are of a very filthy kind. Their appearances may be better than yours, but their minds are worse. I will show them to you, as my Leader has given them to me.”

She then gave me a picture which was as vivid in her thought as though I stood at the side of the killing-pens, and looked through the steam at those who were confined within them.

The first I saw was of the size and shape of a man, the body very thickly and grossly formed, and of a dark sepia colour, irregularly blotched with yellow, in some places as light as sulphur.

It sat cross-legged. It had a heavy head, which hung forward; the nose was very large and horny, like a vulture's beak. The natural impression of the face was rapacious and cruel, but it had now an appearance of abject and hopeless misery, which was almost comic, through all its tragic reality.

It had large bat-wings, wide open on either side, and as it crouched thus, with wings extended, it appeared to me as though it were seeking a space beneath an umbrella which was not sufficient to cover it.

There were six more of these creatures—all males. There were two others—one male, one female—alike, except that their faces, though equally brutal, were less intelligent, and that their wings were closed when I saw them.

My companion interpreted—“The seven were judges, and the two were witnesses in a recent trial which has brought them all to this end, very justly. The seven cannot close their wings, which are broken at birth in recognition that they are of a high caste which does no work.” (I thought of the finger-nails of a Chinese mandarin, but I

was too much interested in the tale which her Leader had obtained from them to break her thought to discuss it.)

“The other two can use their wings, but they do not fly as a bird does. They can use them only to flutter up to the perches on which they sleep. It appears that there is some reason in their own land why they should not sleep on the ground, but it was not explained.

“The two came before the judges with a complaint against a female of their kind. She had been short of food, which, it seems, is divided among them according to certain duties which they fulfil, which are sometimes very difficult to complete, or from attempting which they might even be forbidden by others who have more power than themselves.

“Lacking food, and knowing that these two had it in plenty, she asked them for some, which they refused to give. She then took it, while they were absent.

“The judges did not punish these two who had refused food to the one who needed it, and who were not ashamed of the tale they told.

“They decided that the one who had taken the food she needed should be beaten.

“They did not know that there was any world beyond that in which they lived, or that the Dwellers existed.

“But the Dwellers had watched them, and it appears that they were appalled at the wickedness of the creatures that they had caused to continue, when nature would have destroyed them. They intended at first to end the colony, thinking that they had no right to let such creatures live, whatever they might learn by observing them, but in the end they relented.

“They have removed these nine for the fate they merit, and have deputed one of themselves to endeavour to teach the first decencies of existence to the remainder of their kind.

“The Dwellers can be very merciful.”

I answered, “The tale is strange enough, but it contains some things which are less so to me than they must be to you, for I have known of such in my own time and race. But there is one thing that puzzles me. When these creatures have fallen into the boiling tanks,

and their bodies have become sodden with heat, and the Killers have sucked them in, it will be an end of their bodies surely, and the bodies of the Killers (who may be no better, though, it is true, we know no such thing of them, as you have told of these) will benefit.

“But that is their bodies only. If these creatures exist apart from their bodies, what is gained?”

She said, “If you cannot answer that, neither can I. It is a thing of which I have never thought till now, for all this is very new. The Dwellers, who have many thoughts, and who do things, may know, but I begin to suppose that, though they are so much greater than you, they may sometimes change and blunder, as you do. I have also blundered since I followed you in the doing of new things. They may know what you ask, but, for me, it is too difficult.”

CHAPTER XXII

NIGHT IN THE ARSENAL

It was now very cold, and, had I been alone, I should have suffered intensely. She asked me if any plan had formed while I rested, and I replied that I had thought of many things, but that it was always difficult for me to make up my mind quickly, unless circumstances were urgent. The night was still young. We could unbar the door, if we would, but, if we were not attacked again, we could not open it. This was a difficulty that spoilt almost any plan for aggressive action. If her Leader could really swim the boiling tank in safety, the time might come when she could release us, if we should still require it, but this was not yet possible unless she could also unbar the place which captured her.

“I have no doubt you are right,” her mind answered. “If we cannot open the door, it is best to let others open it for us. If there be a way to open it, we can see it in the morning. You see so badly at night that we should find it a great disadvantage. But I have really little fear of the Killers.

“If my Leader could release herself now, they would see her as she ran toward us. There would be less than nothing gained if she entered, for there would be no-one left outside who could open later, if a chance should favour us. Let us think of other things while the night passes. Are there any in your own land who could be as base as those who wait their end in the killing-sheds?”

I answered frankly, “I think there are, though it is difficult to explain, without making them appear even worse than they may really be. It is in our natures to act independently of one another. Each has his own store of food, and of the things his life requires. There are often those who depend upon him, and for whom he cares more than for his own life. If all the wealth we have were divided

equally, even if we would then work equally to maintain it, we should become restless and dissatisfied. Adventure, risk, and chance, are essential to our contentment.

“Then, we grow old and die very quickly, and it is our nature that we can learn little except by our own experience, so that it is always a world of children.

“Living the life we do, we feel that we cannot dwell together at all, unless we can trust each other not to take the things which are ours. We could not keep any social order without judges who could punish those who transgress it. These judges, even though they might be merciful and forgiving in their private life, may feel that they have no right to be so when complaint is made by another.”

She answered, “It seems to me that I have sight of a very terrible world, which you could easily alter if you would, but you have not really answered my question. In the case of which I told you, it appears to me that the real wrongs are two. First, that they had such laws that one of their kind could be short of food, and debarred from the means by which she might obtain it. Second, that those who had it should have refused to share. The first seems to me to condemn the whole race which endures such conditions, for themselves or their neighbours. The second condemns alike the two who refused, and the judges who failed to see that the real wrong was there, and not in the theft which followed. But I cannot think quickly of these things. They are too strange, and too far below the lives of any of the creatures that the ocean holds.”

I replied again, still trying to be fair to all, though my own thought was hers, and with a more vivid bitterness, having been in actual contact with the life from which she revolted.

“I agree with all that you think, but there is, with us, another trouble, which you could hardly imagine. I do not know how the food which you say you take, in your own way, once in every year, may be obtained, nor with what effort, but I suppose that there is plenty for all, and it has become evident to me from what you have told me of the lives you lead, that you have abundant freedom and leisure, and that whatever communal duties each individual may have, they are

not very onerous. Our conditions are very different. Life is maintained by the constant toil of the majority of our race—a toil often burdened by very adverse conditions, and numerous perils to health or life. Even so, there may be times when food fails, and some must go short.

“You will see that it would be unfair if some, avoiding this toil, should take by trickery or theft that which is won by the exertions of others.”

“It seems to me,” she replied, “that to condone one baseness you suggest another, which is even more despicable. It seems to me, also, that you may require many to judge wrong, because you have few who can lead rightly.

“I think that there are two ways of life which are good. There is the higher way, which is ours, in which all are united; and there is the lower way, of the shark or the shell-fish, of freedom and violence, which only greater violence can destroy, and which nothing can bring into slavery. But the vision which you give me is of a state which is lower than either of these, of blind servitudes and oppressions, to which you yield without willingness.

“The more you tell me, the more easily do I understand the sudden violences and crafts of your mind, and the disorders through which you think. But has there been none who has pointed out to you either the road of freedom, or the road of concord? Are you content with a social state as uncontrolled as the bodies in which you live so briefly? Have you no law-makers whom you can reverence, and whom you can obey with serenity?”

I answered, “In the country in which I live, we have invented a very curious state, in which we believe that we ourselves make all laws, for ourselves or each other. When I consider it, I know that it is not true, but it is a fact of many consequences that we believe it to be so.

“You must allow for the fact that if, in any part of our world, there should arise a trusted ruler—and there have been such, who have been followed gladly by its best men, and who have made such laws that their race has prospered and increased—he will probably have

lived most of his life before he gain his position, and his body will quickly decay, and there will be none to succeed him.

“In my own land we had, at one time, a custom that the son of a ruler should be a ruler after him, whether he were fit or not. Some of them did good, or at least attempted to do so. Few of them did great harm. They took more than their share of the good things of the land, and they gave to their friends. They sometimes made war when their people would have been content to remain at peace. They sometimes—but less often—prevented war, when their people desired it.

“They interfered little with the personal freedom of their subjects, so long as their own pleasures were gratified. For their own sakes they liked to be popular. Few laws were made, and if such as there were should be considered oppressive, the people would unite to insist that they should be reduced or altered. When the king and his subjects differed, it was always that they wanted less law, and there was confusion, and sometimes violence, till they succeeded in their desire.

“They objected particularly to having their goods or money taken by taxation, and their kings did not dare to tax them heavily. To enforce many laws requires the employment of many men, and great expenditure of treasure, from which a king gets no benefit. Had the king made many laws, he would have had no money to administer them, even had he wished to do so.

“But even so, men were not satisfied. There is an old tale with us of a colony of frogs in a river, which had no king, and thinking that it would increase their importance to have one, they petitioned their Creator, and he, being kindly, showed them a dead log in the stream, and told them that their king was there. But when they found that this king was inactive, they complained again, and he, being angered at their folly, gave them a stork, who chased and ate them as often as hunger moved him. The tale says that they were no more pleased than before, but that they complained in vain, for their Creator would hear them no further. We, having tried kings of both qualities, the predatory and the inactive, and being no more satisfied than the frogs, have devised an imagination which has conquered those who

conceived it. Even though we recognise the incubus which is upon us, and that it is of our own devising, we cannot hereby perceive any way to remove it.

“The fact is this. Our ancestors of a previous century, believing that they had discovered a way to freedom, devised a plan by which the people of each locality should choose one of their number, and these men, meeting together, should have power to frame laws, and to make impositions upon them. Every few years a new choice should be made, so that they could replace any with whose actions they were dissatisfied.

“This procedure has now been followed for many years, with a variety of unforeseen consequences, all of which I could not explain without a previous understanding of the whole social order—or disorder—in which it is rooted.

“But one sequel is simple. These men, being appointed to make laws, have proceeded to do so for many years with uninterrupted diligence, and there is no power to stop them.

“How can they be stopped, but by a law of their own making? And that is the last law which they would consider.

“The result is that we are oppressed by a weight of laws, to which we render a partial and bewildered obedience, aware that there are many of which we have not even heard; and every year hundreds of thousands of us, most of whom have no intention of law-breaking—are indeed nervously anxious to avoid it—are insulted and plundered by the innumerable officials through whom these laws are administered, and whom we toil to support for our own undoing.”

I went on to show her pictures of the life from which I came, so that she should realise the existence which was possible under such conditions, where personal freedom had disappeared beyond anything which our planet had previously known, or is ever likely to experience again; where you might not even die in peace, except under the penalty that your body would afterwards be seized and cut open, to ascertain how you had contrived to do it.

Horror, pity, curiosity, disgust, contempt, and wonder chased themselves across the surface of my companion's mind as the nature

of this life became visualised before her. With these there was a satisfaction that I had escaped, by whatever channel, from conditions of such barbarity, and a certain admiration or respect for myself, such as we may feel for one whom we recognise to have lived through some unusual tragedy, beyond the common experience of mankind. Then there was a desire to see for herself the strange and alien life which I showed her, and I knew that, were it not an impossibility for her to enter a past to which she did not belong, she would gladly have adventured it with me. I thought, with curiosity, of how she would encounter such an existence, could I have translated her to a mortal body and the conditions of life with which I was myself familiar, and I had a moment's doubt of one who, I felt, had experienced only the pleasures of existence without its pain, but my final thought was that the serenity of her mind was a spiritual quality too fundamental for any servitude to subdue it.

She asked me whether our world had always lacked a leader to propose any rule of life other than this state which lacked either individual freedom or a rational mutuality, and I replied that there had been an event of two millenniums earlier than my own life, which was commonly regarded as a revelation from Heaven. Its Exponent had announced a series of paradoxical aphorisms for the conduct of life, which were of an unforgettable kind, and were still highly respected. If they were obeyed, life would be fundamentally different, but the common opinion was that they were quite impracticable. Each of these aphorisms prescribed a line of conduct and foretold its result. It might seem difficult to honour the Teacher, and reject His wisdom so absolutely. But it was contrived very simply. The consequences which had been ascribed to the course of life which He taught were allocated to a vague existence which was to follow at a distant time, and in another sphere. Meanwhile, if they were obeyed at all, it was regarded as an act of self-sacrifice, no one supposing for a moment that the results which He foretold would actually follow. I admitted that I knew of no authenticated instance of anyone obeying these precepts with results unsatisfactory to himself or others.

As the long night passed I went on, in response to a curiosity which seemed insatiable in its desire of exploration, to describe many phases of the social and economic chaos which we call civilisation, often illuminating my own mind as I did so.

I noticed that she was particularly impressed by the precarious tenure on which we hold the houses which our defective bodies require, and the uncertainty of many of us in obtaining a regular and sufficient supply of the very necessities of life itself and the consequent bitterness with which we regard a stranger who lays hands on anything to which we consider we have a prior claim.

Realising this, she began to understand how those among us of the baser sort, who have more than sufficient for their own comfort, may yet persecute any who attempt to share it, without incurring the contempt or punishment of their fellows.

Joined to this bitter resentment at any private theft, I had to exhibit the docility with which we allow ourselves to be robbed by legal process, and the immunity and respect enjoyed by those who are the instruments and beneficiaries of these extortions; and, as I showed it, I had to realise the fantastic inequity with which these impositions are levied, as, for instance, that a man who prefers salt shall pay less than one who eats sugar, or that one who keeps a dog shall pay more than one who keeps a pet of another species, or—an idea almost devilish in its lunacy—that a man shall pay more heavily because he provides a larger home, with the increase of young children who are dependent upon him.

I reverted to the explanation that, while no king could have imposed this burden of taxation upon us, we were bewildered by the belief that it was of our own doing, and that this conviction acted as a paralysis....

The shaft struck the wall sharply, and rebounded to the floor beside us.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ESCAPE

It is the habit of mankind to depreciate the appliances of its ancestors, when it has superseded them with other contrivances. In our time, bows and arrows have become symbolic of futility among engines of war. Yet, before the introduction of gunpowder, the longbow was considered a weapon sufficiently formidable to threaten the whole order of feudalism, and it is at least doubtful whether stupidity alone, or a deliberate purpose, exposed the archers at Bannockburn, without the usual support of pikemen, to the charge of the Scottish horse.

It is certainly true that a company of Crécy archers would have quickly cleared more than one of the Flanders trenches, which were too near for comfort, yet too far for a grenade to reach them, and too deep for the trajectory of a bullet.

We had talked and slept and talked again as the long night continued, and had not noticed the first faint light that came slowly from a sun that rose to so prolonged a dawn, till the arrow fell rattling on the floor beside us.

My companion laughed as it fell—not with her lips, that only opening slightly for a breathing which it seemed no haste could quicken, nor with her eyes, to my knowing, for it was too dark to see them, though they must have been alight with the joy of unfamiliar action, but with her mind, through which the laughter and its cause were conveyed together, and by which means mirth, though amid a crowd of others, could be private to those who shared it.

Our thought was single that we should go back to our first station beneath the door, where we supposed we should be safe from the arrows. She rose lightly—another shaft striking the place where she had lain, as she left it—and slowly and stiffly, from my long vigil, I

followed her. She was becoming used to the frequent evidences of the imperfections of my physical existence, but this exhibition stirred her to a fresh wonder. "Didn't it know," she asked, "that you wanted to get up quickly? Is it insubordinate, or entirely stupid?" I defended it as I could, "I think it does its best for me, in its own way. I have used it very hardly of late, and it needs repair; within a few minutes, when it understands that it must work again, it will be ready. Did it never protest, I should use it beyond its capacity, and soon destroy it. But perhaps if you had come to my world, you would have found your own body less perfectly adapted to more strange conditions than you find here."

She answered frankly, "It is likely enough. Though I should at least know what was happening. You seem to me to live in yours like a stranger, without control or confidence, and not knowing what goes on within it.

"But I agree with you the more easily because I am already feeling the need of the water in which I most naturally live, and I am also conscious of the loss of the energy I have given you, which, in about two months from now, should it continue at the same rate, would exhaust me entirely."

As this thought reached me, we were moving down the centre of the hall, she in front, because she was confident that her will could turn a shaft if it were coming directly at her. Suddenly I saw her bulk more broadly in the dim light, and was sharply startled, till her thought assisted my eyes to explain it. She had lifted and shaken loose her fur, which was of a surprising length, and then drawn it down again more closely than ever, so that its surface was as smooth and shining as a serpent's skin.

I had an impulse to lay my hand on the glossy back, but dare not break the barrier of her physical difference and aloofness. It was as though an unapproachable virginity surrounded her. I vaguely realised the power by which she could control the fiercest creatures of the deep, and how they felt as they cowered before her.

If she understood my thought, she gave no sign, but went on to tell me, "In the ocean are many springs, some that are hot, and some

that are very cold, where we can lie with lifted fur, and let the water go through it. Here I can only shake it loose, and every hair is too sensitive to rest content if any speck of dust be upon it, especially of organic origin, for they dread corruption in any form.”

We were two-thirds down the floor by now, and she was stepping delicately to avoid the body of the Killer, which had spilled across it, when an arrow passed us, and the next moment I was struck sharply behind the shoulder so that I staggered and recovered myself with difficulty. “I’ve got it now,” I thought, for there was a dull pain under my shoulder-blade, and I was aware of a feathered shaft that projected behind me, but her mind only laughed in answer.

“It isn’t easy to tell where your body begins or ends, but I don’t think that arrow’s hurt you.”

She was right. It had entered the knapsack in a downward direction, pierced a variety of its contents, and then been deflected by a burning-glass which I had brought in case my small stock of matches should be exhausted—but so far I had had no occasion to use it. Now it projected three inches from the lower corner of the knapsack, a narrow, steel-like, unbarbed head, of razor sharpness.

But how had it struck me there?

We crouched with our backs to the barred door, and watched and understood.

The walls and ceiling were of the same substance as the door that had turned my axe-edge, and the shafts that struck them fairly rebounded, but they were shooting now so that the shafts glanced from the roof, and then did diabolic turns, like the wizardry of billiard balls when a master guides them. Whether there were any quality of an unfamiliar kind in shaft or ceiling I cannot say, but such shooting I had never seen, or imagined.

Fortunately for us the side walls were still hung with enough weapons to make such jugglery difficult upon them—(the end was bare like the ceiling)—and the floor was scattered with those I had brought down in my chase of the Killer.

“Unless you have something better to suggest than sitting here, we shall probably be in the stewing-vats before sunset,” my comrade

considered judicially, as a shaft slanted across us at about two feet distance.

“I am of the same mind,” I answered amiably, “but what can we do? I might send one arrow from the window. I should probably aim too hastily to hit anyone. I should not be likely to send a second. We can unbar the door, but we cannot open it. We could ask your Leader to do so, if she can escape from her present confinement, but the moment seems inopportune. Can you get in touch with her, and learn what is happening outside?”

In response to this suggestion she established communication almost at once, and was soon passing on the report to me.

“There are two archers shooting. The one you hit is hurt in the head, but only slightly. The smaller Killers have gone to the farther side, and are out of view. The very old, the diseased, and the young, are congregated together at the far end of the enclosure. The infirm archer is with them, but he was consulted by the others, and it seemed that he gave them the plan of attack which they are following.

“There is a young one of the larger kind who is turning somersaults in excitement, because he hopes that the older may be killed, and he will be able to obtain a bow.

“They suppose that the arrows have destroyed you already, but they are cautious, and will continue to shoot till their ammunition is ended. The smaller Killers, who have gone round to the side, are well provided with strangling-cords, and have also many javelins. They have fetched a quantity from one of the other buildings. They are elaborately made, and have red shafts. Probably they were of a sacred or ornamental character, and have been acquired for fighting purposes only in this emergency.

“The javelins are not dangerous to you at present, as they turn in the air when thrown, and the window bars are too narrow for them to pass.

“There is no guard here now, and the bat-winged victims are greatly excited by the hope of escape, but they appear to have no means of releasing themselves.... I think the arrows are ended.”

We thought so too, for they had now ceased to enter. If our enemies hoped or supposed that we had been disabled, they must advance to investigate, and I had the sense of relief which comes when you can at last strike back, after being exposed to an attack which there is no means of resisting. I had a moment's inclination to unbar the door, and rush out upon them when they pushed it open, with such axe-blows as might scatter them, and win our freedom at a moment.

I had the thought that if the archers could be cut down, the rest would be panic-stricken to see it, and that without their bows they might not be very formidable, but the recollection of the strangling-cords was enough to check this impulse effectually.

Then I thought that if they expected that they had killed us, they would not suppose that the door had been unbarred, and how would they endeavour to enter?

The light had increased now, so that the whole extent of the hall was visible. It showed nothing that we had not already seen or imagined, except that in the roof there were slits of an oblong shape, and of a regular occurrence, and over the sides of these we saw the heads of small lizard-like creatures protruding—bright yellow, snout-like heads, with small emerald eyes, that watched us fearfully, but with an impression of malevolence, and of an intelligence that gave me a feeling of actual discomfort as I gazed, so that I looked elsewhere, and then remembered how an animal will turn uneasily from a man's eyes, and was ashamed, and looked back, and found my gaze was reluctant.

My comrade followed my thought, and surveyed them with her usual coolness. "They are more intelligent than the Killers, of whom they are not afraid. The Killers serve them. They must have built that roof for their dwelling. They fear us, and therefore hate us. It might be well if you sent an arrow to frighten them."

But as the thought came, the yellow heads shot back, and the openings were quiet and vacant.

"I thought so," she smiled, "they can read our thoughts, while they watch us. They are dangerous and might do us mischief, but I think

the Killers are too stupid to use them.”

Meanwhile, I had again secured the bow, which I had used the night before with such unmerited success.

When I had drawn it once or twice, and felt that I could control it to some purpose, though it was almost beyond my strength to handle, I stepped to one of the windows on a sudden impulse, and saw the ground before me was pink with advancing Killers. Swiftly and silently they came, having appeared again from the side which had hidden them from the sight of our Leader. There was no whistling from the suckers, but they were waving them from right to left, and tossing them in the air in their excitement, as does an elephant when he trumpets. Many of them had the red-stemmed javelins. All had their strangling-cords in readiness.

The archers moved beside them, one on each flank, bow in hand, but I saw that there were no arrows on the strings.

There was no need to aim. I bent the bow to my strength's limit, and sent the long shaft into the hideous crowd that confronted me. I think that it might only have dented the slimy bladder-like skin of the first it struck, without puncturing it, had it been able to throw him back without striking any solid substance behind him, but—perhaps because they were advancing so closely—it went through him and two others before it spent its force, and left them heaped and squealing. In a moment the whistling cries arose to a point which I cannot hope to tell, for I lack words for any possible comparison. Right and left ran the Killers, the archers first in flight, and in a few seconds were beyond my range and seeing, beneath the side walls of the arsenal that was at once our jail and our safety.

My comrade, looking from the other window, gazed at the stricken, struggling heap with eyes that danced in triumph. Her age-long wandering in the ocean ways had familiarised her to death and cruelty in a hundred forms. Her repugnance had been to doing things herself which she regarded as natural only to a lower order of creation. I suppose in all her life she had never knowingly done harm to any sentient thing. But she loved adventure as a child loves it.

Then her eyes clouded to an instant's blankness, and turned to me again, and this was the thought she gave.

"My Leader says, 'Tell that animal not to shoot again, and if it does so, leave it entirely. We are not Killers, nor do we practise their ways. Besides, it may cause trouble with the Dwellers, of which we have prepared sufficient already.'"

I answered in anger at such perversity. "Tell her that if she is not a Killer, neither am I an Amphibian, and I shall play this game in my own way."

"But she is a Leader——"

"She is not mine. Tell her I have the authority of five Leaders, and she had better do as she is told herself."

"She says that she has already loosed a bar from the floor, and is coming herself to take direction."

"Tell her that if we open the door to let her in we shall have to keep it open, and how then shall we resist them? If we close it, who will be left outside to open it, when we are ready? Tell her to stay where she is."

"Be quiet, please. She has dived in the boiling tank. We must not divert her mind. She dare not look nor breathe. Now she has reached the outer tank. It is worse than she expected, and she is very nearly exhausted. She has risen to the surface and is looking through the steam for a place to land. There are Killers on that side. She will dive again, and swim under the killing-sheds so that she may reach the farther side before they can run round. You must help her with such will as you have. She has risen. But it is too soon. There's a floor above her head, in the water. She is swimming on. She has struck something under water. It is one of the boiling bodies. It is a Frog-mouth. It is not quite dead. It has seized her with its teeth. Now she has willed herself free. She has risen to the surface. She can breathe, but she can only swim very slowly. She is exhausted, and she is holding one arm out of the water. It has been burnt by the water where she was bitten. She is at the edge now, but the Killers are there also. There are only three yet, and their wills are not strong enough to resist her. They are confused and frightened in mind. One has

tried to push her back, striking with a javelin. She has caught it in her hand. He has fallen into the water. I have not heard one of them squeal quite like that before. She has pulled him out again, but he is still squealing. I think he will die. More Killers are coming. She is running here. She says, 'Have the door unbarred.'"

I lifted the bars down, though I was far from sure of the wisdom of opening. Then I went to the window. She was already in view, running at a great pace, but with an ease and coolness that gave no impression of being hunted, but rather of one who constrained others to follow. I cannot easily convey the feeling that came to my mind as I watched her. They were too far behind to throw to any good purpose.

But round the side of the building from which I watched came another crowd, forgetful of arrows in their excitement, and were between her and the door in a moment.

"She says, do not shoot. She will draw them off, and then return to the door, and I must be ready to run out with her. They will then try to cut us off from the gate, but we shall make for the cliff behind, and climb it, and go to meet our companions. She says I can bring you if I will, and if you can climb."

I answered, "I cannot climb that cliff. No man could."

"She says, we must go that way. It is necessary. The animals can go on killing each other if they will. She will have none of it."

I said, "Tell her I did not come here for my own pleasure, but to help her. If she does not need my help she can go her own way, and you can choose for yourself also. I am not going to lose the chance of giving these brutes another lesson."

All these thoughts exchanged in less time than it will take to read them, and even while my comrade answered, with a troubled mind, "She is a Leader. She will do right. Do not shoot." I had already sent a shaft among them which found its victim, and this I followed with another which went weakly astray as they turned and fled to safety.

The Amphibian, who had first taken a sideward leap to avoid their rush, was already moving away to draw them off the door, but seeing

the effect of my shot she ran swiftly forward and pushed it open, and entered.

She stood there, holding the door open with her right hand—the left arm, which had been bitten and then scalded in the water, hanging loosely beside her—with a quiet dignity, which I could not but respect, however much I might resent her attitude to myself. She did not turn her eyes to me, nor give me a thought—she never did this from first to last—and I was conscious that there was no anger in her mind. I was too far beneath her.

She looked at the inside of the door for a moment, and then I was aware that their minds were in contact. Thought is swift, but it seemed a long time that we stood there. I was conscious that my comrade was fighting for her own will, and was, in a way, defying her Leader, if defiance it could be called, where I knew that both minds retained their poise and coolness, and the one that heard was both aloof and judicial.

At last she asked me, “Are you content that I go with her, and can you escape by the way we came?”

I replied, “You must make your own choice,” and closed my mind very quickly. I was angered at the course that events had taken, and in no mood to let her know that I was at an extremity of exhaustion. As I drew the bow the second time I knew that it was my own giddiness that made the shaft go wrong. I was standing upright with difficulty, and knew that if we separated there was not one chance in a thousand that I should escape the handling of those nauseous suckers.

Her mind fought for a moment to pierce the blankness with which I met it. Then it recognised its failure. “Wait,” she answered. “I have a thought,” and again she turned to her Leader, and a longer silence followed.

At last she turned to me, and relief of some kind gave light to the serenity of her eyes. “She goes. I stay with you. How long depends on yourself. But it is a condition that I must not explain.”

I was so gladdened by this decision that I was disposed to be generous. “I am very glad,” I answered, “unless it will expose you to

greater danger than you would otherwise meet. But I hope I have not been the cause of any difference between you and your Leader, who so plainly dislikes me.”

She answered coldly, “I am in no danger that I fear to meet. We are not animals such as you are. Nor do we differ among ourselves. Our Leaders are always right.”

As she gave me this thought, her Leader looked at me for the first time. I thought there was inquiry in her glance, but it passed me dumbly. She threw a thought to my companion, “You should watch the floor,” and turned and went out, and the door closed behind her, with the click which had sounded so ominously in the night when I first heard it.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT IN THE ARSENAL

When the door closed I was very glad to sit down with my back against it, as we had done before, and my companion was quick to perceive my exhaustion. Again I felt the small life-giving hand in mine, and, for the time at least, the effects of thirst and starvation, and the long night-hours, were overcome by the reserves of her vitality.

She was very quiet at first, and indisposed for conversing.

At length I asked her, "I know how I must appear to you in many ways, but why was your Leader so contemptuous of me, beyond anything I have met among your people previously?"

She answered, "She was not contemptuous. She did not regard you at all. Why should she? She had more serious things of which to think. Besides, you think of our Leaders as one, because their decisions are always unanimous. But this is wrong. Each is different. There is none like this one in all practical issues, and in control of material things. That is why it was she who came to seek the first one, when she did not return. I think she regards the whole expedition as a mistake, and that she should have been left to her own ways. But such things are not for me. They are for themselves only.

"She taught me much while we talked together. When I am with you only, I think myself superior in many ways. Your body breaks so easily, and you are never sure when it will fail you. Your mind is confused, and inconsequent. It is only when I think of yourself as of a Leader whose followers are mostly treacherous or disloyal, but who still endeavours without loss of courage to fulfil his purpose, that I respect you at all. But when my Leader showed my stupidity I felt that there is little difference between us.

“She showed me, among other things, that I accept your conclusions without thought, and that I do not even take notice of what is beneath me.

“You are used to opening doors in certain ways, and so you assumed that this could not be opened at all from the inside, and I believed you without reason. The Killers must have been preparing an attack from beneath our feet, and were only interrupted when they ran out to waylay my Leader, and I did not hear it. I know that your senses are rudimentary, but do you not hear it now?”

No—I heard nothing. But she said that they were moving busily under our feet, so that we must be prepared for an attack at any moment. She showed me what her Leader had known at a glance, that if we pressed the hinge the door would open.

I said, “If there be a cavity beneath us, there is probably a trap-door from it to this hall. In that case, I wonder they haven’t used it earlier. Let us see what we can discover.”

We examined the floor from end to end. It was of the same hard smooth substance as the walls. It was laid in squares, about a yard each way, so finely morticed that the divisions were scarcely perceptible. But there was one in the middle of the hall that attracted our attention.

It was set as close as the others, even more so, but there was no appearance of mortar between it and those adjoining. I cleaned the dust from the floor with my ragged sleeve, and the difference became more evident.

As we bent above it, there was a slight sound overhead, and looking up suddenly I saw a row of yellow heads that were regarding our movements with interest. “I wish I could kill those creatures. They will harm us yet,” I thought, and my companion answered, “They wish us evil, but you will do us injury if you fear them. They know every thought they cause you. But tell me what plans you have. Our Leader is rescued—if any rescue were needed. We can open the door when we will, and there is nothing to keep us here, if we have courage to venture out. But perhaps it would be better to defend this sheltered place, till our friends come in the evening?”

I answered, "I think we can go free together when we will, though I could not have done so singly, for I shall have no strength of my own till I come on food of some kind; but we shall need to know where we are going, and to what purpose.

"I suppose that at any moment this stone may move, and there will be a rush of enemies upon us. Yet if we wait till that moment we lose nothing, for they could not come up quickly through such an opening, and the more of our enemies that are congregated beneath the building when the door is opened, the better it will be. But you are right that we should have a plan as to where we are going, and why we do it, either together or separately.

"When I came here, it was with the object of finding two of my friends who had preceded me. Almost at once I involved myself in another obligation. It seemed to me that the one might help the other, and apart from that I had no guidance as to where to search, nor hope that any creature would aid me.

"So far, I have not found them, though I have seen evidence that one has been near here. I think it is most probable, if they live at all, which I greatly doubt, that they are in the hands of the Dwellers, and it is there that I should seek them.

"I have no wish to do this. It is very perilous, and not hopeful. Also, I do not wish to part from you, and I know you cannot come there.

"But if I should return with you, I suppose that there is no way by which I could live in your own element.

"If you will help me to get clear of this danger, and back to where food and water are possible, I think I ought to leave you, and by doing this I shall also relieve your Leaders of a difficulty with the Dwellers, which they have indicated already."

She replied, "I think we shall not part so soon, if we escape the vats of the Killers. I have something to tell you. When my Leader wished me to go with her, and leave you here, I objected. Then I told her my reasons—as our custom is—knowing that she would judge them fairly, and more capably than I could do myself. She found that they were not good. She showed me that you are yourself of the kind

of the Killers, that you have little faculty of reason or self-control, that you are violent and untrustworthy, and (she thought) untamable. If that should prove to be so, we could not even make you as one of the sea-dogs. Also, you could only live on the roof of our island, where you would probably die when the first storms swept over it.

“First or last, you would have to go to the Dwellers.

“She has seen that, every day, as the sun sets, one or more of them will come over the mountains, and disappear to seaward. She supposes that it is a regular patrol, and that they come out at some inland spot during the earlier day, and retire down one of the passages which you have seen.

“When they pass, the Killers are afraid, and hide in the wall.

“She proposed that we should leave you here, where you could defend yourself till the evening, and you could then go out and give yourself up to the Dwellers, or escape entirely, while the Killers will be hiding, if you should prefer to do so. She thought it best that you should give yourself up, as they would deal with you as you deserve, and would not kill you unless it should be desirable, as she thought likely.

“At first I could not answer this; but then I had a new thought. I replied that now she was safe we had still to rescue the body of our Leader which was left in the tunnel, if that should be possible. I should be willing to go to seek it, if you were with me, but not otherwise. It is plain that we cannot take it by force from the Dwellers, even though we should all go together. If we go secretly, we must be few. In many ways you might help me there, for you are more nearly of their kind, and you do not fear them as you do smaller things. Even if the body be destroyed it is necessary that we should know.

“She did not like my plan. I thought that she would refuse it, and I held to it with all the force I had, which was little. Then she closed her mind from me. I knew she had many thoughts which she would not show me. At last she decided, ‘You may do this, if you can. But you must not ask this animal to go down to the Dwellers to aid you. If

he offer to do so, you may take him with you. But he must make his own plan before he hear of yours, and to that he must keep. You must be in hiding before the sun goes down. If we should return this way, and should meet with the Dwellers, you may watch us meet, but you must hold your minds blank and closed, so that neither they nor we can perceive you, unless we ourselves should signal to you. You must not release the Bat-winged men, nor allow their escape. They must die, as the Dwellers have willed.' That is all she told me, but there is none like her for foresight, even of the Seven, or for plans that are so made that they can change as the chances alter, and still reach to where they will. She saw me foolish, but she decided to make a plan which used my folly. I am glad that we shall go together, and shall see the homes of the Dwellers."

I answered, "I am glad also. I cannot say that if I had no search to make I should give myself to the Dwellers, as your Leader advised so kindly. They might decide my fate with great wisdom, but I prefer to do that for myself. As she said, I am not easily tamable. Besides, if I once get clear of this place, I think I might find means both to hide and to live in this new world, and I should well like to explore it. It is already apparent to me that it is full of beauty and of strange wonders, of which I have yet seen very little—and the tunnels of the Dwellers seem the more perilous way. But we both have good reasons for the choice we have made, and I think we may do better together than either could do separately. But why should we not attempt escape immediately? Why should we not return to the lower way while there is still daylight to guide us, and before the Dwellers appear, to add a new peril to the road we take?"

"I am not certain which is best, and I think, as you do, that we might escape at any time with no great risk, if we were sudden and rapid in the attempt; but I think that she wished us to remain to see whether my friends will still come by this way, and are allowed to pass in safety. There is also this to think, that if the Dwellers always return to the interior when the night comes, and they travel more rapidly than we should do, they might overtake us if we enter one of the tunnels earlier, while, if we follow behind them, we may do so in

safety, with little fear that they will know of our coming till we have passed the tunnel and arrive at that which lies beneath it.”

So we agreed to wait, and as we thought that the loose stone in the floor was now the point that threatened us, we sat closely round it. I kept the bow beside me, thinking to send a shaft through any opening that might appear, but as the time passed without movement I loosed my knapsack, and finding thread and a strong needle, I commenced to repair my rags as best I was able, my companion watching, half in amusement and half in sympathy, and wondering why the creatures of my race never tried to train their skins to utility.

Then for some time she was silent, her head rested on her updrawn knees, and when at last she moved again she told me, “I suppose you think of us as all being alike, as we live the same lives, just as I should think of your kind, if I were among them, while to you they are widely different by character and appearance and occupation. But we are not so. I have a vice which I cannot break, which is shared by one only among all our thousands. Our Leaders have considered it, and showed us that it comes only when our minds are tired by new things, and desire rest when we do not will to take it.

“Then our thoughts change to sleep of themselves, and on a note which is not of our own choosing.

“There was a distant time when I was very foolish, and I went into a part of the ocean where there was much depth and great darkness. There I found a pressure which came upon me so that I could not release myself. I was held there very long, with a horror which you may have some power to imagine.

“When the time came at which our nation assembles, and my absence was noticed, the Leader whose body we are now seeking, and who is like myself in the love of strange and difficult ways, though of a much higher capacity to traverse them successfully, undertook to search for me, and knowing the direction which I had been seen to go, she at last discovered and released me, by methods which would be beyond your comprehension, if I should attempt to tell them. In doing this she risked her own life, and lost so much of

her vitality that she rested afterwards for many years till her strength returned, and did not even take part in the Councils of the Seven.

“Now, when I wished to gain my own way, I looked for every argument that would support me, and I recalled this to my Leader’s mind, as a reason why I should go, if someone must be risked to seek her. Then, as we sat here, the horror of that place came back to me, and in a moment I was asleep and within it. But it has left me now, and, I hope, for ever....

“It is in my mind that there will be fighting when that stone moves, and that I am pledged to help you.”

She picked up one of the short javelins from the floor, and balanced it thoughtfully on an outstretched finger. When she had turned it over, and looked at it carefully for some time, she threw it against the wall, watching its flight very closely. It turned once in the air, failed in its balance, and struck the wall with a slanting feeble stroke.

Unperturbed, she collected six others, and threw them one by one, so quickly that the next was in the air before the first had fallen. Of these the two last struck the wall at the same spot, and with the full force of the throw.

“I think I can play that game if they should ask it,” she laughed in her mind, and collected others to her hand.

“Could you hit the same spot twice in succession?” I asked.

“Surely,” she answered, “even you could not forget so quickly. But I myself forget that your body is not as mine. I understand that yours may do your will with exactness on one occasion, and on the next, though you have the same will, and it be equally capable, it may fail entirely. All the games of which you told me, in which your body is used, are based on this quality. But with us it is different. I know now that I can hit any spot at which I can aim, and as often as I attempt it. I will show you with these.”

She picked up two of the javelins, and sent the first against the farther wall—but the second did not follow it. At the moment her hand was lifted, the stone beside us disappeared from sight, leaving a

yard-wide gap, and as swift as thought itself her javelin was flung into the open pit beneath us.

An outburst of whistling screams told us that it had carried no welcome message, but the next second we had our own troubles to deal with. Back into its place the stone shot upward, and with such force that certain things which had been placed upon it were thrown to the roof and fell scattering upon us. Four of them there were—four eight-foot lengths of living, writhing rope—but to me, at least, they seemed forty.

I suppose that my companion, of cooler mind, and of quicker hands also, made no such error.

I know that while I was struggling with one that had caught my leg and was thrusting upward for a more deadly grip, her mind reached mine with the quiet quickness of thought and buoyant gaiety of spirit that physical danger always waked within her. I had a feeling that the idea that she should be threatened by hostile violence always came to her as an absurdity, to be met with laughter.

“We must watch the stone. Put your foot on its end. Jump to the left, or the other one will get you.” So she called to me, while she ripped one which had fallen round her own waist with a javelin point till it loosed her and fell squirming, and as it did so she flung the javelin, not at the next of them, though it was round her feet already, nor at the gap which showed again where the stone had left it, but at the lizard-forms, that were now twittering with excitement above us.

It struck one of them fairly on the outstretched head, and down it came, a bright yellow snake-like form, turning head-under-heels as it came—or under tail, to be literal—and falling in the open gap, at which there rose a chorus of such consternation from the unseen Killers beneath us, that it was evident that to them a lizard must be a very dreaded or a very sacred thing.

“Two each,” she laughed, as she caught the still restless portions of the living cords on an arrow’s point, and threw them back into the gap beneath us. “Did you notice that they became almost harmless after I had struck one of the lizards, and the others bolted? I believe it was their minds that guided them to attack us. It was to reach

them, if the need came, that I first tried the javelins, but I dare not tell you, nor let the thought make growth in my own mind, lest they should know it. I fear them, but I do not fear the Killers at all.” And just then the Killers came.

I think the falling of the lizard must have produced a confusion that delayed their attack, but that this was succeeded by such a tide of fury as swept away the natural cowardice that underlay their ferocity, and caused them to forget the caution with which they had approached us previously.

They came leaping upward, with their hands on the edge of the gap, and the first fell back with a javelin in the throat, and a second I knocked back with a sidesweep of the axe, and from the third I sliced off the sucker at its root, and stopped his whistling. But the crowd pushed up, and flung him sprawling outward.

They had no cords—perhaps they thought them useless after the way we returned the four they sent us; perhaps they would have been too dangerous to themselves in that crowded rush—and they had little time or space to use their javelins before the axe was on them. I struck, and struck, with steady sweeping strokes, at the pushing crowd that rose against me, the tough skins denting to the blade, and bursting as they felt the pressure behind them.

And always, if they rose too fast, or one should dodge my stroke, a javelin found it, from where my comrade had stepped back to the wall to reach them down as she needed them. Once I thought I had failed, as the pressure spued up two or three at once, too quickly for the axe to take them, but her mind reached me serenely. “Keep the others down—and leave these to me,” and was vaguely conscious that she was avoiding their weapons with a cool celerity, while her own bore them her message that their hours were over.

And then amid an up-rush of damaged bodies which he was using for his own protection I saw the red-brown malignant head of one of the archers, and struck with all my strength a straight-down cleaving blow, and was conscious that the attack had collapsed before me, and the gap was empty.

With a sudden dizziness I looked on the shambles that now surrounded the opening. I have told something of the outward repulsiveness of the Killers, with their worm-pink skins that were both tough and slimy, but of the interiors of these foul bodies I cannot write. An axe-stroke has no reticence.

I thought it was from that nauseous sight that a sudden faintness threatened, and I struggled against it, stepping back, and leaning on the axe, and turning to my companion for her to snare my triumph.

She stood very still, her eyes bright and watchful, her mind beginning to question her for the thing she had done—which was, no doubt, outside the experience not only of herself, but of all her kind—but her will meeting it confidently. Then she looked at me, and her thought changed. I made an effort to reassure her that I was uninjured, and was aware that I was falling.

I don't think I was unconscious for long, and I believe that she neither helped nor hindered, but watched quietly beside a phenomenon which was beyond her experience.

When my senses returned, she was alert and near, and her mind was quick to reach me.

“You can rest while you will. I think your last stroke was enough to still them. You made it work that time!” She always spoke of my body thus, as something separate from myself, as we might praise a friend who carved well with a blunted chisel. “I am sorry that I failed you. The Killer rose on your farther side, and I could not reach it till it had made its throw. I have much yet to learn of the ways of fighting—do you not understand me? Did you not know that your body was broken again?—does it tell you nothing?—look under your right arm.”

I looked, and understood. The excitement of the fight, in which my life had literally depended upon the speed and force with which I could strike, and recover, and strike again, and then the utter exhaustion that had followed, and now the dizzy weakness that possessed me—each in turn had left me unaware that a javelin had found its mark. Thrown straight upward, and probably with no great force, in the pushing crowd that gave scant space for free movement,

it had struck me in the armpit as the axe was lifted—no depth of wound, but one that bled very freely.

It was evident that I must rest for a time at least, and so I lay there, while she sat beside me and watched the empty gap before us, conquering once again the repugnance she felt at touching my body, so that the smooth furred fingers should close the wound, and the soft palm should give its strength to heal me.

“I am ashamed,” I thought, “that I should be so incapable from so slight a wound. You regard me as a creature of violence, yet I break down at every conflict, where you come through with a clearer victory. I think I am more an encumbrance than a help, even in such ways as these.”

She answered, “It was I who failed you. I should have stood nearer, and it need not have happened. I held them too lightly, and you, who took the harder part, have been hurt through my folly.”

My mind protested, but as the thought formed I was sleeping.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FORBIDDEN THING

There have been those, from the Egyptian civilisation to our own times, who have believed a dream to be in the nature of an occult visitation, from which future events can be foretold or avoided. But even they would admit that a dream must be remembered on waking if it is to be of any utility, and that is just where so few dreams are entirely satisfactory.

When I waked I recollected vividly that I had dreamed of the making of a fire a short distance outside the door, which had stood open while I made it. I had built up a pile of wood, which I had cut from the javelin shafts, and set the burning-glass in their midst, and I had sat and watched the smoke of the heated wood curl upward, till a blaze showed faintly in the sunlight.

So far I remembered clearly, and I supposed that the incident when the arrow had struck the glass might have brought it into my dreaming mind, but I knew that the dream went further, and was of a very exciting character. I had a feeling that it was very urgent that I should recall it, but I tried in vain to do so.

I was on the point of telling my trouble to my companion, but the feeling that it might only increase her contempt or pity for the internal anarchy in which I existed, deterred me. Had I done so she would have given me a convincing reason why no fire should be attempted, and our adventure must have had a widely different sequel.

As it was, I rose, and with my left hand—for my other arm was stiff at the shoulder, and likely to be of little use to me for some time to come—I picked up one of the javelins, to ascertain whether it were suitable to the purpose for which my dream had used it.

For one-third of its length it was of metal, pointed and with double knife-like edges, but the remainder was of a dark and very resinous wood, such as would take fire readily. Here, at least, my dream had made no error.

It seemed to me that, as my arm would be of little use for further axe-work if they should attempt to rush us again, a fire, which could be lighted safely on the stone floor beside the opening, would be our best protection, as it could be instantly swept down upon them, and could scarcely fail to be sufficiently disconcerting to give time for my companion's javelins to operate.

I was elated in mind that I should be able to demonstrate my practical genius in this way, recalling in some wonder that I had as yet seen no evidence of fire in all my wanderings, unless the heated water supplied it. But I would say nothing until I had proved the success of my project, and the fire was blazing.

I wondered for one foolish moment why I had dreamed that the fire was lighted on the open ground, till I noticed that the sun, which was now past its noon, was no longer visible from the windows, and that, within the hall, the glass on which I relied would be useless. Here again, the dream was wiser than my waking thought, and its reality impressed me proportionately.

I told my companion that I would demonstrate a new method of fighting, as my arm was useless, and I made a heap of javelins upon the very edge of the pit, while she regarded my work with an observant curiosity. Then, using the clasp-knife with the left hand as best I could, I shredded some of the wooden shafts into such splinters as should take fire very easily, and asking her to watch the hole for a moment, and giving an assurance that I should not go far from the door, I opened it, and stepped into the brighter light without.

The space around me was bare, as far as sight could reach it, except that a group of Killers, probably the infirm and young, showed at the far end of the enclosure, but I knew that there might come a rush of them from round the side of the building at any moment, and very watchfully therefore I arranged the splinters with the glass in

the midst of them. It was a very short time before a rising smoke changed into the uncoloured flame of a noonday fire, and, picking up two or three of the longer splinters by their outer ends, I went back into the hall. My companion did not turn as I approached, but told me, "There is something that has frightened the lizards. They have thrown themselves from the roof into the pit beneath us. If they have read your mind, your new way of fighting must be very terrible." With the thought she looked round, and her mind waked to a swift insistent protest—"No! *It is the Forbidden Thing!*"—but at the same moment I had thrust the splinters into the pile I had prepared to receive them.

For a few seconds our minds fought strenuously. "Do not let it burn. We know little of the ways of the Dwellers, but all the world knows that. It is the one thing they will not endure." "I am not bound to the Dwellers. To us it may be a weapon of safety." "But I am; and to my Leaders it would be unforgivable." "We can keep a watch for the Dwellers, and put it out if they approach." "The mere knowledge that it had been lit might destroy us all." "The responsibility is mine only." "If I am with you I share it." "It can be put out in a moment, if it be scattered on the stones." "I know nothing of that; but I know that for many centuries it has not been seen on the surface of this continent—not since it was used in the great war, before the barrier had been planted." "Do they use it under the surface for themselves? How are the tanks heated?" "I do not know; but I think that there may be other ways. Please put it out if you can do so. It threatens war to my nation." "I think you fly from a shadow, and that it would save your life, not destroy; but, as you wish it, I will."

I felt a resentment which I could hardly restrain at the folly of this objection, and the unexpected reception of my successful experiment. Apart from this, I had felt a real relief from the added security it would give us, for I knew that I was in no fit condition to face a second attack, if they should resolve to make it. But to such a plea only one answer was possible.

The swift exchange of thought was of a moment's duration only, but already the dry wood was crackling, as I kicked it apart, and

commenced to stamp upon it. And then a fresh fact met me. The hard cold stony smoothness of the floor, which looked less inflammable than asbestos, was more so than celluloid. As I tried to stamp them out the flames did not appear to bite into it, but played over its surface with a slight clear hissing noise. It was only for a second that the event was doubtful. Then I leapt back from the flames that were all around me. The next I was flying down the hall, with the flames licking their way as fast behind me.

A second sooner than myself my comrade had judged the issue, and was at the door before me, and held it open. But for that I do not think it possible that I could have escaped alive from that swift inferno.

As we turned to look back at the building we had left, a flame crept out of the right-hand window, and spread swiftly in all directions. As we gazed, my companion's mind turned to me with unruffled gravity. "For your part, I know that you meant well, and I think that you did rightly. I see also that you have powers of which the limits are beyond my sight. But I think also that the world I have known is ended."

Above that gravity, a dancing light of adventure crossed her eyes for a moment, and beneath was a fortitude which I knew would face what came without flinching.

I answered more hopefully, "The flames appear to move over the surface only. The building is of such material as will not burn at all in the world I come from. I think that it must be covered with some protecting varnish, which is inflammable. That will burn itself out very quickly, and it will be as though nothing had happened."

"No," she said, "the building burns," and even with the thought the increasing heat drove us farther away, and the flames, which burned with a hissing sound, rose higher.

"In any case," I continued, "the fault is mine, and if we meet the Dwellers, I will tell them."

"The act was yours, but the cause was ours," she answered—"and the Dwellers will soon be here, that is a very certain thing, and it is our part to decide how we shall meet them."

By now the building rose a solid oblong of bright flame in a windless air, and the heat was terrible.

On our right hand as we faced it, we saw six other buildings of a similar type, and on our left was the steaming vat, with the killing-pens built over it.

I thought, "The next building is catching."

"Yes," she answered, "they will all go."

On the farther edge of the enclosure we saw the Killers, a pink crescent standing outside the doors of the inner wall. They were quite silent, and very still.

A yellow blotch on the sand, the wiser lizards made their way to the open gate.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRIAL

As the heat increased we again moved backward, and stood there in a pause of indecision; at least my own mind hesitated, and hers had closed, as it would when she sought decision from a too-difficult complexity.

At last I asked her, "Had we not better follow the example which the lizards set so promptly? There is nothing here to do, and the Killers seem too appalled for movement. As the fires die, their consternation may give place to fury. I have lost my axe, and my knapsack, and all it held. The bow is burnt, and were it not so, my right arm is useless. I think we should make a sudden rush for the gate, for it is only speed which will save us."

She had a javelin in her hand, and she spun it in the air, and caught it lightly as it fell, before she answered.

"Should the Killers try again, there is one that will sorrow. But I think differently. It is with the Dwellers only that this game is played from now onward. Perhaps it may be well to go. It is hard to say. But you have not thought of the Bat-wings."

No, I had not thought of the Bat-wings. It was not clear why I should. It seemed to me that if we thought of ourselves we were sufficiently occupied for the moment.

But I could not avoid the thought when she raised it, for they were making a clamour which the hissing roar of the fire itself could not entirely silence.

"I don't see that they concern us," I answered, "unless you think that we should release them before we leave. They are not very attractive animals, but I don't know that I want them to be burnt to death. Still, your Leader said they ought to die."

“That is just the point,” she replied, “it was the order that they should die, and I am of no mind to go, and leave them living.”

“I suppose your Leader meant that if we drove off the Killers, we should do wrong to release them, and I have no wish to do so. But the Killers are still here to boil them, if the fire should prove more merciful. Surely that is sufficient. I did not think you so bloodthirsty. Besides, the circumstances are different from anything that your Leader could have foreseen.”

“Yes, the circumstances are certainly different. I think, where you are concerned, they always are,” she answered drily, “but it is in my mind that the Killers will not be here much longer. I think, also, that my Leaders see very far, and that when we have gone a different way we have not found it a good one. It seems to me that it is a thing that we cannot leave to the chance that the Killers will remain, or of the flames falling. We have this to think. We are in the land of the Dwellers, where we have no right to be. They had judged these Bat-wings, which were theirs, and they had given them to be used at a Feast which will very surely not be held, through our doing. They had not judged them to burn. I think we should see that their will is done, if we are able.”

I saw that she regarded the fate of the Bat-wings no more than that of a shoal of cod that she might guide to the fish-tanks—or, indeed, less, if she compared them, for the cod would be innocent of anything worse than feeding when hunger urged them—but that her feeling was as that of one who has unavoidably trampled his neighbour’s garden, and would smooth it over, as best he may, before leaving.

I said, “I see your view, and for you it may be right. But though you regard me as a lower creature than yourself, and addicted to violence, I am not willing to throw wretches into the boiling tank—which seems your purpose—for faults which I have not judged, and the guilt of which I am unable to estimate. Neither am I willing to release them, lest they might do us mischief, or desire our company. Nor do I think the fire will reach them, for the steam will quench it.”

She answered equably, "Of steam and fire I know something, though not on the earth's surface, and this is not the time for the telling. But I think that the killing-pens will burn to the water's edge as the heat increases. As to the Bat-wings, I have lived for many centuries, and I did not know that creatures of such baseness are, or had been. I care nothing for them, except that they should cease to be, and it seems best to me that it should be done quickly. I know that my Leader's mind is more far-seeing than mine, and that she thought so also. But I think that we have done so much harm that it might not be easy to increase it. I can see that we cannot go on together unless we find some reconciling way when our thoughts differ. Let us do this. We will go to them, and they shall say for themselves what they can say, to which one of us shall answer, and the other shall judge their fate. Which is to question, and which to decide, shall be their own choice; and we will both agree to take the judgment of the other, which we know will be fairly given."

I said, "Come quickly, for the fire increases," and we ran together.

We went round to the entrance, where the sound of my axe-stroke had roused the sleeping guard, the night—it seemed so long!—before, and finding none there to stay us, we climbed some stairs to a platform-grating which extended between the pens. There were five a-side. The floors of them were of loose bars only, and were somewhat higher than the grating on which we stood, so that the Killers could pull out the bars without stooping. The water steamed and bubbled beneath them, and we looked down and saw it below the grating on which we stood. Beyond the pens we saw the open tank extending on every side but that by which we entered. At the farther end was the stone pier which I had seen previously, reaching far out into the deep water.

Four of the pens on the left hand were occupied. In each was one of the judges. They crouched dismally on the bars, with wings extended. The heavy dark bald heads, with their cruel horny beaks, were drooping hopelessly forward. Their eyes followed us with an intelligence that seemed afraid to hope, but begged for pity.

On the other side, there were three like them, and then two others that could move their wings, and these two were not still, but flopped unceasingly from side to side, sometimes almost reaching to the roof, and then coming down with clumsy flappings.

My companion addressed the one with the largest beak, and reached her point very promptly. "My Leader told me of you. It appears from your own tale that you are unfit for life. Do you agree?"

He answered, "She was very treacherous, for she let us tell all before she gave any sign that she had a Dweller's mind."

"I also may have a Dweller's mind," she answered coldly, "but listen, for your lives are balanced on the choice I give you. There is one with me who is not as I. You may think him more of your kind. I do not know. I think that you should die quickly, but he is less willing.

"Neither of us has heard your defence, and we will do so fairly. Your choice is this. One of us will question you to show that you should be in the tank below, and you shall reply as best you may. The other shall judge, and all shall accept the issue. It is yours to choose the one that shall judge you. You can also choose the one that shall speak for the rest, but it must be one only, except that the two who were the accusers can speak separately, if they will."

Then the nine closed their minds from us, and disputed for a long time (as thought is counted) among themselves. Then the one to whom we had spoken told us, "We are all agreed that we shall argue this thing, and accept your verdict. The two wish to speak separately. We are not agreed on who shall speak for the seven, nor which shall judge us."

My companion answered with patience, "It is necessary that you should agree quickly, but we cannot make you do so. In two minutes from now, if you should still be in this difficulty, we will drop one of you into the tank, and perhaps you will find that six agree more easily. If not, we will make further reductions as long as this assistance is needed."

He looked at us with eyes that were naturally hard and cruel, but were now flaccid with misery, and a cunning gleam was in them, as

he tried to probe our minds to find which would be the first to be sentenced, but my companion baffled him.

It was but a few seconds later that he answered, "I am to speak for the seven. You will argue against me, and the Prehistoric will judge us. So we have decided by a majority, for fools are many."

"You may be right in that," my companion answered, "but I think that it will make no difference."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE VERDICT

My companion commenced her examination immediately. I have thought since that it might be a model in many ways for the conduct of a prosecuting counsel in our own courts.

I knew that she considered the accused unfit to live, and that they had been competently tried and condemned already. Yet, now that the decision had been placed with me, and it was her part to accuse them, her questions were direct and fair, without subtlety or dissimulation, seeking the truth without favour, and equally ready to develop a point, whether it were against or for them.

The fact that the spokesman of the accused was accustomed to legal argument, (which she certainly was not), and was of an acute and vigorous mentality, gave additional interest to the quick exchange of thoughts by which their lives were decided.

“We have been told that you are judges among your own kind?”

“Yes.”

“Is it necessary that you should be unanimous, or do you decide by a majority?”

“By a majority.”

“A female was brought before you for stealing food, and was condemned to be beaten?”

“Yes.”

“Were you unanimous in this case?”

“Yes. I should explain. She was first brought before two only. She was condemned, and appealed. The appeal was heard by five, who confirmed the verdict.”

“Did the appeal relate to her guilt only, or to her sentence also?”

“To both.”

“Was the sentence altered at the appeal?”

“It was increased. But that was because the accused attempted escape, while the appeal was pending.”

“What were the two sentences?”

“Eight strokes were to be given under the wings with a five-thonged scourge for the theft, and sixteen similar strokes for attempt to break her prison.”

“Then two of the judges are not responsible for the larger part of the sentence?”

“We are all responsible. It is our law that if a sentence be increased, or an additional one given, by an appeal court, it must be approved by the court below. The power of the appeal court being to confirm, reduce, or cancel.”

“Tell us, in your own way, of what this female was charged, on what evidence she was condemned, why you considered her action worthy of punishment, and defend the sentences.”

“She was charged with the theft of a neighbour’s food. She confessed her guilt. We consider theft deserves punishment, and that the safety of the community requires it. But we do not make the laws. It is our duty to administer them. The responsibility rests with the whole community. We considered the sentence to be fair and moderate, and such as is necessary to prevent the spread of dishonesty among the class of population to which the accused belonged. We have ourselves been condemned with greater severity, for a fault which we do not recognise or understand, by a tribunal of which we were previously ignorant, and under a code of conduct of which we had not even heard, and under which our civilisation could not be maintained for a week.”

“You have not defended the second sentence.”

“I did not suppose that any defence were needed. She had been condemned as guilty, and was in custody, pending appeal against the sentence she had received. To attempt to escape under such circumstances was a defiance of the laws under which we live, and it would be impossible to maintain order or discipline if such incidents should pass unpunished.”

“I understand your arguments, though they may not convince me. The injustice of inflicting further penalties for an attempt to escape those already threatened is too obvious for serious argument, and I notice that you do not attempt to assert it, but prefer to rely upon the argument of expediency only. It is not reasonable to suppose that the victim of such a sentence as you had imposed should be a consenting party thereto, and in this instance you knew that she was not, for she had appealed against it. You could not suppose that she would submit to the sentence, if she could avoid it successfully. By keeping her in custody while the appeal was pending, you admitted this to be so. This duty (if such it were) was performed inefficiently, or the opportunity to escape could not have arisen. For this fault of your own servants you condemned her to a penalty even heavier than that which had been inflicted originally.

“The argument of necessity could have been used with greater force in her own defence as against the first accusation than by you in this connection, and additionally so because the rights of the community, if it be justly organised, must always be subordinate to those of the individuals who compose it. For the rest, I propose to explain exactly why I think the decision of the Dwellers is right, and that your lives should not be continued. You will then be better able to reply in such a way as may be convincing to the one you have chosen to judge you. But there are a few points of fact on which I am ignorant, which may possibly help you, and these I will ask you first. You complain that you yourselves have been condemned under a law of which you had not known, and to which you had not consented. You said also that she had confessed her guilt, and you said later that she appealed both against the verdict and the sentence. This requires explanation. I think you should answer here very carefully, for I think we are confronted with that which threatens the foundation of the strongest of the defences which you have set up.”

For the first time there was a pause of some seconds before his mind took up the challenge. I think he was quick to recognise her meaning, and the danger of which she warned him. I think he also

appreciated for the first time the keenness of the intellect which confronted him.

“The explanation is simple. We were dealing with a female of exceptional obstinacy. She was charged with theft. She admitted the theft. That is a plea of guilty according to the custom of our courts. She appealed on the ground that the theft was justified. There is no such thing as a justified theft in the code of any civilised state. Her appeal had no possibility of succeeding. She was in the position of having pleaded guilty, yet of declining to admit that she had done so.”

“Then, when you said that she admitted her guilt, you meant only that she admitted the accuracy of the statements made by those who complained against her. You also admit the facts on which your own condemnation is founded. To that extent you have pleaded guilty also. How can you assert the authority of your own tribunal over this female, and deny that of the Dwellers who condemned you?”

“Very easily. She was a female of our nation, and was under the authority of our laws.”

“Do you contend that she was under the authority of your laws simply because she was a female of your species, or had she herself consented to them?”

“It is necessary in any civilised state to assume the assent, or, in any case, the liability, of individuals to the laws of those among whom they live, and to impose penalties should they fail to obey them.”

“Let us be clear upon our facts before we argue upon them. She had not consented?”

“To obtain individual consent to every law is obviously impossible.”

“She had not consented?”

“Not in that way; but she knew that she must obey the laws of the country in which she lived.”

“That cannot be so, because in fact she refused to do so.”

“She knew that she must submit to the laws of her people, or render herself liable to the penalties provided.”

“But such knowledge—if she had it—did not imply consent?”

“Not necessarily, but, as I have said, the individual must be subordinate to the state, or no civilised community could continue.”

“It is not self-evident that every civilised community should continue. But your contention is clearly not that she consented, but that such consent is not necessary. By whom were you appointed a judge, and under what compulsion, if any?”

“I belong to the class from which judges are chosen, after certain tests have been passed.”

“Would there have been any penalty, had you declined to act in that capacity?”

“No; but I had no reason to do so. It is regarded as a position of honour among us.”

“Do you regard all the laws of your country as just and good?”

“They are not perfect, but they are well adapted for the needs of those for whom they are made, and they are being improved continually.”

“They cannot be very good, or continual improvement would be impossible. What course do you, or your fellow-judges, take when confronted with a bad law?”

“It is not our duty to consider whether a law be good or bad, but to administer it. The responsibility of the law is not on us, but on the whole nation. Ours is to administer it accurately and impartially.”

“The responsibility for a law cannot be upon a whole nation, unless it be agreed unanimously. It is upon those who make or support it. This responsibility must rest in the largest degree upon those who directly enforce it.”

The rapid interchange paused for a moment, and thinking that my companion was about to formulate her accusation, I interposed a suggestion. The swift duel of thought which I have translated into written words as best I can, had taken a few minutes only, but the heat already seemed greater than when we entered the building. Through the open bars of the pens we could see the towering pinnacle of fire, where the seven buildings were now burning

together. A wind moved occasionally in our direction, and the high flames swayed toward us.

I said, "If we are not speedy, we shall all burn together. I understand that you wish to set out their guilt as it appears to you, now that you have heard their explanations, to which the horny-beaked orator will make reply, and then I am to judge the issue. Will it not save time if we interrogate the other two before these speeches are made?"

She agreed at once, but added, "I think you should question them. I am conscious that their world is less strange to you than to myself, and you might discover circumstances in their favour which I should fail to do."

I assented, and we walked down to where the two whose complaint had originated the trouble were flapping with impatience to pour out their wrongs.

I think it was well that I had taken on the interrogation. Here was no keen argument, cool when at its deadliest, but a confused clamour from two vulgarities that exposed themselves without shame, or appreciation of their effect upon the minds that heard them.

I cannot translate the mental invectives, vituperations, recriminations, and contradictions they poured upon us, but the facts came out with unmistakable clearness.

Their tale was this. Through the vague impression of a complex and highly-organised civilisation, there stood out clearly a group of dwellings, inhabited by members of a trading class, of one of which these two were occupants, and (apparently) owners.

As was customary, they did not use the ground floor, on account of a plague of white slugs which rose from the ground at certain seasons and crawled into the houses. The higher floors were gained through circular openings in the ceilings, to which they flew from perches in the rooms below. This left much of their domestic economy unexplained, but I did not pursue a subject that was only indirectly material to the inquiry. I gained an impression that the higher floors were in some way immune from these slugs, which were a serious danger or annoyance, and of which no method had been discovered

by which to keep the ground floor entirely free. For this reason it was usual to allow an industrial worker of the poorer kind to occupy it in return for certain menial services. These sub-tenants were not allowed to fly into the upper stories under any circumstances.

Until a few weeks earlier, the present couple had lived prosperously. Trade was good, and they had only been detected in cheating once in every moon as the law permitted. They had been fortunate enough to breed a daughter with a bright yellow blotch on either shoulder, which they had been able to sell for a large sum.

The ground floor had been occupied by a female who had been employed in some industrial process by which the wings were liable to become damaged, and had lost the use of hers, so that the ring on which she perched at night had to be hanged within a few feet of the ground. A beneficent law provided that those who suffered in this way could take certain pickings from the main roads, by the sale of which life could be maintained. She had, however, complained of a growing blindness, which prevented her from snatching her due share of this bounty, and when the time of the spring meal approached had caused annoyance by waylaying her employers as they went in and out of the house, and petitioning that they would provide food for her. They declined a request so unreasonable, and had advised her kindly of the methods of suicide best adapted to her condition, and when they saw that their advice was not taken, they even went the length of recommending her to a medical practitioner who would destroy her without a fee, in return for an opportunity of investigating the diseases from which she suffered. Unfortunately, they did not kill her themselves, which they could have done for a slight penalty, for their laws are, in this instance, more just than ours, the penalty of murder being in proportion to the expectation of the victim's life, and its estimated value to him. Then they might have committed the murder jointly, and halved the penalty between them, for in this also their law is more equitable than ours, and if two or three people unite to commit a crime they can each be punished for one-half or one-third of the crime, or for their fair proportion only.

But the time passed without decisive action being taken, till the week of the summer meal approached, and the wretch, being blinder than before, and weak from six months' fasting, had failed to gain the

right to a meal for herself, and had again resorted to begging them to supply her need.

On the eve of the feast they had collected their food in an upper room, and had gone out to barter a ring-eared monkey, very quaintly tattooed, for the wing-powder which they would need after the second day's eating, and on coming back they had found her sitting on the edge of the aperture above the room she occupied, afraid to flutter down, owing to the condition of her wings. They found a savoury mess of pomegranates and pig's liver, (such as is eaten on the first day before sustaining food is taken), had been entirely consumed, and two of the food-balls also. She would give no explanation of how she climbed into the room, and it was supposed that she must have had an accomplice, who should have helped her down also, but who had become alarmed, and fled. She admitted that she had eaten the food, but claimed that she was obliged to do so, and that there was an abundance remaining for their own necessities.

The two judges before whom she was taken had treated her with great consideration. They had sentenced her to eight strokes, which she would almost certainly have survived, in view of the food that she had swallowed, and they had ordered that the sentence should not be executed for three days, during which she should be placed in a cell designed for such cases, where she could release herself from her troubles without further difficulty.

The cell had a deep well, in which she could have drowned herself very easily had she had sufficient sense to do so. A kindly regulation had provided that the sides of the well, above the water, should be deep and smooth, as there had been distressing instances of prisoners who had changed their minds when half-drowned and had clambered out, so that all their misery was repeated. There were also weights which she could have tied to her feet, had she wished to do so.

Instead, however, of following these suggestions, she had contumaciously appealed against the sentence she had received, which had delayed its execution, and entailed a two-days' journey

into the Upper City for her accusers. The food she had taken appeared to have renewed her youth, or rather her energy, (for she was not old), so that she had attempted to escape her confinement, and had almost succeeded; and when rebuked by the Superior Judges for not availing herself of the provision for her comfort which the cell provided, she had actually uncrossed her legs, and shaken the damaged wings derisively, asking if she were likely to commit suicide with three months' food in her body.

I endeavoured to put such questions as might have elicited any extenuating circumstance which had bearing on the main incident, such as a past kindness, or a past ingratitude, but I obtained nothing that was helpful.

Their replies were inconsequent, and their minds worked round continually to self-reproaches that they had not killed her themselves, and to a choking indignation at the thought that it was the stolen food in her body which had supplied her with strength to contest the issue.

We went back to where the Chief Justice crouched unmoving, but with eyes that had watched the scene with sombre keenness.

My companion commenced immediately—"I have thought of all that you said, and of much that your thoughts implied, though it was not stated. The conditions of life which you showed me are beneath anything I had imagined previously, though I have heard strange and dark things from the friend beside me. It may be that your own state is no worse than that to which he is native, but that it appears different to him because he is of a different kind. For when I heard how that half-blinded creature, whom you had condemned to wretchedness, and would have persuaded to destruction, shook derisive wings at your inability to subdue her, it came to me that even in these dark and dreadful worlds there may be fair ways to tread for such spirits as are sufficient in themselves to find them. It seemed to me for a moment that our spirits are the only reality, and all the rest illusion. Yet, if that be so, round spirits of what kind can so dark a dream have gathered as that which has brought you here? It is a thought which I cannot grasp in a moment, but to which I may

give much time when occasion allows it. Meanwhile, my inclination is changed. I still think that you should die, and my Leader, who is wiser than I, was of the same mind, as were the Dwellers who condemned you. But I am less sure than I was, and I will say nothing more to urge it. You have chosen another judge, and I am content for him to decide it.”

When she ceased he looked at her in silence for a few seconds. I think he was regretting again the choice of judge which the majority had forced upon him. Then he accepted the position, and seeing that I was waiting to consider the defence which he would set up, he opened his mind toward me.

“You are of a world different from ours,” he began, “but sufficiently like it to understand how necessary are the laws which regulate the possession of property, and that any law without penalty would be no deterrent. You know also that the function of a judge is different from that of a legislator, and that it would be grotesque to punish a judge for a defect in the law which he dispenses. We have fallen into strange hands, of whom we knew nothing previously, and it is by the mercy of circumstance that we are able to lay our case before you. I can do this confidently because I know that you will understand our position, and I am assured that you are not in yourself either unjust or merciless. I will not weary you with many thoughts, for I know that you are in haste, and we would ourselves very gladly be free from the increasing heat and danger. Our defence is threefold, and I submit that each point is in itself sufficient: (1) We think that the sentence was fair; (2) if it were harsh, which we deny, it was in accordance with the laws of our country, which we were sworn to administer; (3) if these two pleas should fail,—which is beyond my imagination,—it would still remain that for any possible fault we have been tortured and punished already beyond our deserving. Consider that it is in the name of mercy that this fate has been threatened! We are accused of brutality, but we have never sentenced any of our people to be boiled alive, even for the foulest crimes. It may be that the Dwellers did not intend that such a horror should happen. I think it more likely that they proposed to alarm us

only, and foresaw your coming, and that you would release us, so that we can go back to our duties, knowing their wishes, and introducing their methods into our country, with consequences which they will no doubt themselves direct to a satisfactory issue.”

I replied, “I will not torture your minds with a long judgment, though the issues which you have raised invite it. I will tell you at once that the first two pleas fail. The sentence was not fair, and on hearing the evidence you should rather have addressed your minds to the inequity of the social conditions which it revealed, and to exhort the prosecutors to observe a higher standard of social morality in future. Having heard them, however, I think your arguments would have been wasted. They, at least, are unfit to exist, and as I do not wish to prolong their agony, after they have heard this decision, I propose to deal with them before I complete my judgment.”

I then went with my companion to the two pens which contained them, and drew out the bars on which they rested. As we thought the male culprit was slightly the less repulsive of the two, we soused him first, that his trouble should be the sooner over.

As we commenced to draw the bars, their cries became deafening in volume, and the female, in a frenzy of fear and vituperation, commenced spitting in our direction.

As the last bar withdrew, the male leapt to the uprights at the side, but found that they were made of a material too smooth for his grasp to hold, and he fell backward into the water which bubbled beneath him.

Having disposed of the female in the same way, I resumed my verdict. “The second point, as I have said, is of no more avail than the first, because it appears to me to be a very evil thing that legislators or judges should attempt to exalt the laws they dispense as being higher than the essential justice which they are intended to demonstrate. It should be the greatest difficulty in putting an unjust law into operation that no judges of good character should be found who would consent to enforce it. A judge who solemnly administers a law which he knows in his heart to be unjust is baser than one who

takes bribes from a litigant. In the one case he is bribed by an individual to do injustice at some risk to his own position; in the other he is bribed by the State to do injustice, with an assurance that it can be perpetrated with impunity.

“But your third point is of a different quality. To consider it fully would take more time than is now available, and we might all be involved in a common fate the while I should do so. It appears to me that there is force in your contention that the fate to which you have been condemned has an even greater severity than the harshness of your own laws, for which they have condemned you. I am not sure that this is so, but it is at least a plausible and confusing argument. I have endeavoured to consider it from their standpoint, and I think that their reply would be that there is no point in the comparison, because they have acted from different motives, and with different intentions. Your laws are designed to produce certain courses of conduct in your individual citizens, to repress tendencies which might be subversive of the State as it is organised, and as you were content to continue it; you endeavoured (we may hope) to use no more harshness than you considered that these objects required. They have no such objects in view. They do not make you examples to others, nor design to coerce you into observing any rules of future conduct. They regard you as having a mentality so base that it should be destroyed entirely. But you say that they may not have intended that this fate should fall upon you. I think that this is less than possible, for, having heard your arguments, I accept their decision very heartily.”

Saying this I commenced to withdraw the bars, and my companion helped me in silence.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FATE OF THE KILLERS

The horny beak must have been softening in the boiling tank before my mind could free itself from the fierce despairing cry, "The fools, the fools!" with which the chief of the culprits had splashed down to his allotted end. It confirmed my opinion that there would have been a different choice of judge if his advice had been taken.

But we had no time for thought, where action was urgent. With a sense of good work done, we passed out from a building on which the fire was already falling. The wind had risen, and as the buildings burned, not down but inwards—I mean that the outside of the walls was burnt off evenly to a core of somewhat different quality—burning flakes, almost as light as air, began to float on the wind, and sometimes would have driven against us, so that we avoided them with difficulty.

It was to withdraw from these that we moved away from the boiling tank, which my companion left with reluctance, so much did the sight of any water allure her, and but for the fact that it was in the condition of a thin soup from the many bodies which had been boiled within it, and indescribably repulsive, I doubt whether the heat would have been sufficient to deter her from the swim she needed. For myself, my thirst was such that only this new danger was sufficient to force me from it. But my cup was gone, with all my other possessions, excepting only what my pockets held. So I had no means of cooling the water, if I could have persuaded myself to drink it; and of boiling water I had just had a sufficient experience. For the Chief Justice, as he plunged, had contrived a kick which sent a swirl of water over the grating on which I stood as I pulled at the last bar, and though I jumped very quickly I had not escaped entirely, and to a

stiff right arm I now added the infirmity of a left foot that limped and blistered.

I scarcely grudged him his revenge,—he was a good fighter, and perhaps fate had used him hardly,—but I felt an increased doubt of how we could hope to escape from the surrounding Killers that grouped beneath the crescent wall that enclosed us.

My companion was not troubled in that direction. “There is water near,” she told me jubilantly, and the next moment we were standing beside a large pool that sparkled clear and cool in the sunlight. A stream came in at one end from the cliff-side, and was drained away through a sluice at the other, so that it was fresh continually. Weeds grew in a clear depth, but did not reach the surface.

She dropped the javelin, and dived.

I had seen seals swim, and many graceful forms to which the water is native, but I had seen nothing like I saw then.

The legs did not move separately, but the appendages of which I have told held them together as one limb. The double tail, which was carried on land in such a way that it was barely visible, now came out, and with the tiny monkey hands at each extremity, may have done much, both in steering and propulsion. But the whole body seemed to move without effort. A curve, a twist and it shot the pool’s length and back, without evidence of any further directing motion.

I have always loved the water and (having drunk all I would) I was already taking off my damaged rags to join her, when I noticed that she was motionless above the weeds and looking intently at or through them. I marvelled how she could maintain her position, and paused a moment to watch her. The next, she had looked up, and must have recognised what I was doing, for her thought was urgent against it. I was not instantly willing to give up my intention, and while she still pressed me to desist, there came a movement under the weeds that caused the whole surface to tremble. The next second she had shot upward, and leapt out beside me.

“Water-snakes,” she answered. “They do not know us here, as do those of the ocean. Under the weeds, it is deep beyond seeing. I do not think I could have saved you, if you had come in. But I have

taught those snakes that such as I am are not for a meal for their larder.”

I did not reply, for I had looked up, and seen that the living-wall was ablaze for all its length from cliff to cliff.

She saw it also, but more coolly. “Did you not foresee that it must be? I only thought that the Dwellers would be here sooner. It is a place of hiding that we need; but the water drew me.”

“I do not see where we can hide on this plateau.”

“I think there is only one place, and that I have seen it already.”

She led me toward the southern corner, where the cliff was met by the blazing wall. The Killers had left it at this point, for they were all thronging wildly to the gateway, and pouring out through the narrow neck between the burning of the open gates.

When we were about fifty yards from the wall, we turned to the cliff-side, and looking up saw a fault in the rock, it could scarcely be called a cave, but there was a shallow horizontal gap, about two feet high at one end, and about ten feet wide, narrowing to a point at the farther side, and about eight feet from the ground. I don't think I could easily have climbed even that height in the condition in which I was, but she led the way, and wriggled easily, feet first, into the gap, and helped me till I was lying there beside her.

In the shadow, with the sun already descending toward the hills behind us, they would be good eyes indeed which would have detected us from any distance, while we had a wide view of the whole plateau, of the cliff on the left hand where it curved slightly forward, and of the whole stretch of the lower country beneath us.

“It is to our left,” she told me, as we watched and waited, “that our people will descend the cliff if they continue in that purpose. It is only there that it is possible to climb it.”

It looked impossible to me, even there, but I did not question it.

“The Dwellers come,” she said, “we are none too soon. If you make your mind blank and observe only, I do not think they will detect us. Everything may depend on that. Avoid thought. Do not communicate with my kind either, if they should appear.”

Then she closed her mind, and I was alone beside her.

When the Killers ran out from the blazing gateway, they had scattered aimlessly about the plateau, as ants do when their nest is broken, and for some time they remained in restless tumult, moving continually without direction or purpose, but this was changed in a moment to the frantic desperate rushes of rats when the dogs are among them, and they can find no outlet.

The Dwellers came up the hillside in no appearance of haste, and what they thought or knew of the events we had occasioned they gave no sign to indicate.

There were three of them side by side, taking cliffs in their stride round which our path had wound, and approaching from the only point at which the sides were not too precipitous and deep, even for their attempting.

Arriving on the level ground they consulted for a moment, and then one of them came forward alone. The wall was still blazing in places, or I think he would have stepped over it without change of pace, but, as it was, he leapt easily, and then proceeded systematically to investigate the smouldering ruins of the settlement. The killing-pens, which had caught fire last, were still blazing, and he approached them with caution, but I think that ivory-yellow skin, on which I had seen the teeth of the Frog-mouths bite in vain, must have been insensitive to fire also, so closely was he standing, as he looked down to observe the victims that boiled beneath it.

He stood there for a long while, as though he found difficulty—as well he might—in understanding all that had happened. I tried to avoid thought, as I had been directed, but the idea crossed me that had the Bat-wings lived, they would not have failed to disclose the whole tale of the imprisoned Leader, and of my companion's presence, if they had thought that they could have gained anything by so doing. Had it been in that Leader's mind when she had directed us to destroy them? I thought it likely; but at least the minds of my companion and myself had been free from any such consideration, and the deed itself had been a good one.

With a heavy thoughtfulness he went back to his companions.

Meanwhile, they had not been idle.

It is probable that it had not been the mere coming of the Dwellers, so much as the sight of the things they carried, which had produced so sudden a panic among the Killers who saw them. For they had now shaken out a net, with which they were sweeping the ground from end to end till the whole of the Killers were a kicking, whistling confusion within its ample meshes. One of them then sat on the ground, and taking the basket from his back, he abstracted from it a lidded vessel or cup, which he set open before him.

One by one he pulled the frantic victims loose from the net that held them, and after a glance of inspection, squeezed them in his hand over the cup, so that their blood drained into it.

When he had squeezed sufficiently, he threw the empty carcase with a careless aim, high into the air, to fall far off in the boiling tank, from which its own meals had been so often taken.

This went on for about an hour, during which he dealt with some hundreds in this way, and also selected about two dozen which he inspected more carefully, and then passed to his companion, who also looked over them, and either handed them back to take their turn at the squeezing, or dropped them into his basket.

I supposed that they had decided to destroy this colony, and to found a new one with the few which they had saved for that purpose, but I reflected that this could not have been their intention when they handed over the Bat-wings for destruction, at a feast which would never be held, and if they had now come prepared to take that course, it implied a foresight or knowledge of what was passing, which was sufficiently disconcerting.

I could not resolve that problem, but it soon became evident that the occasion was of some further importance, for one by one they were joined by others, until I had counted fourteen of these giants that were assembled on the plateau.

More than once their words came over to us as the wind helped them, but to me they bore no meaning. Whether they conversed among themselves by other means, as they were able to do with the Amphibians, I could not tell, but they spoke little outwardly, and

mainly monosyllables. They seemed to be waiting for an event impending.

Thus they waited, till the twilight was nearing. As I saw them on the plateau, their huge bulks dwarfed by the proportions of the scenery around them, I thought of them again as Titans of an earlier world, and of a size the most natural to the background against which they moved.

I was conscious not only of my own insignificance, but of a vulgarity also, which was not personal to myself, but belonging to the race from which I came.

I clothed them in imagination with the garments to which I was accustomed, and their significance and their dignity at once departed.

But for what were they delaying? As the time passed I was increasingly convinced that they were aware of the Amphibians, and were awaiting their arrival; and as this conviction grew, there came with it an increasing fear that I was watching the prelude of a tragedy, for which the great sweep of the wooded valleys beneath us, and the amphitheatre of mighty hills, were a setting of appropriate grandeur.

The thought impressed me with an awe which left no space for consideration of my own relation to the shadow which I believed to be falling, nor do I think the fear I had was influenced by the expectation of any personal consequence.

But when this depression was at its worst, and the strain of uncertainty was becoming unendurable, I was suddenly aware of the influence of a bolder and more confident spirit, and into my mind there came a music, such as I had felt when I first watched the Amphibians approach across the seaward bridge:

*From the force that withstands shall we falter or flee,
Who have bent in our hands the untamable sea?
From the cloud that is close ...*

Surely the Amphibians were approaching over the cliffs behind us.

*From the nights that have been, from the midnights to be,
There shall dawns intervene, there shall ...*

My companion's mind spoke once only, but very urgently. "It may be the end of all, if you cannot isolate yourself from that which is near us."

I closed my thoughts as best I could from everything but a passive photography of that which was developing before me.

The Dwellers had risen, and were standing in a group of no regular order, upon the side of the plateau from which descent was possible. They were looking silently toward the cliffs above us.

Next, on my left hand, I saw the Amphibians descending. The six Leaders came first. They climbed down as easily as a fly walks on a wall. I think the long centre toe gripped the rock more firmly and easily than a human foot could do, and the appendages of the legs helped also, the little hands grasping and steadying, but there was an ease of balance, and a certainty in every movement for which these differences were less than explanation. After them came the whole regiment of the Amphibians. They formed up below, with the six Leaders in the front. I think their song was still continued, but I would not hear it. They took no notice of the smoking ruins, or of the steaming tank, which was now covered with the floating husks of the bodies which had designed it.

Straight forward went the Amphibians to the spot where the Dwellers blocked their passage. They did not hesitate, nor did the Dwellers give way before them.

What would have happened I can only guess, had there not come an unexpected incident.

From I know not where, there appeared the group of yellow lizards that had fled from the burning arsenal.

A small bright yellow patch they showed on the sandy soil, and the Amphibians stopped, and the Dwellers grouped to look down upon them.

I have thought since that they must have timed their appearance, intending to give such information to the Dwellers as would win

favour to themselves, and bring destruction on others.

Whether they knew of our hiding-place I could not tell, nor whether they were aware of the confinement of the Leader who had escaped—but of what use is conjecture?—all I know is what I saw from my hiding-place.

There were long seconds of silence, which seemed minutes as I watched, and then one of the Dwellers stepped forward and put his foot firmly down upon the spot of bright yellow malignity. When he lifted it the colour was gone, and there was nothing left that showed at that distance.

He stepped back, and the protagonists remained facing one another in a continued silence.

Then, at last, the Dwellers stepped wide of the path on either hand, and the Amphibians moved quietly forward between them, filing through till the last had passed. I noticed that three of the Leaders had remained aside, and supposed that they might be retained as hostages or culprits, by surrendering whom the rest had won to safety, but as the last file passed I saw them fall in behind it, and the Dwellers made no motion till they had disappeared into the narrow trench which we had traversed on the night before.

Then they also turned, and departed.

The dusk was already falling over the valley, as my companion's mind laughed its relief, and the tension ended.

"I think," she said, "that this is the beginning of the next adventure."

BOOK II

THE WORLD BELOW

CHAPTER I

COUNSEL

The night had fallen to blackness while we still lay in the rock-cleft.

The ashes of the central buildings glowed with a pale blue light, and an occasional flame would rise up and lick across them like a ghostly tongue.

The long curve of the living-wall had fallen in from end to end, but the ashes were burning still, with a paler flame, so that it showed like a white bow in the darkness.

There were no stars; the night had clouded while we slept,—for I lay long in a sleep of utter weariness and exhaustion, both of mind and body; and so, I think, in her own way, did my companion.

But I waked at length, with a dim sense of peril ended, and the short pause of security which is so precious to those who walk in dangerous ways, but conscious also of thirst and hunger, and of the shadow of great events, of which the significance was beyond my knowing.

I lay for some time in silence, pondering the strange things I had seen; reviewing—not without some mental discords—my judgment of the Bat-wings, and the fate to which it had cast them, and wondering vainly what new marvels or terrors might be before us, when we should penetrate the subterranean world of which we were about equally ignorant.

As I lay I became aware that the night was chilly, though, being cloudy, it was less so than we had experienced previously. But I was suffering from a lowered vitality, and though my wounds were trivial I was conscious of the throbbing of my scalded foot, and that my right shoulder was both stiff and painful.

I then fell into a mood of depression, in which I saw very vividly the folly of the adventure which we had undertaken. How could we hope to penetrate undetected into the domain of the Dwellers? There was no sanity in the supposition. If I wished to live till the year of my exile were over, should I not endeavour to find some crevice in the surface-world, of which I already knew something, where I might hope that my insignificance would save me?

If those whom I had come to seek survived at all, was I not more likely to discover them under such conditions, than among those whom I had seen squeezing the juice from the living bodies of the Killers, as casually as a cook stones raisins?

While I thought thus, my companion's mind gave no sign, nor had I heard any movement from her. With a sudden start of terror I imagined that she were no longer beside me. It was in that panic fear that I realised how greatly I had come to depend upon her: alike upon her body for its vigour, and upon her mind for its counsel. And beyond this I knew that there was a spiritual quality in our intimacy, through which I was able to face the shadows of the unknown with something of her own serenity.

It was a simple action to reach out to feel where she lay beside me, and yet my hand delayed it.

Partly I may have been deterred by the atmosphere of aloof virginity which always made me diffident of any physical contact, partly it was that I dreaded to test my fear, as a man with a coward's mind may leave a letter unopened, knowing that it may hold the news of his ruin.

At last, I felt across the narrow space which had divided us as we lay and watched the concluding drama of our adventure, and with a sense of measureless relief my hand touched lightly for a moment on the smoothness of the soft warm fur.

Her mind opened instantly, realised the mood I showed her, and crossed it with the dancing gaiety with which she ever faced the thought of peril. Then,—with the subtle distinction which she always drew between myself and the body in which I lived,—she asked me,

“Is it more trouble than usual? Has it no gratitude for the rest you have given it?”

I answered, “It is rested by sleep, but has gone without food long beyond its accustomed time. It can do this while it shares your vitality, but afterwards the need re-asserts itself with increased urgency. It is cold also, and, as you know, it has suffered recent damage, which it needs rest to repair.”

She replied, “I can give you strength, if you need it, and if you think it wise; but consider.

“We have resolved on an adventure of which we do not know the length or the end. Of myself, I should continue in the ordinary course without food for about four months, after which I should require a time of rest and nourishment, before I should be fit for another year. If necessary, I could continue living, and in some measure of activity, for a much longer period. But I have been giving you of my own energy so freely that, if we continue in this way, I shall be exhausted in a much shorter time. Then I must return to my own place and people, as the food on which you rely—and the Dwellers also—is of no use to me. I ask this,—is it better that we should continue to share the strength I have, or should we find food for your body, and so regulate our movements in future that we can make it self-supporting?”

I answered, though my body ached for the vitality on which it had learnt to rely, “I think that it will be wiser for us to conserve the strength you have, which we may need in days to come, when there may be no means of renewal. But it will make important differences, for which there must be allowance in the plans we form. I am used to sleeping at short intervals, because my accustomed day is only about a quarter the length of that which you now have; and even though I obtain regular and suitable food, I shall still be incapable of the rapid and prolonged exertions which I have endured with the stimulus of your hand to help me.

“It appears to me that we must commence our enterprise by penetrating one of the tunnels that open on to the opal pavement. It is true that there must be other means of access inland, by which the

Dwellers emerge in the daytime, but there are two reasons against attempting to use them. One is that we do not know their location, and though they may be nearer, it is equally possible that they may be more distant. The other is more serious. We are told that the Dwellers come up through the inland passages, and descend by those which are on the lower level. By choosing the latter, and following behind them when the night has fallen, we may reasonably hope that we shall be able to enter their abodes without encountering any who are coming in the opposite direction. In addition to these reasons, it occurs to me that the country inland is of an extremely forbidding and mountainous formation, and though the Dwellers are able to traverse it, it might be absolutely impossible for us to do so.”

My companion answered with her usual equanimity, “It is a choice which must be made, and your decision contents me. But I notice a quality in your reasoning which must, I suppose, introduce the adventure of your life to many avoidable difficulties. I think the arguments which you gave me were good, but they did not cover all the considerations which might influence such a decision, and of which I feel sure you could have thought, had you wished to do so.

“It appears to me that you first elect your own preference, and then call upon your mind to furnish arguments to support it. It is not bound to do this, and it knows that you rely upon it to suggest any serious danger or difficulty which might impel you to alter your decision, but, no less, it understands your wish, and that if there be any sufficient arguments to justify your choice it is expected to find them. Like your body, it is separate from yourself, and may even work without your own awareness, but it is of a readier loyalty.

“I think, had you for any reason desired to adventure into the mountains, that your mind would have been quick to suggest that you could travel in greater security on the surface if you should avoid the paths which you have traversed already, where the Dwellers would be most likely to seek you. It would have used the argument of the unknown distance in an exactly contrary way, and it would not have failed to remind you that the tunnel which you have already explored contained no possible hiding-place, so that an alternative

passage could not be worse, and might be better. It would have recalled that the whole length of the opal pavement is without any possible cover: that the bridge would be difficult for you to traverse in the darkness, while the Frog-mouths would be dangerous in the day: and that you have already been discovered once in the tunnel, so that it is at least possible that a watch has been set to take you there, should you again invade it.

“I could give you many more arguments of the same kind, but I am not resisting your plan. I am only interested in a method of decision which has, at least, the merit that it can operate more speedily than mine is easily able to do.”

I had not thought her to be slow of decision when the need was urgent, but I felt that she had more to tell me, and I kept my mind open and receptive.

“You slept very long,” her thought continued, “and I considered these things, after my own method. I first collected in my mind all that I have known of the Dwellers from the beginning, and of the things you have told me. I added that which I know of your own character and capacities. From these facts I endeavoured to deduce a method by which we could succeed in our objects, if we be not already too late. I made little progress, for the facts are few and insufficient. But I made progress to this extent, that I realised that we are supposing some things which we do not know.

“In particular, you have shown me your mind, and I have seen that you visualise an end to these tunnels which opens into a hall, a chamber, or a large passage, or at least some public space, populated by the Dwellers, and where concealment for ourselves would be difficult, if not impossible. Your imagination may be correct, and it is a possibility for which we must be prepared. But in your mind it is less a possibility than an expectation, for which there is no sufficient ground whatever. Yet you had imagined it so confidently that I had difficulty in separating it from the facts you had shown me.

“I thought of this very long, and I see that your life is so brief, and so confusingly occupied, that you are obliged to proceed through a labyrinth of assumptions by which you hope to reach the thing you

wish more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. But in this case, I cannot see that the assumption has any basis of probability.

“I know, from what you have shown me already, that you come of a race which has lived only on the earth’s surface, and any cave or tunnel by which you enter it implies the approach to a confined and narrow space, so that when you attempt to visualise the condition of a race which lives under the surface, your imagination is of a cave, and not of a country.

“Now if the interior of the earth be completely solid, or nearly so, this imagination may be quite accurate. But is it? Neither of us knows. We do know from your own experience that the tunnels go down for many miles, though we do not know their ultimate depth. That suggests that there must be some reason for so deep a penetration. To make such tunnels must have been a great labour. To descend and ascend them continually must be an unceasing toil. There must be some compensating advantage in the depth which is reached. The hollowness of the interior would supply it. But there might be quite different reasons. We know that there are areas of great heat that lie closely under the surface. There are parts of the ocean floor where this heat causes eruptions. Such areas may be of great extent. They may render it difficult or impossible to live under the surface till a greater depth is reached. True, the tunnels must penetrate this region, on this supposition, and it must therefore have been found possible to render them heat-proof.

“We have one other fact. The Dwellers reach the surface at very distant points. But this has no certain significance.”

I answered, “I see the point you make, and I agree that I was inclined to a too-hasty assumption. Also, it enters my mind that if the earth be indeed hollow at a depth of a few hundred miles, and an inner surface be land only, it must be of far greater extent, not merely than this continent, but than the whole of the solid land of the earth’s surface as I knew it, and as it appears to be to-day. It is also possible to imagine tiers of hollowed space in which such areas might be many times repeated, but the artificial creation of such tiers would require an amount of labour which appears stupendous and the

dumping on the earth's surface of excavated material to an incredible volume."

She responded, "All that you think appears reasonable, and part is new to my mind. It would help us greatly if we knew whether the Dwellers are a numerous race, but of this I am able to tell you little.

"Before the time of the Great War, we believe that they dwelt on the surface only, or, at least, until a comparatively short period before it. Up to that time, for reasons into which I must not now enter, being irrelevant, we knew little of them, or they of us. That was about eleven thousand years ago.

"We know that they are bi-sexual, like the race from which you come. We suspect that their bodies age and decay, and are replaced by others, but of this we have no certain knowledge.

"In all the time I mention I cannot recall having seen more than two hundred of their men and three of their women. We do not suppose that they exist in these proportions. Our observation of the sea-creatures is that they cannot dwell in peace together unless their females are at least equally numerous, but we have seen those only who first negotiated the treaty with our Leaders, of which you have been told, and such as have been in attendance at the fish-tanks. Of these I mention, I cannot recall that more than thirty have been seen at any one period. As the centuries have passed, there has been a gradual change. But this might only mean that they have exchanged to other duties. I have never seen one that showed signs of age, nor that was less than full-grown. The eight which we saw last night I had not seen previously."

I answered, "But, even in the absence of more direct evidence, the works which we have seen suggest that they are a numerous race.

"The protective belt which surrounds the continent cannot be less than five thousand miles in length, and it was twelve miles in breadth at the point at which we crossed it. Even for giants such as they, it would be an impossible task for a small community. Then we see that they patrol the coast, which must be the work of many."

She replied, "That is also probable, though not certain. We do not know that they patrol the whole coast. This region may be their

headquarters, as I believe it to be. The work you mention is great, but so are their skill and knowledge. Their methods may be beyond our imagination. Or they may have worked through the agency of subject creatures.

“It seems that we have little certainty. Our safety must be in assuming nothing, so that we may understand the true significance of the facts that meet us.

“But our first purpose must be to gain the entrance of the tunnel by which we propose to descend. To do this we may retrace the path we came. But is this necessary?

“Our Leaders wished to recover the body which we are now seeking, and for that reason they had to go as far north as the second tunnel.

“They may have had other reasons, but, if so, I do not know them. If we choose to explore the one by which you descended, the distance must be much shorter across the wide valley which lies beneath us, and the way does not appear impracticable. The crossing of the further hills, and the descent of the cliffs, may be difficult, and in this strange world there may be dangers in a new way of which we can have no foresight. It is certainly shorter. It will avoid the long transit of the opal path which is perilous if they be watching to take us. But I do not pretend that I think it the safer way. It is the doubt that calls me.”

I answered, “I do not think it the safer way either. I have lost the axe on which you have seen that I relied for any defence I could make against the creatures which threatened me. I have also lost my knapsack, and with it all the necessities I carried, except such small things as my pockets held. I have a damaged arm, and a lame foot. I think that I shall be unable to move more than slowly, however urgent the call. But if you are not afraid to venture with one so useless beside you, it is the doubt of the unknown way that calls me also.”

She answered generously, “You are too good for the body in which you live. I have the javelin still, and, as I said before, we will pass in peace, or there will be one that will sorrow.”

CHAPTER II

THE UNKNOWN WAY

I did not ask, for I remembered our compact, and I closed my mind securely against her doubt of my welfare, but there are times, with thought as with the spoken word, when silence is of an equal significance.

“It is in my mind,” she told me, “that the intention which we have formed to feed your body when next we may, will give it no strength beforehand. It is in my mind, also, that the food of the Killers would hardly please you, if we could find it amid the ashes.

“Beyond this, I think that the Dwellers may return very early to resume their investigation of events which (I hope) are still of some mystery to them, and that it is well that we should be clear of this place before the darkness leaves us.”

Again I felt the silk-soft palm in mine, and the slim webbed fingers closing, and again the current of her finer life possessed and thrilled me.

It was a reluctant pleasure, since I had realised the concealed repugnance with which she touched me, but my need was too great, and the wisdom of her action, in our common interest, too evident for me to refuse.

“I am stronger now,” I replied, after a time, “shall we start?” and side by side we let ourselves down into the darkness.

Clear of the shelter which had protected us, I was conscious of a thin cold rain, and of a chilling wind from the north, which penetrated the leather rags that I had no longer the means of stitching together, and made me glad to move my stiffened limbs as rapidly as I could, while we crossed the enclosure, to where the still-smouldering ruins gave a dim, unearthly light from both before and behind us.

I drank again at the pool-side, while my companion dived for a moment in the cool darkness. We passed near enough to the great tank for her to see that there was no longer any water within it. To this end, the Dwellers must have taken some action while the fire still burned, for our vice of curiosity led us backward to view it, and she showed me that the bodies which it contained were charred beyond recognition.

Then we made for the gap in the barrier of the burning ashes where the gate had been, and left that desolation behind us for ever.

As we passed out, our steps were lighted for some distance by the glow from the line of smouldering ashes beside us, but the darkness became denser at every yard as we turned from it to cross the plateau. Yet she went on swiftly, and, in the confidence that her hand supplied, I found no difficulty while the level ground continued. When the path fell roughly I held back to a slower pace, and even then I stumbled frequently. "Can you not see at all?" she asked, "for if we can do no better than this our plan must be altered. We have eighty miles to cover before the dawn, if we are to reach the valley woods while the night-time cloaks us."

I answered, "I cannot see when the darkness is absolute, and you go forward as though the day were round you. I suppose that other creatures are like me in this, or how would the darkness aid us? Can your eyes see when there is no light whatever?"

She replied, "When there is no light whatever, I can see nothing that is more than a few yards away, but within that space it is not my eyes only, it is my whole body that perceives what is around it. I do not see, but I know. My body is too much alive to walk into any tree that confronts it. But we must do something. If you would keep your mind blank and ready, I think I could show you always for a few steps before us."

This we tried, and for many hours we went forward with the way visible to me for about three yards ahead, and, beyond that, blackness. It was difficult, and very tiring, for neither of us could think at all, but we made good progress. Steadily she kept me aware of things before me, but more than once my own mind wavered, and

in a moment I was stumbling in the darkness. And the darkness did not lift at all. There came a cold and steady rain, without wind, which descended straightly upon us. My rags were quickly drenched, and for the most part of the remaining night this rain continued pitilessly.

Our way was often very rough, and in the darkness we could not choose it. We could only go forward directly, and take what came. For the most part we descended, but not regularly. The ground we crossed was not cultivated in any evident way, nor was it enclosed or protected—or not till we had crossed the lake, and that was later.

At times we walked on a prickly growth of some kind that was too close and stiff for our feet to break it. Often we walked, or, I might say, waded, through herbage such as we had encountered on the previous day, making our progress slow and heavy, but always her buoyant vitality sustained me.

Once we found the ground falling precipitously before us, and discovered that we were on the bank of a river. We could not tell its width, and my companion's suggestion that we should swim it found me unwilling. Bearing leftward, we continued beside it for some miles, and then found it had left us. It was about here that we began to feel touches as of light hands on the face, in a place where trees were frequent. I was frightened at first, till I realised that they were only trailing leaves,—creepers, I thought, but they were really of the trees themselves, as we saw when the daylight came.

But the real horror of the night was at the last. For some time the ground had been flat and bare, soft from the rain, which had now ceased, but easy to traverse, so that we increased our pace, and were making good progress, when we found our feet sinking in a shaking bog, from which we pulled them with difficulty. Then it was firmer again, and then softer at times, till we were in a swamp which became worse as we went forward. For a moment we stopped, and I found myself in darkness, as my companion's mind asked me, "Shall we not go back, if we can? If we sink deeply in such slime we cannot swim or live. Nor can either of us think clearly while I show you the

way. If we move from the straight line ahead we should remember our turns. Shall I lead you only?"

I agreed, and we turned back, as we thought, with exactness. Indeed, it must have been so at first, for she saw the marks we had left, but it was unexpectedly difficult. I was in darkness now, following the guidance of her hand, and content to think that her own sight and thought were concentrated on getting us clear of the swamp, when I suddenly felt her sinking beside me.

Cool, but urgent, her mind called me, "I have no footing: pull." I was up to my ankles in the slime, and found my left foot slipping from beneath me as I leant away from her. (For I had been at her left hand previously, but when we turned back we had changed hands, not positions, and I was now on her right). A step ahead, it was firmer ground. A struggle to the right, and she had footing once more. Then I went in deeply. After that we moved as best we might. One only at a time, and feeling each step carefully. I lost sense of direction entirely. And it was there—or nearly there—that the dawn found us.

But that was after,—well, I cannot hope to describe it, but I must tell it as best I can.

It was fortunate that our minds were in closest touch at the moment, or the second's interchange of thought might have been a half-second later, and there my life would, I suppose, have ended.

Her own mind was alert to give me the indications that her sight supplied, when it suddenly changed to a great doubt, paused on the brink of consternation, recovered to the high gaiety with which it was accustomed to encounter peril, shot me a thought-swift warning, reverted to its poised serenity, and closed from me entirely; and, in the slow process of words the warning that she gave was this,—

"We come here of good right, fearing none, and we mean no harm to any. Therefore we move in security. Our minds are serene and friendly, and we walk at peace with all things. If you doubt or fear we are both lost entirely. As your body fought the Killers with the axe for both of us, so my mind fights for both now. You must help now, as I helped then. I have passed you the javelin, for there is no use for

weapons here, and I must not hold it. All is well. Be quite sure to believe it. Step as I guide you. Jump when I call on you, I will tell you just how far. Separate now."

The whole thought was instant, and in the same moment I knew that that on which we walked was swaying beneath us. Her hand pulled me quickly to the left, and we ran up something that moved from under us like a treadmill,—if we had been on the outside of the wheel,—jumped at last, landed on something smooth and slippery, like that which we had left, and having—the thought crossed me—a living softness. Then I caught my foot, stumbled, recovered, jumped again, clambered a few yards of rising ground, slimy enough, but firm also, and felt the soft touch on my cheek that I had felt before, and knew that trees were round us.

We went on for a hundred yards, while the ground sloped upward. Then it commenced to fall away, and we stopped at once. There we stayed, and there, at last, the dawn found us, still distant from the cover which we had aimed to reach in the darkness.

We were on a narrow twisting tongue of land, perhaps fifty yards broad by two-hundred long, the conformation of which had betrayed us to the swamp in the darkness. On the left hand it merged into bog and water, with occasional islands of verdure, and scattered trees. On the right hand was the deep water of the great lake that we had seen from the mountains two days before.

The sun had not yet appeared above the ridge of higher ground that ran between us and the sea, but the faint light of dawn was sufficient to show us a mile-width of still water, and beyond it a level woodland of great trees, the extent of which, from the low ground on which we stood, we could not determine.

The few trees that surrounded us were of a different character. Most of them were of the kind that had touched us in the night so weirdly. They had trunks of a livid white, not more than eight feet high, from the top of which a cluster of rising boughs rayed outward. On the length of these there were no leaves, but large flowers of a very brilliant scarlet only, while at the end of every bough grew a cluster of long ribbon-like leaves of a bright green, that hung

downward, almost to the ground in the still air, or fluttered very lightly when the wind stirred them. I was not sure whether I thought them beautiful, or strange only. I had an unreasonable feeling that they were unfriendly.

In the hollow of one of these tree-tops, where the branches rose, there sat a duck-billed bird, of a halcyon blue colour, and of the size, and somewhat of the shape of a partridge. As the dawn widened, it rose and flew outward, not crossing the lake, but going up the mid-water, to the right, where it extended for many miles, gradually widening as it did so.

“It does not fear us at all,” I remarked to my companion, before it rose to leave us.

“I made peace in the night with all things,” she answered, “come and see. You will know that it was needful.”

I walked with her to the end of the tongue of land on which we stood, and, where the lake and swamp were mingling, there were huge shapes that wallowed in the mud like gigantic tadpoles, but with two forelimbs, short and thick, and ending in a row of claws of great length. A hippopotamus would have been small beside them. The most part of the head was a large-toothed mouth, flat and shallow, with one down-curving tusk, growing like a hook from the centre of the upper jaw. There were two large circular eyes, on the top of the flat head.

“They were lying closely,” she told me, “in the deeper mud. We were walking on, or slipping between them for some time before I knew they were living.

“It was only as one of them waked to consciousness of us, and began to roll over, that I became aware of that on which we were walking.

“I knew that he had already decided to spill us in the mud, so that he should reach us the more easily, and that if the others should combine against us we should be helpless. They are the Dwellers’ creatures, not of the sea, and for a moment I almost had the doubt which would have destroyed us. But I think I have not ruled the

monsters that the oceans hold for so long, to lose my body at last in such talons. Also, you did well.

“A javelin, such as this, is a cunning weapon, and I had joy when I used it, but I think that our ways of peace are greater than those which you are designed to practise.

“You see the monster that still has his tusk hooked on to that projecting root, to steady him while he slept in the shallow? It was in the edge of his eye-socket that your foot caught when you stumbled.”

CHAPTER III

THE PERIL OF THE LAKE

We watched for some minutes while the giant leviathans lazily moved themselves from the mud-shallows to the deeper water. They seemed half-asleep, and very slow, and somewhat clumsy, as they did so, with no life in the flat unlustred eyes, and a thought crossed me as to whether they were really as formidable as my companion had supposed them, when I noticed that one of them, who had moved out a short distance, had sunk his head, and raised his tail, as a duck does when he feeds under water.

Suddenly his tail wagged in an uncontrolled excitement, and in an instant a dozen of these huge creatures had flung themselves at the spot.

Those that were already in the deeper water drove like huge torpedoes toward it.

Those that were still in the shallows propelled themselves at almost equal speed with huge claw-grips and flapping tails through mud and water.

So great was the converging rush that the spot at which they aimed was splashed bare for an instant, and we saw that tusks and claws were tearing up the muddy bottom in chase of something that was burrowing deeply to avoid them. The next moment something of a dirty-white colour, and of the size of a small cow—but we could not see clearly—was dragged out and torn to pieces.

Then with contented grunts, and a switching of great tails, they swam out phalanx shape into the deep water, where they dived together, and the still lake gave no sign of their presence.

It was after this that my companion closed her mind from me, as she would do when a doubt came which she could not quickly answer.

At last she told me, "It is in my mind that we have done wrongly to come this way. The morning is here, and we have not reached the forest which should be our immediate safety. Between us and it the swamp is extending far on the left, and the lake for many miles on the right. If we try to go round on either hand, I have little doubt that we shall be observed from the heights behind us, where the Dwellers will be patrolling.

"If we hide through the day, we shall have a long way to go over the low land, which we have proved to be an evil path in the darkness, and to cross the hills beyond may be still more difficult. Beside that, the delay is misfortunate, for we should not arrive at the tunnel-entrance at the beginning of the night, as we had planned to do."

I replied, "Can we not swim the lake?" and surprised a thought of relief and wonder in the mind that heard me.

She answered, "I could, of course, do so very easily. I should swim under the water, and land beneath the cover of the trees upon the farther bank. But I supposed that you could only swim on the surface, if at all, and that in any case the distance would be beyond your power."

The answer annoyed me, for her contempt of my physical capacity was always hurtful, friendly and entirely reasonable though I knew it to be, and I had always accounted myself an accomplished swimmer.

I said, "I have swum longer distances. I can swim under water for a short time, if necessary; but one of us swimming on the surface will be far less conspicuous than two walking on the bank, and we shall be out of sight very much sooner. Beside that, if we are seen and chased, we shall have a far better opportunity of escaping."

I do not think my reply quite satisfied her. I saw that she thought I was illustrating the habit of collecting all the available arguments for a course that I had pre-chosen, of which she had already accused me, but after a moment she answered equably, "It is far best, if you are sure that you can do it; and for myself it is far pleasanter. If we are going that way, it is foolish to stand here longer, where we may be observed easily.

“But can you swim in those rags, or will you not at last discard them?”

I think that most people would have hesitated, as I did. I could not swim such a distance encumbered by the clothes I was wearing. I could make them into a bundle in such a way that they would not impede me too greatly. All my instincts were against their abandonment. There were still a few things in the pockets which I greatly valued—my clasp-knife,—some matches—some cord—a note book (but I had made no use of this, so far)—some small scissors—a razor, and a quantity of spare blades. But I knew that the rags I wore in this new world exposed me to the contempt of every eye that beheld them. To be modest is to be inconspicuous. It is to follow the mode. By that test my present clothes reached the last extreme of indecency.

I had no means of stitching them further, and the rough usage they had received had already caused such damage that they would dispense with me, if I did not dispense with them very promptly.

I considered temperature, but the sun was already gaining power, and I knew how warm it became on the lower levels in the daytime.

Under the surface I knew that I had found the tunnel to be of a comfortable warmth.

I took off my boots, and knew that the operation was final. A sole already tied with string on the previous day, was now entirely loose. The other was scarcely better. The uppers were leaving me by successive details. My socks—what was left of them—were clotted with dirt and blood.

My companion watched the gradual revelation with amused and lively eyes, but she hid her thoughts from me as it proceeded.

In the end, public opinion was too strong for me. All my life I had made myself grotesque in the ugliest garments by which the human form can be hidden, because my fellow-men required it.

Here I was conscious of a different verdict, and the slave crouched instinctively to the crack of a new whip. On a sudden impulse, I resolved to leave them.

I wrapped my small possessions in my waistcoat, which was still a fairly sound garment. I tied it securely. Then I threaded a piece of cord through the button-holes, which I fastened round my waist, so that the little parcel could be easily carried behind me.

I made of the boots and other garments a bundle which I resolved to sink in the lake, so that there should be no sign left of our presence, and we dived into the water together.

The lake was smooth, and the water was not too cold to be pleasant. It became clear and very deep as we left the bank behind us. I swam strongly at first, rejoicing in the morning freshness of sun and air and water, and buoyed by the exhilaration of my companion's mind. But a time came when I looked with doubt at the distance of the wooded headland which we had agreed to make our objective. The shore was far off, but yet I seemed to have made no progress to the one before us.

My comrade swam beneath, but not closely. In the delight of her recovered element she dived and rose, and swam beneath and round me, with a speed and ease that did nothing to encourage me to satisfaction with my clumsier efforts.

I had a strong desire to call on her for the vitality of which I was learning to rely too absolutely, but against this I fought with a stubborn wish to show her that I was not entirely incapable, even in an unfamiliar element.

For a moment she stayed quietly beside me, sliding through the water at the same pace as myself, but without apparent effort, while she rose sufficiently to view the scene around her.

"Look back," she suggested suddenly, and I changed a stroke which was becoming wearier than I was willing to recognise, so that I might turn my eyes to the distant heights behind us.

I searched them, but could see nothing of a new interest. Once I thought that there was a flicker of flame on the hillside, but it was too minute and far off for any certainty, and the next moment I had lost it entirely.

"I'm afraid your sight is not much use, even in daylight," she considered, "but please swim as low as you are able, for the Dwellers

may not be equally deficient.

“There is one who has scraped together all the ash and litter of the burning, and it has flamed up afresh.”

I changed to the breast-stroke, and she sank to three feet under the surface, as I answered, “I suppose they will make an end of it entirely. Is it because of the Forbidden Thing, and do they, I wonder, wrongly blame the Killers for using it?”

“I cannot understand why they should object to fire so strongly. In the world from which I come there are so many inventions less useful and with greater potentialities of mischief; and their own works show that their engineering skill and practice is advanced beyond the knowledge of my contemporaries.”

She answered, “Perhaps it is only that they do not wish the creatures that they allow to live on the surface to develop knowledge. I can only guess, as you can. But we are likely to learn many things before the next dawn comes, though we shall not see it.”

I did not answer, for a trailing growth of water-weed had caught my left leg, and I kicked free with difficulty. The next moment I was surrounded by the floating growth, and I was some moments under water before I could release myself sufficiently to continue.

My companion regarded me with the merriment which my bodily difficulties always prompted, only now it was more irrepressible, because she was intoxicated by the joyous freedom that the water gave her, after so long an absence.

“Is it really so,” she asked, “that if you were below the surface for more than a few moments your body would become useless beyond repair, and you would die out of it entirely? and did you know this when you offered to swim so far across the surface?”

“It is true enough,” I answered, “but I have no intention of drowning. In my world, we live dangerously in many ways, and when there is sufficient necessity we take such risks as we must, and we have contempt for those who will not take them.”

“It is very well,” she replied, with a mocking gaiety of mind which would not quieten, “but the contempt of your fellow-men is a somewhat distant eventuality; and as I desire your company when

we invade the tunnel of the Dwellers, I hope you may decide that the risk will still be sufficient if you swim in some other direction.”

I replied, “I am swimming to the nearest point at which we can land, and at the best pace I can. I do not know what better I can do, unless I am to sink to the bottom. But if you can give me any reason why I should not swim in this direction I shall be glad to have it.”

She said, “I can give you two, and they are both rather good ones. Let me show you them as I see them.”

She then gave me a most unwelcome vision of a mass of floating weed through which to swim would be hopeless, and downward, through clear water below it—for it was not rooted—to where our acquaintances of the morning lay scattered on the lake-floor, with wide unwinking eyes looking upward, doubtless for the capture of any prey which might be caught in the green snare above them. I do not think it needs excuse that the sight appalled me. We were in the very middle of the lake, and I was tired already.

“How far do the weeds extend?” I asked.

“I cannot say. It is farther than I can see. If you will turn and rest for a minute, I will find out which way we can best attempt to go round them. But swim quietly backward, for you will not wish to rouse our friends below while I am absent. I know that when you meet any strange thing your first thought is to fear, and then to fight it, but as your axe is gone, and you would not find it easy to reach your clasp-knife, I suggest that you should not rouse them.”

I agreed very heartily, although I knew that she mocked me, and, indeed, the idea of using an axe in the water to defend myself from such an attack was sufficiently comic, as she visualised it to me.

The fact was that now she was in her natural element the idea of any living thing within it provoking either fear or hostility had regained its normal absurdity. Had she been alone, I knew that she would have dived beneath the weeds at once, without a second glance or thought for the creatures that lay below her.

She had left now, and I swam back for a short distance, and then turned on my back, and floated on the sunny water, glad of the rest, but becoming increasingly frightened as I reflected that at any

moment I might find myself in the grip of those wide flat jaws. I understood why these beasts had their eyes so flatly placed, as I recalled that unwelcome vision. How far could their sight extend to the surface of the lake above them? Were they resting oblivious of such small things as I, that might be swimming in the water, or did they watch there, as a kestrel hovers, ready to rush upward at the first sight of their expected prey?

I was somewhat reassured, as the moments lapsed, by a shoal of silvery fish which passed me. They were as long as salmon, but much slimmer, and they swam in a long line two or three broad, straight toward the place of danger which I was avoiding. They, at least, had no cause for fear, unless they were too stupid to know, or sufficiently agile to avoid it.

And then she was again beside me:

“It is not very far round on the left, and there is clear water for a long way forward. There is a cold spring at the bottom when we have rounded the weed. The water there is purer than the lake itself, and I am desirous to bathe in it. If you swim on, I shall catch you up very quickly. But we will stay together till we are clear of this place.”

We swam on, side by side, in silence. I was already aware that I must conserve my strength to the utmost, if I were to reach the shore unaided. After a short distance, the weed receded so that we were able to approach the shore obliquely, and then it disappeared from before us, and again we could head straight forward.

It was here that my companion left me. I know that she was in some doubt as she did so, for she asked me whether I would not prefer to float only, till she could rejoin me. But I was anxious to get forward while my strength lasted, and I had caught a glimpse of her mind, from which I knew how keenly she desired and needed her intended pleasure, so I answered only, “I will go on. You will catch me easily. The farther I leave the beasts behind us, the better pleased I am. But you will keep your mind open, in case there should be anything to let you know.”

“Surely,” she answered, and the next instant had left me.

The headland was nearer now, and it was with the hope that the struggle would soon be over that I settled down to swim the remaining distance. Once I called to my companion, and she gave me a sight of herself as she lay with lifted fur on the lake-floor, and let the cold stream go through it. But, for the most part, I tried to think of distant or abstract things, to turn my mind from the weariness which now made every stroke an effort.

Then a swell came from the left hand, as though a large boat were passing at no great distance.

I looked round in wonder, but for a moment I could see nothing to cause it.

Then a huge black body rose from the water, like an enormous porpoise, and turned a somersault which sent a heavier swell across the level surface of the lake.

My stroke quickened without conscious effort as I beheld it. But at the first moment I was not greatly frightened. It was evident that it did not pursue me, and my course was not toward it. Fortunately, I called my companion, and the answer, "I am coming now," was unperturbed in its promptness. I had an instant's vision of her, as the loose fur contracted, and the slim swift body shot forward.

But the next minute was rapid in thought and action.

My mind called urgently, "There is another one that has risen nearer."

"They may not see you while they are on the surface. Their eyes look upward only."

"They may do so, as they roll in their gambols—I think they have done so now. They are both coming."

"I am coming quickly."

"It is useless. What can you do against them?"

The two huge brutes were racing over the surface in their competition to secure me, with a speed which would have left a motor-boat behind very quickly. I could not doubt that in twenty seconds they would be quarrelling over my divided body.

My terror warned her only to avoid the danger which must destroy me.

"Refuse fear," she called back, "it is that which gives them power to destroy you."

But fear I must, and as she realised it, I think—though I am not sure—that there was a second during which her own mind faltered. But if so, it was for an instant only. Then she realised the full peril of the moment, and her courage rose to meet it.

Cool and swift, and very urgent, she thrust forward the full force of her mind to overcome the panic which had possessed me. "I shall be first. Swim on. Listen. You are safe if you hear me. You must stop thinking. Give your mind to mine, and I can save you. Do not think at all, but believe it. It is everything that you do this."

The rest is a dream only.

I was dimly conscious that the first of the rushing beasts was upon me, and that it dived slightly as it came, so that it should snap at me from below. I saw the wide flat shovel-jaws opened to take me, and then two things happened. Almost into the mouth of the gaping jaws she came between us—she had swum at least three times the distance that our opponents had covered—and at the same instant the second monster charged sideways into its rival in its eagerness to get a share of the expected dainty.

They were afraid of her, clearly. They both recoiled for a moment.

But it was clear also that they regarded me as a prey of which she had no right to deprive them.

On they came again from different sides, and into their very teeth she swam to thwart them.

Even so, had they been capable of concerted action, I do not see how she could have saved me. But she was cooler, swifter, more agile, with a mind that mocked them and bewildered. Nor was she content with defensive movements only, but as either would draw back for a moment, she followed the retreated mouth as though she dared it to harm her, as no doubt she did.

How it would have ended I cannot say, but at that moment fate interposed to help us. We were still a hundred yards from the shore, when the ground beneath us shallowed, and they pursued us no further.

We climbed out into a place of shade and of mossy softness, but I was too exhausted to regard it. Where I sank I lay. Perhaps, she was exhausted also. Anyway she gave me no thought, but remained in silence beside me.

After a time I slept.

CHAPTER IV

THE SILENCE IN THE WOOD

When I waked, she was sitting looking into the water with brooding eyes in which amusement flickered more than once as I watched them, but which seemed, for the most part, to be puzzled by some thoughts for which she could find no solving.

She looked at me at last, and saw that I was awake, and offered me her mind in a moment.

“I am glad,” she thought, “that I saved you, and I think that the Leaders will approve it; but of this I cannot be as certain as I gladly would be.

“As we were made companions in this enterprise, it seemed that it was right to do so. But it is a law of our kind that, as no creatures in all the oceans will dare to harm us, so we do not interfere between them. Were we to withhold their prey from them, I cannot say that our immunity would continue. It is a thing so fundamental that from the beginning I have never known it attempted. We cannot be as one of themselves, and above them also. It comes to me again, as I have thought before, that you are like a seed of death to the world I know, and the end is beyond my dreaming.”

I answered, “I owe you the debt of my life, and I cannot tell at how great a risk you have saved it. But I do not wish you to do things for me of which the consequences may be beyond our understanding.

“I thought to show you that I could cross the lake unaided, and I have only made my weakness more evident. I think it may be right that I should go alone in future; for when you called upon me first not to fear, I am aware that I failed you, and I suppose it was from that that the danger became so imminent.”

She answered, “That is true; and by my code it may be right to say that you failed me, where it was beyond the power of your body

(which is truly contemptible) to do otherwise. But I have thought, and see that by your own code I failed you for my pleasure only, for which I have no excuse of weakness to offer. I do not think another man would have left you, as I did. You think I showed courage because I interposed to save you, at some risk to myself.

“Whether there were risk I do not know; nor how great it may have been; but I think you showed a greater courage, being what you are, to go forward alone, and that, not to save my life, but to give me a needless pleasure, against which you might have protested reasonably.

“But we have still a long way to go before evening, and we shall do well to face the remainder of the journey, the difficulties of which we cannot tell till we meet them.”

While we conversed in this way, I had been observing the scene around me. We had landed upon the edge of a forest of a more varied luxuriance than that in which we had rested upon the higher land two nights before.

Here, as elsewhere, I saw no sign of grass, nor of any similar straight-bladed growth, but the ground was covered by mosses, very deep and soft, and close-creeping herbage of other kinds in many shades of green and yellow. The trees were of many beautiful and unfamiliar forms, some of great size and height, but not too crowded to show their contours, nor the sky between them. Their foliage was of shades that varied from the palest yellow to the deepest gold, with infrequent hints of red, and there was one broad-spreading bush which was entirely of a beetroot crimson.

It was very still—for the coming storms of which I had been told might bring rain in the night, but did not yet disturb the peace of the daytime—and of a beauty at which my breath paused for a moment, and of which I cannot hope to tell you.

But I was not looking for beauty. The need for beauty is continual, and for food is intermittent only. Yet the last is the more urgent while it remains unsatisfied.

It is true that man cannot live by bread alone, but it is equally so that he cannot live long without it. I remembered our compact that I

should be self-supporting in future. I knew the swiftness with which my companion considered it natural to travel. I was aware of the importance, not merely of reaching the tunnel-entrance by nightfall, but of doing so in such condition that we should be prepared at once to explore it. I looked round in a natural anxiety to discover some means of nourishment.

I saw nothing to encourage hope, except that there was a curious fruit-like formation upon the hanging branches of a tree behind us.

The leaves of this tree were very long and narrow, and of so light a yellow as to give an effect of whiteness, like the palest petals of the Californian poppy. At the root of many of the leaves there was a smooth-skinned tawny fruit, of the size of a loganberry. Opening it, I found that it was a fruit very certainly, containing a juicy pulp, and in the midst a single slender seed, of the size and shape of that of a lettuce. I tasted it cautiously, and found it delicious. My companion watched me with a friendly but unconcealed amusement.

After a time, she gave the glance by which I knew that she wished our minds to communicate.

“You have really no means of knowing,” she asked, “whether they may assist or kill you? Is this because you are in a world of strangeness, or are you accustomed to this exciting uncertainty?”

I replied, “I have senses of taste and scent, which warn me that many things are unfit for eating, but they are not entirely reliable. The creatures of my kind depend largely upon tradition, as their own lives are too short to acquire much knowledge—and as, even were it otherwise, they would doubtless die in the experimental stages of obtaining it—and we eat such things as our ancestors have eaten before us.

“Here, my only method is to choose such substances as appear most like to those which I have known to be wholesome, and eat a small portion. If the taste be good, and no ill consequence follow, in a few hours I can eat more freely.”

“Your lives may be short,” she said, “but, at least, they lack dullness. How shall you go bad, if it should chance to be a wrong thing that you are now eating?”

I controlled an impulse of irritation before I answered, "I shall not go bad, for I am testing the food very carefully. But I shall be the more careful because of the thoughts you have, and I may keep you here in consequence till you are tired of waiting. There are many ways of going bad for those who eat the wrong things, and none of them is pleasant."

"If your kind can avoid such poisons through their traditions, how do you know of the effects of many?" she asked me.

It was ever so, when we commenced exchange of thought upon the world which I had left, that the starting-point was quickly out of sight behind us.

"There are a variety of very poisonous substances, either vegetable or mineral abstracts, which can be mixed with food or drink without easy detection. As our bodies frequently break down through defective construction, or our own misuses, or from unavoidable hardships, before their final dissolution, we employ men to repair them, and they make use of these poisons in minute quantities, and in the honest belief that we benefit from them.

"It follows that these poisons are prepared in great quantities, and are readily procurable.

"There is a custom among us of mixing one or other of these poisons in the food or drink of an acquaintance or relation whose life might be terminated to our advantage. Probably this custom is not very general, but that is difficult to judge, as it is practised very quietly, owing to a law which provides that the neck of a successful poisoner shall be broken, after an interval of some weeks, during which they are kept alive in great mental agony." ("Do you mean that an unsuccessful poisoner would be treated with comparative leniency?" her mind interpolated. "Yes," I replied, "our laws always encourage incompetence). However many of these cases may escape notice, it is usual to detect a few every year."

"The one who is considered to be the most likely to have committed the crime is then arrested, and all the available evidence is so arranged as (if possible) to prove his guilt. But strict proof is not necessary for a conviction in such cases, the practice being that the

degree of proof required is in an inverse ratio to the repellent nature of the crime committed.

“I suppose that the great majority of those who are convicted are guilty, although, owing to the way in which these trials are conducted, and the nature of the evidence which is accepted as conclusive, it would be a very simple matter for anyone of average intelligence to poison another in such a way that suspicion would fall upon some other member of the household, and it is not reasonable to suppose that this is never attempted successfully.

“But my mind wanders.

“At these trials it is usual to announce in public the nature of the poison used, the quantities required, the methods by which they may be procured, their effects, and the ease or difficulty with which they may afterwards be detected, and these particulars are distributed throughout the nation, so that anyone desiring to poison another need not be hindered by ignorance of such essential details.

“There is also, every year, a large number of people who destroy their own bodies, although we have (grotesquely enough) a law prohibiting this practice,—and here, at least, we discourage incompetence, for we can only punish those who fail, the rest being beyond the reach of our cruelties,—and a proportion of these people use poisons to effect their purpose, so that you will see that there is no difficulty in obtaining knowledge of the effect of such substances.”

“I think” she replied, “that my Leader showed the accuracy of her judgment when she classified you as of the Batwing Kind, though your race is, at least collectively, of a stupidity which it must be hard to rival throughout the ages.

“But tell me this. You have shown me already that there are many other species of animals which dwell in your world, and which you consider to be inferior, because you have the power to destroy them,—Surely no conclusive reason!—Do they also suffer from the same disability, or are they better able to select their appropriate foods?”

I answered, conscious of the derision which laughed within her, and not entirely without a flicker of satisfaction, as I recognised that the ellipses of my thought confused her.

“It is true that for one species to have the power of destruction over another is a practical supremacy, and I may have impressed my thought upon you in that way without careful differentiation. To admit it absolutely would be to place the germ of a disease which we might be unable to conquer as beside or above us.

“We do consider that we are supreme of earthly creatures, but we could assert this supremacy on widely different grounds....

“As to your first question, the physical senses of the lower animals are more acute than our own, because they depend entirely upon them.

“Those that are allowed to live wildly, through our indifference, or in parts of the earth which we have not yet populated, appear to avoid unwholesome food without difficulty. But if they cause us any annoyance we are able to show our superiority by cunningly mixing poison with some attractive substance, by eating which they die very miserably.”

“I am glad to think,” she answered, “that there are some parts of your earth which are still clean,” and then she received my thought in silence as it continued.

“But I must qualify my thought to this extent. There are numerous species of animals which we have subdued to our own purposes, and that we confine around us, either that they may do work on our behalf, or that we may eat their bodies, or both, and there is a diminished ability to avoid poisonous substances among these creatures, as their lives approximate more nearly to the condition of those who keep them.—But this touches on much which would be long to explain, and I see that you do not understand fairly, if I give you the facts only.”

She answered, “It is a wonderful world, and a very hideous. But I have much to ask concerning these creatures that dwell with you, and that you eat when they die. For the time, let us leave it.”

While we had conversed in this way, I had been occupied in opening the small parcel of my remaining possessions, and drying them as well as I was able, their importance to me being too great for my mind to be seriously affected by the knowledge that she regarded

them as a humorous evidence of my inferiority to every other created thing, though she admitted very frankly that the Dwellers were not entirely exempt from a corresponding necessity.

Now I made up my bundle again, and having eaten freely of the strange fruit, I expressed my readiness to explore the golden lights and shadows of the forest that lay before us.

We had agreed that I should now depend upon my own vitality, even though our progress must necessarily be slower in consequence, but I rose and went forward very buoyantly, and though I knew that she was restraining her natural pace to keep beside me, I was well content to feel that I was moving with a lightness and energy which she could not have expected from any previous experience. There may have been some exhilarating quality in the food which I had just eaten, but, apart from that possibility, I had rested well, the air was pleasantly warm, and I had a sense of unaccustomed freedom from the rags which I had discarded.

Had there been a hard surface beneath us, I might have regretted the impulse on which I had left my boots,—though it would have been equally correct to say they had left me,—but the moss was soft and deep, and though it gave a curious tingling sensation (which I forgot subsequently) it was otherwise a very soft and pleasant carpet on which to tread.

The wood which we were now entering must have stretched (as I calculated) for about forty miles along the great valley which lay within the ridge of coast-wise hills which we had to reach and cross to gain our objective. It was probably about ten miles wide at the point at which we were attempting to pass it.

We had gone about half-a-mile at a very quick walk, the trees not being sufficiently close to obstruct us seriously, when my companion asked me if there were nothing that occurred to me as unusual in the scene around us.

I had not thought of anything. I had been occupied by the beauty and variety of the trees which we were passing, but as she asked I felt it, and shuddered.

“Yes,” I said, “it is the silence.”

She answered, "Silence is good; but it is the cause of the silence. The trees live, but they do not move. I think that wind is forbidden. Besides the trees and the moss, it seems that we are the only creatures that live."

And I knew, as her thought reached me, that she was right. There was no moving life in the trees, nor in the air, nor in the moss beneath us. I searched, and if I could have found the smallest insect, I think it would have broken the spell which oppressed me, as I realised the isolation in which we moved.

I stood, and hesitated. I was ashamed of my thought, but at last I gave it. "I do not want to go farther."

"Do you feel it?" she answered, "I felt it sooner."

"It is not that I fear," I answered, "there seems no cause to fear in so great a peace, but I find it hard to go forward."

"Yes," she said, "the Dwellers may not be here, but I think that they have left their wills to protect it. It is a new thing to me. Shall we yield, and turn, or resist it?"

I hesitated for a moment, for I felt a curious disinclination to go farther, beneath which there was a stubborn unwillingness to turn back with so little of reason to justify it.

"It must be a long way round," I thought at last, "and it might be even more perilous. You shall decide."

She answered readily, "Then we will go forward. I will go first, if you will, because I am the more sensitive to the power against which we shall be contending, and I may also be more resolute to resist it.

"I know that you were trying to decide in this way, though you found it hard to do so.

"My own decision is not because it is a long way round, which is of little moment, nor because it may be more dangerous to take that way, for it may be less so, which is more probable. But I think that these were not your reasons. They were only those which your mind supplied, as best it might, to support your preference.

"You know, as I do, that there may be great danger if we go forward, though you cannot understand what it may be. Therefore you fear it. But you have within you a spirit which has been trained to

conflict by the conditions of your life, and which is reluctant to turn aside from a chosen path, and especially so when the danger is not immediately evident, nor physically apparent.

“My own reason is different. I feel that these woods are held by a power which will turn us back, if it be sufficient to do so. I suppose this power to derive from the Dwellers, because I know them to be supreme in these regions, and I cannot think that there could be any other whose wills could contend against my own so stubbornly. But it is in my thought that if we accept defeat here we may as well abandon our attempt at once. It is your nature to depend upon weapons for your protection, and you have none. It is mine to depend upon the assertion of my own will, and if, at the first challenge, we confess defeat without effort, in what confidence may we continue? We have this to think also. The Dwellers have much knowledge which is not ours, and many powers, but of the issue of such a conflict neither we nor they have had any experience.

“I supposed that the meeting of last night would resolve it, for I believed that my own people had determined to go straight forward, and that the Dwellers were resolute not to move aside to allow it. But the appearance of the lizards between them caused my people to halt of their own will, and the issue was not contested in that way.”

Then she went forward, and I followed closely behind her. Peace was round us, and a dream-like beauty, golden-green, and deep blue sky where the trees showed it. The stillness could be felt.

As the body feels when a great wind meets it, so that, though it stoop against it, it can make no headway, so was the pressure against my mind to hold me backward.

My companion gave me no thought, and I saw her go on slowly, but with no sign of effort.

As the pressure increased against me, my heart began to beat very violently. I became sick with terror. I forced each limb forward with difficulty, as though there were a weight that dragged it backward. I concentrated my thought on the fear that if she should leave me I should be lost entirely, and strove with a despairing energy to lessen the gap between us, as it threatened to widen. And then, suddenly, I

knew that the pressure ceased, and she looked back with laughing eyes, and a mind which was elate with victory.

The trees here became very dense, so that we could not see far ahead, and there were many of the fruit-bearing bushes, such as that on which I had fed before, that grew between them. I had a sense of great exhaustion, which I think she shared also, and we sat down and rested.

I saw that she was elate that we had not been turned by this obstacle, but I found myself less responsive to her mood than usual. I felt that we were confronted by powers which were entirely beyond our calculation, and against which we could make no effectual provision. I even doubted our present success.

“Suppose,” I suggested suddenly, “that while we think we are victors, we are caught in a trap which we cannot break? Suppose a new danger were to confront us, how could we flee backward through the stubborn wall we have passed? Suppose that it is a circle through which return may be more difficult than the entrance?”

“We may suppose what we will,” she answered happily, “and we may be right one time in a hundred, but what use is there in that? And such thoughts seem to me to be of a great folly, for by such means you make those against whom you should contend the more formidable. You defeat yourself. You are frightened by a new thing. It is new to me also, but it is no more wonderful than are many of the invisible powers of which you have told me, which are known to your own kind, and of which even the Dwellers—for all I know—may be ignorant.”

I answered, though still unable to rise to her own mood, “I know that you are right when you say that I defeat myself, for it is the weakness of my kind to do so. Even in our wars, it is only rarely that a battle is fought out to the extremity of either side, but a moment comes when the spirit of confidence dies in one side or the other, and it retires or surrenders. Often, it is found afterwards that its opponents were dispirited also, and that the defeated could have been the victors had they endured for a short time longer.

“But your comparison with the powers of my own world gives me little encouragement. In our last war it was considered necessary to prevent people from crossing from one country to another. To effect this a wire fence was erected along the boundary. It looked harmless, and easy to pass. Those who touched it died instantly, as by lightning. To an earlier generation it would have seemed incredible. How can we tell by what incredible-seeming horrors the Dwellers may be able to protect their territories?”

She answered buoyantly, “I agree with what you think, though not with the mood it induces. You are exactly right that we cannot tell, and it is useless to speculate. But the moment is ours, and I am content to have a mind untroubled.

“Why is it that your mind and body are alike in this, that they will fear when there is no cause, or a doubt only, but will rise above it when a cause confronts them? You are at least clear from the barbarisms of your own time, which appear to be such by your own telling that it is a marvel that any of you remain alive to endure them. And you can take courage from the thought that the Dwellers are not of your kind.”

I did not answer further, for I was now rested, and had eaten freely, and with the physical comfort the mood was passing, but I had less confidence than she in the Dwellers, and a greater fear than I had felt before.

CHAPTER V

THE TEMPLE

Now the trees were thinner again, and of a changing character. They appeared to be a larger variety of those which we had encountered during the previous night. Light and graceful they rose around us, with a crown of spreading boughs from which long ribbon-leaves fell thickly. These leaves were many yards in length, of the width of a finger, and of an almost incredible lightness. The air was quiet, but not with the unreasonable stillness of the area of that forbidding will, and when a light wind moved, the leaves were lifted like a woman's hair, and blown aside, so that the straight slim trunks showed nakedly between them.

Always these light leaves murmured with a stealthy whispering sound, so like to speech that I had a feeling that there were words which I almost heard, which I should catch if I should listen more carefully. I began to imagine that they were urgent to warn or threaten.

I turned to my companion's mind to break the spell they were casting, and found her receiving it with a like pleasure to that with which she bathed in the cold springs of the lake-floor.

Her mind paused reluctantly from its enjoyment to answer me when I queried in wonder how she should find a delight which approached to ecstasy in such a way, when I had understood that the sounds of speech, and (I supposed) all noise, were a barbarism that repelled her.

She answered, "You confuse things the most opposite. Is the beauty of bird or beast increased if it be torn open? The sea is full of sound, and like the wind it has many voices, which it contains within itself, as the air contains them. These voices are as the very basis of life to every sea-born thing. Even a dead shell cannot forget them.

The unending murmur of these leaves soothes me with delight, while it arouses longing to return to the ocean-depths where there is neither noise nor stillness. Do you not hear that it is at once monotonous and many-toned, as all sound should be? Would not even such as you are shrink to violate it with the intolerable noises of the speech you practise?"

I did not answer, for her mind left me as it ceased its protest, and we went forward in silence, soothed to drowsiness of thought by this monotony of multitudinous sounds, till the trees ceased, and I was suddenly conscious that my companion was left behind, and that her thought was urgent to call me.

Thoughts that pass from mind to mind are swifter than speech, a thousand times, and more luminous. So it was that we had mutually realised in a moment that which would have been beyond the ready apprehension of human intercourse.

She stood back because she was confronted by a wall of blackness, where I saw sunlight, and a level lawn. It was not darkness that she saw, as that of night, but a blackness as of a curtain, gross and palpable.

When she knew that the way was clear to me, and that it held no visible menace, she decided instantly to go forward. "We will hold our purpose of boldness, as the better hope both of success and of safety. I will see with your mind, as you saw with mine in the night-time."

I agreed, and we joined hands, and went on together.

Now, as we had found before, it is the disadvantage of this method of helping another mind that it hinders thought, so that I went on with my will fixed on conveying that which I saw to my companion, and could not reflect, or even wonder, without some blurring of the vision which I was transmitting.

The forest which we had left swept a wide forward curve on either hand around a level plain, on which was a circular building which must have been more than a mile in diameter. It consisted of a series of platforms, each receding from the one below. There were many of these, each about four feet higher than the last, and the central

elevation must have been considerable, though the extent of the building dwarfed it. In colour it was opalescent, reminding me of the pavement which I had first encountered, but it was of such extent and such beauty that the comparison is one of kind only.

So far as I could see from that position, it was crowned by a level platform. It was entirely silent: no life moved nor was visible.

All this I showed to my companion, who received it without interruption as we paused for me to view it, but when the survey was completed, and I would have continued our advance, I found her slow to follow, and it was only after an interval of irresolution that at last she told me. "I am afraid. I have doubted whether we should go forward. There is a mystery here which awes me, whereas the unknown, or the perilous, has allured me always. I have thought backward as far as mind will reach, and the feeling is new. But, after this, I thought that we have taken a new road with minds aware of its danger. We may come through harmless, or with broken bodies, or, for all we know, we may be destroyed by forces which are beyond experience or imagination. But there is one thing that remains to our own wills, that if we fail we may do so conscious either of a bold or of a craven failure. Having lived so long, I have no will to perish with shame in my thoughts. You have walked where your sight failed, and I can surely do so. We will go forward together, and you can give me the sight I need, unless a greater urgency should require you. It may be that the darkness will pass, as did the pressure.

"But, perhaps, you are yourself unwilling to continue with a comrade so helpless? If you would rather that we turn aside, or that you go forward alone, I am content for it to be as you will."

I answered readily, "I am well content to go on together. I do not share or understand your feeling. So far as I can see them, the platforms are quiet and vacant, and nothing warns me of danger. It is a strange thing that you cannot see, and may be ominous. But we have chosen a dangerous search, and we are little likely to reach success if we turn from shadows. To do so, would be (it is your own thought) to defeat ourselves, before any hostile movement should avail to thwart us. Let us at least go round the base of the building

until we find whether the other side be alike. We might do this without penetrating the space within which you cannot see.”

She answered, “Not by my will. For the fear is less since my resolution denied it; and how do we know that the higher platforms may not show us the entrance which we seek? Or that my sight may not avail when we gain them?”

But her sight did not return, and though I was able to convey the scene so that she walked confidently, yet our minds could not divert to the exchange of other thoughts,—could, indeed, scarcely think at all, without reducing her to a darkness which was not merely such as I had experienced on the previous night, but blackness absolute and unrelieved.

We went straight upward from one circular platform to another, finding no change whatever. We walked on surfaces as smooth as polished granite, in some places of a milky opaqueness, at others of deep and multi-coloured transparencies. Always before us was a wall of the same substance: climbing it, we found another similar platform to traverse. The outer edge of each curved very slightly upward, not more than a few inches, like the low rim of a gigantic saucer. It was nothing, proportionately, to the dimensions of the platforms themselves, but was enough to make me wonder how they were drained, when the rain fell. Then I wondered whether rain were allowed to fall in that solitude. Looking closely, I noticed, at the foot of the next wall, that there was a space of an inch or two between its apparent base and the platform beneath it.

Apart from these apertures, which gave to each of the circular walls an appearance of being unsupported, there was no opening anywhere, as of door or window, nor sign of joint nor division in the whole extents of walls or platforms.

The colours before and beneath us were of innumerable variety, and of deep and glowing intensities, changing continually as we advanced. They changed, but did not flicker, nor sparkle. We walked on lakes of frozen fire, that faded as we advanced to the quiet green of an English sunset when the mists are windless. Here, I thought, might be the place of the birth of sunsets. Sometimes the

approaching wall would show a violet colour of an intensity which I had neither seen nor imagined, but this colour was never beneath our feet, nor could we reach it closely, for as we approached, it always changed and faded, if fading it could be called which was most often into a blue of more than peacock brilliance. But it was dull to the violet light which had preceded.

So we climbed unhindered, till we traversed a much wider platform than those below, and knew that the last wall was before us. It was higher than the previous ones had been, and we mounted it with some difficulty. We then saw a circular space of a diameter of about two hundred yards, and of an absolute flatness. It seemed that there was nothing more than the sides had shown already to reward our climbing. Except—so small a thing. A tiny point of light on the surface at the centre—so small a point. As we walked toward it I expected it to show more largely, but it did not do so. When we stood within a few yards, which was the nearest that we dared to venture, it was still too small for the eye to measure. It was a point without magnitude. I cannot say that it was embedded in, or that it lay upon, the surface. I cannot say that it was red or yellow: it was fire. It did not change or sparkle.

We stood there for a long time. I had no thoughts that I can translate to words. I have none now.

At last, we continued our way to the farther side of the platform, where we found a new reason for pausing. Beneath us lay the penultimate terrace which we had noticed to be so much wider than the others.

Where we had crossed it in ascending there had been no other difference. But here I looked upon the body of one of the Dwellers, who lay face-downwards before us.

She did not lie on the flat surface, but in a shallow depression, hollowed to the shape of her body, which was half beneath and half above the surface of the platform on which she lay. It fitted her as though it were a mould in which she had been cast. It fitted her arms, that lay stretched straight and wide above her head. The whole

attitude was one of grief or adoration. We watched, and saw no movement.

We walked aside for some distance, before climbing down to the platform on which she lay. Having done this, I looked toward her, and saw that she was now standing. We remained motionless. We could merely watch. If she saw us there could be no escape nor evasion. We could not exchange thought, for my mind was occupied in conveying to my companion the vision of what I saw, but she contrived to let me know that it was as inexplicable to her as to me, and I remembered that she had told me that she had never seen more than three women among the Dwellers, although she supposed them to be more numerous.

The one we now saw stood upright, showing a girlish slimness, her great size neutralised by the parity of her surroundings. She was gazing towards the point of light, her arms held down before her, and the joined hands twisting as in an extremity of controlled emotion.

Unlike the male Dwellers, she had hair on her head, abundant, though not long. It was golden-brown in colour, and extended down the spine, a narrow lifted ridge. Otherwise the body was hairless. The back was the brown of a burnt biscuit, changing in front to rich cream-colour. Otherwise, she might have been a woman of to-day or yesterday, with the grace and symmetry of a Grecian statue.

So, for a time, she stood, and then turned, and descended.

As I watched her do so, I became conscious that she could see no more than my companion. For though she walked confidently enough down what to her were no more than very wide and shallow stairs, I saw her twice put a foot forward, as with an instant's doubt, to feel the slight flange which rose at the edge of each platform.

Before we descended farther, we walked to the edge of the hollow in which she had lain, and I had an impression of the enormous mould of a human form, as though it had been pressed in wet sand, but all the substance of that hollow showed the violet light of which I have told before, and though it did not flash nor shine into the eyes as sunlight does, but was, as it were, buried within the stone that contained it, yet it was of such intensity that my sight was lost as I

saw it, and for some moments after I turned away I was a sharer of my companion's blindness.

It was inevitable that we should take much longer in our descent than had the Dweller, whose stride from platform to platform was so different from our shorter steps, yet when we arrived again on the level ground she was still there, and had turned to face the temple (if such it were) with thrown-back head, and uplifted arms, and an expression as of one who has been hopelessly repulsed, and yet makes one more appeal, not with expectation, but because it is intolerable to turn away, and to admit defeat which is final.

It may be convenient here to explain certain facts regarding the Dwellers of which I learnt later, and in gradual ways. They had, in the course of numerous millenniums, developed bodies which were immune from disease, and (in comparison with our own) from accidental injury also. So far as their experience showed, there was no physical deterioration, nor any reason why they should not continue indefinitely. Yet their solution of the problem of longevity proved inferior to that which had been evolved by the Amphibians, in an unforeseen way. In our own race, we know that the desire of life may persist in a body which is both old and organically defective, and that the brain is usually the last stronghold of a vitality which is reluctantly surrendered. Their experience was opposite. A time would come when the body functioned, but the mind grew weary. Year by year, an increasing lethargy would be succeeded by a more active desire for death, till the slow operation of their own will-power would destroy their bodies through the misery of its final centuries. To the young, this condition would appear incredible, and they would confidently boast that they would resist it successfully, but, sooner or later, it would inevitably descend upon them.

Such was their individual doom: as a race they lived under a darker shadow. When it became evident that they had so far overcome the threats of disease and decay that the individual might continue indefinitely, they had naturally been concerned rather by the fear that there might be an ultimate congestion of population,

than that the race should fail in fecundity. But this fear had not been acute, because they were then engaged in exploiting a new, and seemingly almost limitless, subterranean territory. Also, they passed through a period of warfare with the inhuman population of other portions of the earth's surface, in the course of which many of them were destroyed, and which remained as a continuing menace when the actual conflict ceased.

They had soon learned that though the lives of their women were prolonged indefinitely, their power of procreation did not continue, and they had first observed, immediately after the war of which I have spoken, that the children that were born were males in a considerable majority. They were not alarmed at this circumstance, which those who specialised in such matters assured them to be of a temporary character, either because (as some held) their males had been weakened in strife, and their boldest and strongest killed, and it was (they said) a natural law that the young should be of the sex of the weaker half of the community; or (as others held) because the spirits of the dead were reincarnated, so that, in time of warfare, an excess of male births was a natural consequence of the fatalities which preceded them. With all their wisdom they could not resolve this question with certainty. They were not even agreed as to whether there were any necessary relation between the births and deaths that occurred among them, or whether, should they cease entirely to die, new spirits could be incarnated indefinitely from the Unseen.

But the war ceased, and the years passed, and the excess of male births did not cease, but augmented continually. Many troubles resulted, many expedients were tried, many laws were passed, but this condition persisted.

At this day, while the males and older females must have numbered tens and may have numbered hundreds of thousands, there were less than seventy women of marriageable age alive, and of some two score of children there were three girls only.

As the Dweller stood thus, a feeling of desolation came upon me, settling into a dull despair, which I had no force to combat. It may have been the attitude in which she stood, solitary and silent, in that strange setting, the vacant beauty of the temple before, and the golden circle of the woods behind her, her arms lifted in dumb protest against the inexorable destiny which overshadowed her.

It may have been her attitude only, or it may have been more than that, as I realised later.

For when at last she cast down her arms with a gesture of impotence, and turned with bowed head, and descended into some cavity of the ground, my companion opened her mind toward me, and the shadow darkened as she did it. Then her thought grew clear to this issue,—“When you have shown me the dark things of the time from which you came, I have been curious, or repelled; or I have sympathised or marvelled only; yet it has been as unreal as is a reflection in water. But here I find it close, and very terrible. Its meaning is beyond me, but I had not imagined that the world could hold such sorrow.... It is strange that we could receive thoughts which were not directed to us, but it may be that when they are cast loose in such intensity of petition they may be received by all who are near them.”

I replied, “That is scarcely so, for I saw only, and her thoughts were hidden.”

She answered, “It may be that you do not receive the thoughts of the Dwellers as easily as we do, or as you receive ours, or there may be another cause, but to me her thought was clear and vivid, though it was formless, being a desire that was so strong that it could endure with little hope to support it. I do not know for what she asked, but I think she called for help which will not be given. I can show you her thought.”

Then she gave me the prayer which had gained so unexpected an audience, and my mind was filled at once with a sense of intolerable calamity, and with the cry of one who knew that the time for hope was over, and who struggled to reject a despair which would be

beyond her endurance, so that her mind beat lamentably against the repulse of closed and indifferent doors.

I suppose it to have been because her trouble was of a nature more easily explicable to myself than to my companion that I found in the transmitted thought a more concrete quality than she had recognised as she received it.

I could not tell the cause of her calamity, or its incidence, but I became aware that it was the impending destruction of her race against which she pleaded, and that this was joined in some undisclosed manner with a personal grief, the larger shadow being a connected background to the more imminent catastrophe.

It was not evident that we were concerned in the troubles of any one of the Dwellers, or in their general welfare. Indeed, their perils or pre-occupations might contain our safety. They were alien from, and might be contemptuously hostile to, my own humanity. Yet the depression of that telepathy would not lift, and it was with a sense of overhanging tragedy, illogically enough, that we advanced to investigate the cavity by which she had descended.

The ground declined as we approached it, becoming a rounded channel or gutter, down which we moved, the temple on our right, and the surface soon above the level of our heads on the left. We must have descended thirty or forty feet when we came to the lowest point, the ground commencing to rise before us, and at the same time we became aware of the entrance to a tunnel on our right which sloped down and inward beneath the temple.

In dimensions it reminded me of the tunnels beside the opal path with which I was already familiar, but it was otherwise different. There was no vertical rod, such as that which had drawn the eyes, and stayed the pursuit of the Frog-Mouths. There was no difference between floor and walls, but all were marble-smooth, and hard, and cold. They were opalescent, but of a kind and colour which I had not seen previously. The sides and roof were of the dim green of the under-surface of an arching wave, and like a wave they curved over, differing from the upright walls and flat ceiling of the earlier tunnels. The floor gave an impression of dark green depths through which we

could have seen to the remoteness of the earth's interior, had the faint light allowed it.

We had ceased to think as we moved forward, so that I might once again give to my companion the benefit of the sight she lacked, and it must have been my own volition that caused us to take a few steps within the entrance of the cavity. But as we did so, her thought broke sharply across my own, "You need show no more: I can see here." It was a relief that did not lessen the marvel. She showed me that the blackness still fell like a curtain over the very mouth of the cavity, where I looked out into sunlight, but the gloom within was alike to both of us, and in the relief of this renewed equality we sat down, not very prudently, against the wall of the passage, forgetting its potential dangers in the pleasure of needed rest, and in the necessity of reconsidering our position.

"The question is," I began immediately, "shall we continue the plan we made before we knew that this tunnel existed, or shall we do better to attempt to descend it?"

"It is one question, among several," my companion answered, "but it is hard to answer. We have some facts now of which we were ignorant when we decided two nights ago. If we exchange our thoughts at once, we shall make confusion only. Let us think separately till we have each resolved what is best, and have made our reasons clear to ourselves. Then, should we differ, and either prove unable to convince the other, I will give way very willingly."

I assented to this, knowing it to be unlikely that such a difference would arise or continue, and we remained silent for a considerable time, for my own thoughts were chaotic, and I was anxious not to interrupt the exhaustive logic of the mind beside me.

My inclination was to explore the cavity to which we had now come, but when I attempted to formulate arguments in support of this preference, I knew that I could not do so conclusively. I was in a state of nervous exhaustion, and my courage sank at the thought of struggling outward through the belt of the resisting will, only to front the perils of the pathless hills, and the jaws of the waiting Frog Mouths. Though to descend to the Dwellers might mean destruction,

I was in no mood to defer it, but rather to cast myself upon their mercy, with a feeling of indifference as to what the end might be. So that when my comrade indicated her willingness to converse again, I was quick to ask her opinion first, to which she assented with her usual equanimity.

“It is evident,” she began, “that though we know more than we did, we still know so little that all decision must be guessing, and each new fact, as we gain it, can only demonstrate how foolish may have been the choice we made before we perceived it. Yet, when the roads branch, a choice must be made.

“The Dwellers may have information by which they know of our movements, or they may be searching for us, in ignorance of where we are; or they may be entirely unaware or indifferent.

“In the first case, it seems clear that should we return we are adding useless dangers to a sufficient peril, for we must face them, first or last, and we can gain nothing by wandering upon the surface before we do so; in the second, we may be more likely to avoid them if we descend here, by an entrance which appears unwatched, and where they do not know us to be, than if we return to those with which they already know us to be familiar; in the third case, it may still be to our advantage to descend at once, rather than to wander farther upon the unfriendly surface of an unfamiliar world. I can see that there may be facts which would make folly of these conclusions. We are certainly distant from where my Leader’s body was left to their mercy. We have no reason to suppose, if it have been preserved at all, that it has been conveyed below the surface in this direction. We have no reason to suppose that we shall be able to penetrate under the surface toward the point from which our search should commence more easily than we can do above it. We have no certainty that there is any connection whatever between this passage and those of which we knew previously. Should we descend, and escape capture or destruction, it may still be that a later day will see us emerge with time lost, to no end but the experience of an abortive adventure. This is the more likely because there is no evidence of traffic to or from the entrance, but the whole aspect is of the

reservation of a peculiar and sacred place. I cannot tell which may be best, but my inclination is to go down.”

I answered, “So is mine; and I can add to your reasons two at least which you have not mentioned. The one is that while within the tunnel you have lost the disability of the blindness which had hindered us in the surrounding area; the other, which is more serious (because I suppose that we could quickly reach the woods where you would presumably see as before) is that, after this delay, it is doubtful whether we could cross the hills before the night falls, and now that my last remnants of clothing have left me, my body is ill-adapted to meet either storm or frost, and I have less fear of the more even temperature of the subterranean places.

“It is true that this passage is not like the one which I first penetrated. Its slope is less. Its current of upward air is less evident. Its floor is less easy to tread. Its roof does not give the same measure of light. It may not be frequently used, and it may lack the stores of food and water on which I subsisted. But beyond this, all is conjecture. It is a choice of risks, and we agree as to the one to be chosen.”

So we rose, and went down together.

CHAPTER VI

THE DOWNWARD PATH

I have often speculated as to what might have happened had we decided differently, and had I survived the dangers of the surface world, and attempted the penetration of one of the seaward tunnels. Knowing what I do now, I suppose that it must have ended fatally for myself, if not for my companion also. But so much is still mystery, so much conjecture, that even that may not be certainly true.

As it was, we went on for some time in an eventless silence, the dark green shadowy smoothness of the surface on which we trod sloping gently downward, the glassy arch above us becoming gloomier as we left the daylight. The idea oppressed me that we were actually traversing a wave's interior cavity. I think that I had been mentally exhausted by the prolonged effort of conveying the scene through which we had passed to my companion's mind.

Once or twice I tried to establish connection with her, but her thoughts were closed against me, and I gained no more than a knowledge that she was abstracted and troubled, and indisposed for conversing. Then we came to a place where we must needs pause and consult, for the straight path ceased. The slope ceased. We stood on a level path that curved forward, right and left, with a blank wall before us. Either side we might turn, and the choice could scarcely be made in silence.

I questioned my companion with thought and eyes. It was too dark for me to see hers, but mine may have been visible to her better sight. She answered readily.

"Yes, we must choose; but I have been concerned with a greater urgency. As we entered the tunnel my mind inquired for my own people, with whom I had been disconnected since the encounter with the Dwellers which we witnessed together, and though I have learnt

nothing of their welfare I found that an urgent message is being sent out to me continually,—*‘Return at once. Further concealment useless. The animal must go to the Dwellers, who have already dealt suitably with those he Seeks. Do not reply.’*

“That is the message, about which I am troubled. I cannot quickly tell what is right to do. I conclude that no reply is desired because there is either fear or certainty that it would be intercepted, and understood by the Dwellers, and might do harm in ways which I cannot know, and might not therefore avoid. It may be from the same cause that the message contains no mention of the body of my Leader, though that is the object for which I am here. It may be that this trouble is over; even that it is returned already. Yet the objection to any reply being sent indicates less than complete harmony, and there may be actual hostility between the Dwellers and ourselves.

“From these thoughts two questions follow.

“If there be dissension between the Dwellers and ourselves, and concealment be useless, how can I hope to return openly and in safety? Possibly they may have agreed that I shall not be hindered, if you remain, though there are some improbabilities in this supposition. So far, I have thought of no other.

“The second question, which is greatly the more important, is this. Am I right to leave you? Never, from the remotest memory, have I known such a doubt to rise, nor can I tell how to resolve it. Always we have acted together. Our Leaders have thought for all, and our will has been single.”

The news which she gave had disconcerted me sufficiently for my thoughts to be both confused and depressed at the first hearing, and I cannot say to what protest or reproach they might otherwise have led me, but to this appeal there could be only one answer possible.

“If you feel under the obligation of the promise that we should explore the tunnels of the Dwellers together, there is no need for concern on that point, for I release you from it. Even if I should not, I think that your first duty must be to your own kind, and that the news which your message gives has altered the whole position so

radically that no arrangement could be binding which was made in ignorance of it.”

She answered, “You confuse me with vague thoughts. Let us be silent,” and for some minutes she closed her mind.

Then she continued, “Your thought is generous, and I should be unfair not to recognise it, but it is born of conditions which are as alien from ourselves as are the ways of the Frog-Mouths. If I be under obligation to keep an undertaking to you which may have already altered your course, and changed the experiences which you must now encounter, how can it affect what is right for me to do, that you should accept my desertion without protest? When you suppose that you can release me in such a way, you assume a position of Deity—and of a Deity who could alter the essentials of what is right and wrong. It is not your willingness that I should go which concerns me—it is the verdict of my own mind.”

I answered, “I have no doubt that you are right, and that you have rebuked me justly. Yet, no less, I should like to feel that you have decided with a mind untroubled by any thought of consequence to myself; for the event, whether you stay or go, is beyond forecasting. Either way may be the more dangerous for me. It is beyond knowing. But for yourself, it seems evident that should you stay you will incur a needless risk of the anger of the Dwellers, and must be troubled by the additional fear that you will have disobeyed your Leaders, and may have to face the consequences of their anger, should you escape the perils of our present enterprise. It seems to me that your position would then be worse even than my own, and I cannot willingly agree that you should incur such dangers to aid me.”

“You think,” she answered, “after your own kind, and suppose a fear which I could not feel, and a contingency which will not occur. If it be evil that there should be discord of thought between me and my people, is it reasonable that either side should desire to continue and perhaps increase it, in a vain quarrel concerning what will have happened?”

“Should I finally return, I shall give my reasons, and, should they be found insufficient or otherwise, the event must be a source of

wisdom for all of us. But that must wait its time. In which direction shall we go?"

We looked to right and left, along corridors that curved forward on either hand, and which were more nearly of the kind that I had first explored than was the tunnel behind us, excepting that they were level-floored, and were not lighted in the same way.

The walls were vertical: the ceiling flat: the flooring was of the material that looked like polished steel, and was soft to the feet, with which I was already familiar. But in place of the dove-gray walls, and the faint opalescence of the roof of my first experience, there was an intermittent darkness, broken by moving fires that glowed, as it seemed, deep within the substance of the walls, and changed, and faded, and revived elsewhere.

It shows how dulled we had become to unfamiliar wonder, or how concentrated our minds had been upon the new problem which had disturbed us, that we had not observed these shifting lights when first our eyes must have beheld them.

Now, as we gazed, the left-hand side of the leftward passage glowed with a sudden redness not twenty yards away. The light spread, and spread, along the glassy surface of the wall, until it had almost reached us. It rose up till it neared the gloom of the distant roof, of which the darkness was not pierced but was changed to a dusky red. The steel-gray floor was stained also with a faint reflected redness. The glowing colour showed the lofty passage before us till it curved out of view.

"Come," she said, "while the light lasts," and I knew that, with the decision made, her mind had recovered all its buoyant serenity.

As we left the light, it was already fading, but others showed ahead, and we went on in an ever-changing darkness, seldom far from some luminosity which was sufficient to guide us on a plain and unimpeded way.

The colours in the walls were various, not only in their kind, or in their intensity, area, or duration, but they had an appearance of being of varying distance from us, so that we would look at the dark wall, and see the transient motion of some glowing splendour, as it

seemed, a mile within it, and then an interval of darkness and then a burst of light and colour, like an open rose, that seemed to be scarcely covered by the surface of the wall that held it.

So we went on until, in no great space of time, we came to an opening on the left hand, wide and high as the passage in which we were, and on the same level, but in an absolute blackness.

We were of one mind to explore it, for the thought had come to both of us that if we continued to traverse that in which we were, we must return to the point from which we started, should the curve continue. My companion, whose judgment was far more accurate than my own on such points, was definite that we had completed a quarter of the full circle when this side-corridor was reached. So we decided; not doubting that it would be lighted in the same manner, and foreseeing no obstacle. I have little doubt, from our later experiences, that we were right on the first point, as we were certainly wrong on the second, for we found at the first step that we were confronted by the same withstanding force that had obstructed our passage of the sleeping wood, but more instant and urgent in its application, so that we did not attempt to hold our ground, but fell back at the same impulse to consult whether we should again adventure against it.

Recalling our previous decision, and our successful effort, I was disposed to accept the challenge it gave us, but my companion differed. She pointed out that it had then resisted the straightforward path which we had resolved to take, but that now we should be turning aside to face a needless difficulty, without knowing that the passage we left might not be in every way the more direct to our purpose.

So we went on, and twice again, at similar intervals, did we come to such a passage, and each time we attempted it for a few paces, and recoiled from the resistance of the will that met us.

But the third time we did not accept defeat as we had done previously. We considered that these passages had appeared at similar intervals, and that it was probable that this was the last we should meet, the fourth quarter of the curving path returning us to

the point from which we had started. Faced by this probability, we rested awhile, and then, hand in hand, that my companion's vitality might give me the physical strength I needed, so that my will should be free for the nervous conflict before us, we went resolutely into the dark mouth of the cavity.

In the course of a few steps, taken with difficulty, as though our feet dragged in a heavy sand, and our limbs and bodies were pressed against a trammelling and resisting garment, we found that we were in an absolute blackness, so that we could not see our steps, and it is doubtful, indeed, whether we should not have retired at once from so menacing a prospect, had not my inferior power of progression caused us to bend our course somewhat to the right, on which side I was, and as we drew nearer to the wall we discovered that it was of a quality which I may best describe as having an interior luminosity. It gave no light to the passage at all, but standing closely to it we could look into it, as into a glass, yet seeing no reflection of ourselves, but a vision that held us absorbed and silent. At first we saw a dark pool, or it might be the shadowed space of a river, but it showed no current, nor any motion of wind. Strange, fronded trees grew beside it. At some distance, there was a touch of moonlight on the water, but it did not waver. We watched for some time, as though expecting something to happen, and yet I thought it to be nothing more than a picture of some primeval creation. Then it seemed that the dark surface of the water broke, and a long snout, as of an alligator, moved into the lighted space, and sank again very quietly. Nothing else. We watched a long time further, but nothing changed, unless, perhaps, the light on the water was slightly fainter. "Is it real?" I wondered. "No, surely," she thought, "I suppose it to be a picture of things long past. I do not think it to be of the earth of this time. Shall we look at the other wall?"

I agreed, though I was reluctant to withdraw my gaze from that primeval night, where I might see I knew not what of mystery or of wonder if I should wait till its morning came. The pressure was more tolerable while we made no effort to move directly forward, and we crossed the interval of blackness quite easily, to find, as my

companion had thought, that the opposite wall held a corresponding wonder. But it was not of any strange or terrible or momentous scene.

There was a faint light, as of the late evening, or the very early dawn of a winter day, and snow was falling thickly. Bare trees showed dimly, and one ivied trunk was close, as though we might have reached to touch it, and on the dark berries a pair of hawfinches were feeding. They were so real and close that it seemed strange that no sound came as they changed footing with a flutter of wings, or pulled the sprays apart.

That was all. It might have been a scene from winter of my own day, or of millennia before or after.

And while we gazed, we became aware that something with a heavy tread had entered the passage. We thought it (and rightly) to be one of the Dwellers. The steps passed us, and went forward. We were of one mind to follow.

Returning to the centre of the tunnel, we were again in darkness, but the footsteps led us, and we found that the resistance against which we had fought had ceased to trouble us while we followed the unseen feet. Realising this, we increased our pace to a run, lest the dividing space should widen, so that we were but ten or fifteen yards behind—our feet making no sounds on the soft flooring—when our unseen guide turned sideways into a chamber on the right-hand side of the passage.

CHAPTER VII

THE LIVING BOOK

We stood at the entrance of a room of (to us) enormous proportions. It was filled with an equally-diffused light, of which I saw no origin.

Neither, when I considered it later, could I observe any appliances for the regulation of temperature or ventilation. Yet the warmth was such that I did not suffer from my lack of clothing; the air was fresh and exhilarating. The arched entrance to the room had no door, but the light stayed at the threshold. Standing on the outer side of the entrance, we supposed ourselves to be unobservable in the darkness.

The Dweller that we had followed was a woman, like the one that we had last seen, but her colouring was different. The hair on her head was short, curling, and glossy black. It extended down the spine in the same way. The body-colour varied from a dark bluish-black to the softest, palest greys. The effect was beautiful beyond describing.

Her form was as straight and graceful as had been that of the other, nor did it give an impression of great size in a room which was proportioned to it. It was not she that was large, but we that were small. Her body was slim and perfect in its proportions, and her face was flawless, yet where the other had given an impression of youth, there was here an atmosphere of age incalculable. I cannot say from what it came, unless from one thing only. Her eyes were intolerably tired.

As she entered the room she had an object about the size of a football perched on her left shoulder. There was a table in the centre, of a transparent blue substance. It had three legs which joined in a twisted knot, and then spread out. I noticed that these legs moved so that the table adjusted itself to her as she approached it, but whether this movement were sentient or mechanical I could not tell. She

extended her left arm to the surface of the table, and the object on her shoulder rolled slowly down.

It was of the colour of a boiled lobster, with many bluish-white appendages hanging from its surface. They were about an inch in length, and of the shape to a dachshund's ear. As it rolled forward they spread out like hands, to balance and control its motion, and when it rested those that were close to the ground would support it steadily.

It was evidently alive, but it had no other features that I could observe, and it appeared equally comfortable whatever part of its surface were uppermost.

The table was relatively higher than those to which we are accustomed, and there was no chair or other seat in the room.

The Dweller remained standing, as though her attention were fixed upon the red globule before her. I turned to my companion to convey my wonder, but she gave me a quick thought that she was trying to follow what was happening, and did not wish for distraction, so I looked quietly round the room while I waited.

The wall on the side on which we stood, and those to right and left, were blank of all but colour, which was blue, of a very delicately-beautiful tint, which I had not seen previously, evidently designed to harmonise with the colouring of its occupant.

The farther wall was of the same nature as those we had passed in the passage, having a living picture within it—if living it could be called, much was an epitome of desolation.

It showed far more plainly, or at least to a far greater distance, than did those into which we had looked before. It was a scene of a frozen river, which itself must have been half-a-mile in width, and of an endless solitary frozen plain beyond it. The sky was frosty blue and cloudless. There were no trees,—nothing but the frozen river, and the frozen snow.

I had a perception that it had lain thus for many centuries, lifeless, windless, and unchanging, and that it was in some inexplicable way akin to the one who appeared to have selected it to companion her, and that within it lay the explanation of the weariness in her eyes.

But its desolation was less than hers, for it must have ended at some time in the earth's history. Though it might have endured for millenniums, yet the time had come when the earth again swung sunward, and the warmth found it. But for the weariness from which she suffered there was no hope at all.

Following this impression, it occurred to me as a natural thing that, if reflections of the earth's changing past were used as mural decorations, such scenes and periods would be preferred as would show little or very gradual differences, or their suitability might be lost.

The articles in the room were few. There was a wide shelf at the centre of the left-hand wall, on which were stacked a number of flat boards which were probably pictures, or material for them, for, to the right of the table, there was an easel, such as would have looked natural enough, apart from its size, in a studio of our own day, with a similar board upon it, on which a picture of the frozen desolation was half completed.

There were various smaller articles ranged beneath the shelf, of which I could not understand the nature or utility.

I returned my attention to my companion, to find her ready for conversing. She said "I cannot learn much, as the thoughts which are passing are not meant for us, but it seems that there is something here similar to your own device, of which you have told me. I know that you have a method of recording ideas and facts by means of marks on retentive substances, so that the knowledge of them may remain, though the brain in which they originated be ended, and that, by this means, you have partly overcome one of the defects of your individual mortality. It seems to me that this method must be subject to great disadvantages, as it must be even easier for such as you are to make marks which will be false, or the record of foolish imaginations, than to be accurate in fact, and wise in deduction; and, as you have no authority to distinguish between them, your children must often be induced to foolishness, or misled to disaster. Possibly the confusion may be so great that they are distracted from any

continuing path, and the result is the inconsequent and abortive activities of mind and body to which you are so largely accustomed.

“However that may be, it appears that the Dwellers have devised a somewhat similar method of recording the facts they accumulate, or the theories which they formulate, such as is more suited to their greater longevity, and their superior intelligence.

“This which we see is one of their books—a living creature of a kind, designed to store the thoughts that are given to it, and to convey them at later periods to any inquiring mind. She whom we now see is both the custodian and the compiler of these volumes, and I gather that she is now placing on record the events in which we have so lately participated.”

While I received this explanation, the Dweller had crossed the room, and picked up a metal article of a brass colour, and of the shape of a figure eight, which she laid flatly on the ground, and within one of the loops of which she placed the living ball, with which she had now apparently finished, and then stood for some time gazing at the half-painted picture, and at the scene from which it was taken. Her method of painting was different from our own in this particular, that one part of the picture was entirely finished, but ended abruptly at a blank which was not touched at all.

After a time, she resumed her work, and the reason of this became evident. She painted with a long pencil terminating in a small flat pad, of a surface of two or three square inches, and this she dipped into saucers of various semi-liquid colours which were arranged upon a wide ledge of the easel below the picture. There could only have been black and white and shades of blue and grey that were needed, but the pad was dipped many times, and touched lightly with a finely pointed instrument in her left hand, till at last she was satisfied, and it was pressed upon the surface of the picture, to which it added a further rectangle of finished work. The picture was then touched slightly with another pad, apparently to blend the added portion perfectly with the earlier work, and the same process was resumed.

It was slow to watch, but my companion was of an unhurried mind, and it is my own disposition to go cautiously when in doubt. I was neither willing to leave this scene for a further risk of the dark passage, nor to face a crisis by revealing ourselves in the room, and so we sat and watched in the outer darkness. It was not a very long vigil, for the artist appeared to weary, laid down her tools, hesitated, walked towards the scene which she had been painting, stood gazing at it for some time in silence, and then lay down beneath it, where it appeared that the floor rose in a smooth curve, a few feet above the surrounding level.

This surface gave way gently to the impression of her body, which sank down partly within it. She lay face forward, her head turned from us, her arms extended straightly above her head. Lying so, she stretched for half the length of the room. There was no sound of breathing, and we could not tell whether she slept, but after watching for some time longer we were of one mind to adventure a further investigation, and very quietly we entered the room together.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TREATY

It was with a common impulse of curiosity that we first went towards the living book which was resting motionless within the metal circle. It had no distinguishable features, and I cannot tell how it became aware of our existence, but it was its function to respond to the approach of any inquiring mind. It rebuffed any attempt to explain our own presence, or what we were, being evidently unable, or forbidden, to accept information except from the official librarian, but as we were more anxious to obtain information than to impart it, we had no objection to this, and, as we found it a cause of confusion to question it together, my companion generously gave the preference to my own curiosities, and composed her mind to receive the replies which it should give me.

We learnt at once that it was the last volume of the official History of the Dwellers, its record extending back for about two hundred years, and it would have been quite willing to begin at chapter one of that period, and go on for a week, had we been willing for it to do so. When it understood that it was required to select specific information in response to my questions, it assented, rather sulkily, though I soon realised that its function was limited to supplying the actual information which it possessed. It was unable to give any explanation or comment beyond anything which it had received with the facts. To any question which went outside its period, or beyond its province, it returned no answer. Even of the way to the library from which it had come it had no knowledge, though it wished to be returned to its accustomed shelf. It knew, however, that it must not venture to cross the metal circle which now confined it, under penalty of a swift destruction, should it touch it at any point.

My companion perceived the reason for this, as she was aware, without touching it, that the metal was heavily charged with some petrifying force having the vigour of electricity, and of a current sufficient to overcome a much larger creature than that which it now imprisoned.

“Are you impervious to electricity?” I was led to ask, as I perceived her indifference to this new danger.

“No,” she replied, “of course not. How could we live without it? But we can naturally control the quantity which we receive. Otherwise our bodies would be continually exposed to the risk of a sudden destruction. Are you so liable?”

I said that I was certainly not immune from such danger, and it added a new peril to our investigations if the Dwellers were accustomed to use it or other forces of unknown potentialities, in such a manner. She agreed, but assured me that she could give warning very easily, now that she knew of this additional infirmity of my body, as she could always tell the quantity and direction of any electric force which might be in her neighbourhood.

I was puzzled to think that the Dwellers should expose so valuable a record to the risk of destruction as a penalty for its own disobedience, and this made me somewhat sceptical of the accuracy of my companion’s explanation, but I learnt afterwards that the effect would merely have been that a new volume would have been commenced. These creatures are only kept alive until they have received as much information as they are capable of retaining, and are then slaughtered. The information which they contain being permanently available, as is that of a gramophone record, and the minds that hold it being more surely and easily stored when they are dead, than in a living state.

Having realised the character and limitations of the record at our disposal, I asked first concerning the safety of the two friends whom I had come to seek. I had to repeat the question in many forms before obtaining any response, but I finally obtained this information, which was obviously the only record which had been made, and the extent of the help which was here available.

Two Primitives of the False-Skin Age were captured by the 42nd Coast Patrol. One was of a venomous kind. They were received by the Bureau of Prehistoric Zoology. The body of one was found to be suffering from microbic disease beyond sterilisation, and was scraped by the Vivisection Department. The other was transferred to the Experimental Section, after the usual method.

That was all. The fate of one of those who had preceded me was sufficiently indicated, and that of the other was, at the best, enigmatic; but I could learn no more. Even of the place or nature of the Bureau it mentioned the living book was entirely ignorant.

Little as it was, it was sufficient to suggest that I should be very foolish to place myself in the hands of the Dwellers, unless I were compelled to do so. I realised, as I had not done previously, that my position was that to which, in my own time, the human race had reduced all the other living creatures on the earth's surface, and that the Dwellers, however justly they might act to each other, would probably consider it an absolute duty to put me to death or torture if they could gain any knowledge, obtain any advantage to themselves, or even avert some trivial inconvenience, by so doing, as many men, and nearly all women, would subject a mouse to a violent or lingering death for no greater reason than that it had annoyed them by a sound in the night.

Having realised that I could obtain no further information on the subject of my own search, I remembered—none too soon—that my companion must be equally urgent to learn of the one for whom she was seeking, and of the events which had occasioned the recall which had reached her, and I inquired accordingly, and received this answer:

ARTICLE 5. In consideration of the foregoing, the body of the Amphibian will be delivered at the Fishgates, at once, and uninjured. The one who is seeking it will be allowed, and, if needful, assisted to return in safety, provided that such return be made before the third sunset, and that she shall not have

entered the Sacred Places. The Primitive shall remain. He shall be treated with such kindness as circumstances admit, and, if healthy and quiet, shall be transferred to an appropriate Reservation. But if he be in any way diseased he may be dealt with according to the nature of his infirmity, and as the protection of the community may require. Otherwise, unless he be violent or intractable, he shall not be slaughtered, either for food or for any other purpose, except in the ordinary course, and at such period as is usual.

Certainly there was information here, and warning, and some mystery also. Our thought was single that this must be the purport of an agreement that must have been made between the Amphibians and the Dwellers since the commencement of our expedition, and we were alike in desiring to learn the other clauses of the treaty, before we considered our course of action.

These were very promptly given, for I believe that these living books were so constituted that they derived a positive physical pleasure from such thought-transference as would convey their contents to other minds, such as is commonly experienced in the exercise of the ordinary functions of the human body.

The treaty (omitting the fifth clause already given) was this:

ARTICLE 1. The Leaders of the Amphibians pledge themselves and their nation, without reservation or exception, that they will not henceforward, or any of them, invade the continent of the Dwellers, either above, at, or on the sea-level, unless or except as may be mutually agreed hereafter.

ARTICLE 2. The Leaders of the Amphibians shall appoint two of their number, and the Dwellers shall appoint two of their number, to confer and agree upon the times at and the conditions on if any which the Amphibians or any of them may enter or remain upon the surface of the territory of the Dwellers, or any part thereof.

ARTICLE 3. The Amphibians pledge themselves that they will not give any aid, assistance, or information, active or passive,

to the Antipodeans or hold any communications with them, except, if at all, at the desire of the Dwellers, and to obtain information on their behalf.

ARTICLE 4. The Amphibians will forthwith institute and maintain a complete service of observation upon the coasts of the Antipodeans, and upon all aerial movements above or from their coasts, with such relays of communication as shall convey all such information to the Dwellers at the least possible intervals of time after the observation of such movements.

ARTICLE 5. (Already given).

ARTICLE 6. Should the Amphibian who is now landed have invaded, or invade, the Sacred Places, or should she remain hidden in the land until after the time of the third sunset, or should she neglect or refuse to return by or before the time stated, then the Dwellers shall be free to deal with her as may appear just to them, or as their safety or interests may require, and the Amphibians shall none the less carry out the first four Articles of this treaty, as though she should have returned safely.

ARTICLE 7. In the event of the successful resuscitation of the body of the Amphibian Leader and of her assent to this clause, and providing that the Amphibian now on the territory of the Dwellers shall have returned in safety whether within the period stated in Article 5, or later by the clemency of the Dwellers, then, and in these events, the Leaders of the Amphibians severally and on behalf of their nation and of every member thereof, do pledge themselves actively to assist the Dwellers against the Antipodeans, in the hostilities now impending, to the full extent of their national and individual capacities, according to their natures, and by such means as they are spiritually and physically qualified to do.

ARTICLE 8. The Amphibians are entitled to communicate with the member of their nation who is now on the territory of the Dwellers for the purpose of recalling her, but not otherwise, nor shall they invite or receive any communication from her

while she remain upon any part of that territory or within it, nor with the Primitive who was her companion.

ARTICLE 9. This treaty is made in honour, verity, and goodwill, without guile and without duress, each nation contracting freely, and on its own territory, that which is past being forgotten as though it had not been; by the six acting Leaders of the Amphibians, and, on behalf of the Dwellers, by the High Council of Five, and by the device of the Aged Ones, all equally, severally, and unanimously assenting thereto, in the Audience of Space, and in the Light of the Perpetual Stars.

Had I been alone I might have delighted the source of this information by requiring its repetition several times, for it contained much which required exactness of memory for its consideration, and it suffered from the defect of all treaties since the world began, that the effort to avoid possibilities of ambiguity or evasion results in an added obscurity, so that they are much more vulnerable to misconstruction, as they are more difficult to readily comprehend, than are simpler and more straightforward documents. But my companion intimated at once that she could recall it as required, and she proposed that we should retire into the comparative security of the darkness while we considered it together.

This we did, and I opened my mind to her at once in this manner, "There is much in what we have heard which must be clearer to you than it is to me, but it is evident that some larger issue of impending warfare has assisted your nation to adjust their differences with the Dwellers, and that you have no further need for concealment, or cause to continue our enterprise. On the contrary, your safety lies in a prompt and open return to your own people.

"But my position is different. Your people have abandoned me to the Dwellers, and it appears that, if I fall into their hands, I shall lose my liberty at the least, and be exposed to death, or even torture, or the foulest outrage, as caprice, or self-interest, or curiosity may suggest.

“For though you appear to regard the Dwellers as of superior mentality to myself, they do not demonstrate this by brutalities, such as it appears may have been fatal to my friends already, and which can only regard a being whom they know to have reached them from an earlier age, as something to be killed and eaten. In some parts of my own world there are savages so degraded in type that they will eat the decrepit members of their own race, or strangers who wander into their territory, but they are regarded as the lowest specimens of their kind.

“In the experience of my own time it is not usual to find exceptional brutality such as this to be allied with any high level of intelligence, and it occurs to my mind that the Dwellers have not shown any conspicuous ability in discovering our movements, and that when I was actually captured by one of them, I escaped very easily.

“So far am I from deciding to place myself in their power that I am resolved to outwit them. I suppose from what we have heard that one of my friends has already become a victim of their cruelty. The other I am resolved to rescue, if he be still living. After that, I hope to find some means of concealment and sustenance on the surface, to which I shall return, until the time come when I shall be able to rejoin the civilisation that you deride, but which offers a peace and security which I am never likely to find among the barbarous cruelties which you esteem so lightly.”

My companion closed her mind from me when I had finished, but only for a short time, and then answered quietly. “I think I understand something of the feeling from which your thoughts had their origin, and at the injustice to myself and to my nation which you have implied I am not angered at all, but I think that our minds have never been so far apart since first I met you.

“There was not a single thought which you showed me which was not either false or foolish, and it is easy to believe that you come of a species which devour each other, though there are few created things so base as to do this, in all the seas that I have known until I came in contact with you.”

I was startled by the unexpectedness of this rebuke, the justice of which I did not easily realise, but my mind was cooled by contact with one which declined to rise to its temperature, and I replied in a somewhat different mood, "I should be sorry to be unfair to your nation, and especially to yourself, from whom I have had nothing but a loyal comradeship which I have done little to merit. I know that my mind was troubled and indignant, though it still seems to me that I had cause for such feelings. But if you think differently, can you not show me in what I have deserved your censure?"

"Yes," she replied, "I think I can do that very easily, but it is the more interesting to me to observe how entirely the use of your reason ceases when you are moved by anger or fear, or, perhaps, by other feelings, for I can see that the thought that we were about to part was among the disturbances that suspended your capacity to think to any useful purpose.

"First, it is by no means clear that I can return in safety, or at all. How do you know that I have not invaded the Sacred Places, or even that we are not now within them? I think we may be.

"Second, there would, in any case, be no occasion for us to part immediately, should we remain undiscovered. The third sunset is still distant.

"Third, my people have done nothing to cause you to fall into the hands of the Dwellers, which you are still free to avoid if you are able. They have been careful to make a treaty which gives you a measure of protection which you could not otherwise have secured should you be captured. We have explained already that you could not come with us, being physically unfit to endure existence in the only territory we control, or in the waters to which we are native, were we willing to have you, and were we able to remove you from the place that you have chosen to enter.

"Fourth, you are unjust to the Dwellers, and forgetful of things which you have told me of your own kind.

"You have told me that your own race will destroy other creatures without shame, not only for their own food, or safety (in which you would not yourself say that they are wrong) but merely for the

pleasure which they derive from inflicting misery upon those who have done them no injury, or for the gratification of curiosity, or in the hope of some material advantage resulting to themselves or their fellows.

“More than this, with an unnatural baseness, they will even accept service from, or make such professions of friendship as will gain the confidence of, other creatures, which they will not then hesitate to betray and murder, as caprice or self-interest may incline them. You have told me that you habitually destroy creatures whose affection and loyalty you have gained, when they become old and infirm, or are injured by accident, readily persuading yourselves that you do these things out of kindness, although you do not desire that you should be dealt with in a similar manner when your own body shall show evidence that its vigour is decreasing.

“You have shown me that you justify these things in your own minds by arguing that you are of such superior nature that the welfare, or existence of all other creatures is of comparative triviality.

“But even though such conduct could be condoned by a demonstration of superiority, or would be consistent therewith, it is difficult to understand by what arguments this asserted superiority could be maintained.

“Is it by your power to cause the deaths of others? Then a disease-germ (as you have yourself admitted) may be greater than you.

“Is it by conduct? But you have shown me that you work violence, fraud, and cruelty among yourselves, and against the creatures around you.

“Is it wisdom? Have you discovered a way of life which is more safe, more leisured, more healthy, more in harmony with your surrounding conditions, than that of the creatures which you despise and destroy? Are their conditions more abject than are those of the disordered and disastrous lives of which you have told me, where you crowd together in disease and dirt, inexplicably separated from the land which supplies you with the food which your bodies need so continually?

“As are the vermin which you trap and kill without mercy, so, and less than so, and rightly less than so, must you be to the Dwellers.

“You are not of their world. You came unasked. You may bring strange disease. You may produce discord in a thousand ways. Your mind is indignant and hostile, merely at the assurance that they will deal with you in patient justice, after inquiry has been held,—or, it may be, at the worst, with that expediency which is the basis of the civilisation from which you come.”

I answered quickly, for my mind responded to hers with more thoughts than I could easily control for transference, “I see that you have judged more reasonably than I was able to do. My mind was moved by fear, under which influence its reactions are instinctive rather than rational. There is much in your thoughts which is true, as it reflects upon my own kind, and there is much also that might be urged in defence or extenuation of conduct which appears to you so monstrous. But there are questions of practical urgency also which must be faced, and the occasion is scarcely one for explanation or argument concerning abstract or distant things.

“Yet one thing I should like to show you. You may reflect adversely upon our treatment of living creatures of other kinds than our own, and your thought may not be far from mine, but were you one of ourselves, you would be faced by issues which are not simple to decide, and by conditions which are not easy to alter.

“It is true, for the most part, of the domestic animals that we eat, that we work for them all their lives in a willing servitude, which is the price we pay for the right to kill them at last. We build their houses; we prepare their food; we heal their diseases: we wait upon them in the most menial ways. They are fed with regularity, and without their own exertion: they are protected from inclement weather. We may even risk our own lives to guard them from the murderous attacks of other beasts of prey. Finally, they probably die with less pain, and with far less of fear and foreboding, than will be the lot of those who minister to, and then destroy them.

“It is true that we do these things for our own ends, and they owe us no gratitude, but it is also true that, apart from these things, they

would not exist at all, nor is it true that we are regardless of their well-being nor indifferent to their suffering. Some may be, but many are not.

“I am not sure but that the heavier indictment against us may be, not that we give them death at last, which comes to all, but that we deny them life while living. It is an inevitable result of their protected lives, that they have degenerated in intelligence and character, and compare very poorly with those of their kind that have retained their freedom in remoter places.

“Further, it appears evident that, with rare and doubtful exceptions, they have no understanding or premonition of death, and are in this respect happier than ourselves.

“You have asked why we should consider that we are greater than the other creatures around us. I agree that a superior capacity for successful violence is a poor argument in support of such a claim, nor should I urge it. Nor should I urge that our conduct of life is superior, for there is a barrier dividing their mentalities from ours that no man has been able to cross, and I should confuse assumption with evidence: nor can I, for the same reason, and for others also, claim that we are of greater wisdom than they. Greater knowledge we may have, but it is of the race rather than the individual, and it would be a poor ground for such a claim, at the best.

“If I should seek to support such a plea, I would rather urge the difficulty of the conditions against which we contend, than the extent to which we triumph.

“Our ancestors broke from their environment, and may have shown a doubtful wisdom in so doing. But having so broken, we are confronted with difficulties from which the rest of the creation is free. If our conduct be worse, our circumstances are more treacherous.

“But there is another difference. Most other creatures, though we may not prematurely destroy them, are even shorter-lived than we. They lack the assistance of our inventions for recording knowledge, and, to some extent, handing it down to our children. So far as we can judge, they have no substitute for these, and their individual

ignorance of our purpose to destroy them, and of the methods we use, is a natural consequence.

“I am not sure that this thought does not bring us nearer to understanding the difference between my kind and other animals than would any of the three tests you proposed. All animals have an inherited fear of pain or damage to their bodies, and this leads them to such actions or reactions as will conserve their lives, but it is a curious thought that, since the hidden beginning of created things, no one can have had any inherited experiences of death, of which we know by observation only. Our parents were alive at our conceptions and births, as were all their ancestors before them, and our direct inherited experience could be no different were they all alive and immortal. But the accumulated observations and records of the race familiarise us with the nature of death—at least in its physical consequences,—and teach us its inevitability, from our earliest years. *‘In his eyes foreknowledge of death,’* that is the burden, and perhaps the glory, of our kind; and that which may divide us furthest from those who have been content to obey the laws of their creation. It is curious fact that such animals as we may allow to associate with us in any intimacy must share to some extent this difference, be it height or depth, which divides us from the rest of our creation. A lion cannot sin: but a dog can.

“—But perhaps I weary you with details which are beyond your interest?”

She answered, “No, for I would gladly know more of these things, were there time for the learning, though we must leave them now. For it seems that the more our thoughts exchange, the more nearly do our minds approach to a common point. It may be that we both see truly, though the same things may appear different. Looking from a distant point, I see the outlines of your existence as you cannot easily do. Knowing it more closely, you are aware of dangers and fertilities which I overlook, seeing only the contours of the mountain peaks, and of the depths which divide them.

“But there is one thought in which you may take some comfort. You have told me that your kind, or some of them, will eat their

fellow-men when occasion offers. The Dwellers are, at the worst, so entirely incapable of such conduct, that you may reasonably hope that there will be a similar measure of difference between your own treatment of your domestic animals, and that which you will receive from them, should you be captured or surrender to them.”

I replied, “I should be glad to think so; but the fact is that the practice I mentioned is almost entirely confined to men with darker skins than mine. I have, as you observe, a light skin, tinged with pink. All men whose skins are of this kind believe it to be an evidence of every kind of superiority,—and how the darker cannibals may treat their domestic animals it is unfortunate that I do not know.”

Her mind replied with a sudden ripple of merriment. “I suppose you jest. But let us turn from these things, and consider what next we shall do, and how quickly. For time is short before I must take decision as to whether I shall return within the limit fixed. Yet much may be done, if we are fortunate, in the space remaining; and, as you said in your anger, the Dwellers are not quick to discover us. Yet I think you err when you make light of our peril. Are there no vermin in your own buildings, which you might disregard for more urgent matters, but which you would destroy very easily at the allotted time, or should occasion arise to do so?”

I said, “Yes, there are; yet some of them have found craft by which they continue, and so must we also. But, first, cannot we learn something more from this book which we have borrowed so easily? For myself, I am determined to seek my friend, till I know of his death, or have found him. He may be near us now, or he may be a thousand miles away, or in depths beyond our imaginations. What can we tell, with so little to guide our guessing? And for you, if we can discover whether we have yet intruded into one of the Sacred Places to which the treaty alludes, it may make a vital difference to the action which you should take for your own security.”

She answered “Let us try,” and we rose, and moved again as quietly as possible into the lighted room. I do not think that this was really necessary, but it gave us a sense of secrecy to interrogate the

red globe from the shorter distance, and appeared to reduce the risk that our thoughts would disturb the mind of the sleeper.

CHAPTER IX

THE FLAME OF LIFE

For a long time we asked questions to which we could obtain no answer, or not such as conveyed any meaning to us.

We tried to learn the extent and depth of the domain of the Dwellers, and the location of the Reservations in which my friend might be confined. But the book was not a geography. Neither was it a first volume. Its records evidently assumed a mass of knowledge which we did not possess.

We made progress of a kind when it occurred to me that it would give us some indication of the probable extent of the subterranean world if we could learn its population.

“How many are there of the nation of the Dwellers?” I queried.

There was no answer.

“How many were there last year?”

No answer came.

“Have you any records of population?”

It seemed as though there were a mental impulse of hesitation, but still no answer came.

“How many children were born last year?” it occurred to me to ask.

The answer was immediate, “*It was reported to the Council of Five that three boys had been born in the Great Nursery, and one in the Place of Renunciation.*”

“And how many girls?” I replied, in a natural supposition that this information was incomplete, but there was no answer.

I then went back, querying from year to year, getting for each year a similar answer but with a total that increased as the years receded,

and with a record of male births only, till, at ten years' distance, the reply came—

It was reported to the Council of Five that eight boys had been born in the Great Nursery, and twenty-four boys and one girl in the Place of Twilight.

I would have asked further, but my companion interposed with reason. "I think that we are learning little. If it can tell how long they live, and how many are their deaths, (for as they are born, I suppose that they may die also), we can then judge how numerous they may be, but from their births only we cannot." This we tried, but only to be met again with silence, or with baffling answers.

By persistence and variety in the form of queries we obtained allusion to "those of the Great Lethargy," and to "The Desire of the Darkness," but nothing more definite. In a final desperation I tried to obtain information by means of inquiry as to their customs of marriage, and at last obtained abstracts from the report of a very lengthy trial or debate, which threw a sombre and uncertain light upon the information which we had obtained already.

Mainly, it consisted of a duel of argument between The First, who was evidently male, and whom we supposed to be the head of the Council of Five,—and the Elected One, who was a woman.

It was evident from the moods of both that the matter with which they dealt was of a tragic and overwhelming importance, though there could hardly have been a greater contrast than was shown in the styles of their controversy.

The thoughts of The First were slow, deliberate, weighty, solemn, yet with an extremity of urging which almost amounted to supplication. Those of the Elected One were swift, insistent, passionate, crowding thought on thought, in protest, defiance, and vindication. They were impatient with the intolerance of youth, and bold with the assurance of immortality.

It appeared that the First One put forward a new method of life for the women of their kind, or for their descendants, pleading that its adoption was essential to the continuance of the race of the Dwellers.

But with a fierce scorn she repelled it—"Do you think that women will consent to be as uncoloured and alike as men? Or that they will conceal themselves in dead hangings, as in some savage infancy of the world?"

He answered slowly, "It is only this, that you will be alone if you will not. If you will not that your daughters do these things to save our race from extinction, then you will be alone in your own places. No man will come to you. It is already resolved that all shall take this vow, if you refuse to aid us."

The reply came with a swift derision. "And would they keep it for a score of sunsets? Is there a man in the Lower Places that would not come if I should call him? But it is the thing which we have resolved also. It is no threat to us. Till we have the girl, there is no man shall come near us. There is no man shall cross the Blue Darkness, nor enter into the Place of Twilight. We will not appear at the Feasts of the Inner Moon, nor at the Mimes of the Recollections. Should we rejoice in our seats on the Upper Slopes, knowing that we had doomed our daughters to be less than we?"

The First One answered with the same deliberation as before, but with a cold finality, as one delivering a judgment from which no appeal could be made. "For six months' time, unless you sooner yield, there is no man will come near you. If you are rebellious longer, we shall use such force as may be needed that our wills may conquer, and thereafter there will be nothing of the Place of Twilight, nor of the Blue Darkness, nor of the Place of Preparation.

"If your seats be in the Upper Slopes at the time of the Great Assembly, are not these seats made by the hands of men? Are they not known as the Given Places?

"That which we give we can take.

"If there be any wisdom among you, all these things may continue; but for your daughters is a different way."

His thought smote the mind decisively, as a doom relentless and unescapable, but it did not daunt the courage nor abase the mockery of the thought that met it. "You threaten that which is beyond your power, nor do we fear, nor believe you. In six months' time you will

not waste the Blue Darkness nor the Place of Twilight, for if we do not have the girl by the next new moon, we will ourselves destroy them. *Tell your young men that.* Tell them that we shall uproot the Wilderness and the Five Approaches. You may counsel; but will they refrain? You may threaten; but will they act?

“You are old and weary of life, but we are not old, and we shall never weary. Life is ours, and we have learnt by your failure. But we will not resign our customs either in the Choosing of Males, or in the Rites of the Preparations. Shall our daughters be less than we? Or shall we degrade ourselves that others may come after us? We are ourselves the race, and it is in ourselves that it shall continue.”

At this point, as a book may be illustrated, so the thought changed to picture, and we had a moment's sight of the protagonists as they had appeared as these thoughts were contended.

They were in a lighted space in a hall of vast and shadowy gloom, so that even their giant forms were dwarfed by its proportions. They were in the midst of a great assembly, through and over which there was a diffused light, coming from no visible source, so that the gloom deepened on every side towards the vaulted roof, and the invisible distance of the walls.

She stood forward from a group of women, vital as herself, multi-coloured in their nudity. But she stood out from them like a living flame, the ruddy orange of her hair continuing in a lengthened ridge along the spine, dividing the fire-hued back that softened forward to a paler gold.

There was no speech from her lips, for their thoughts leapt out too swiftly for words, but they were parted in mockery, and her eyes were alight with defiance, as The First leaned forward from his high throned seat, and threw out sudden hands of pleading as he increased the intensity of the thought with which he assailed her.

“You boast that you will not die, as we have boasted before you. You boast that you will not tire. Are there no women in the Place of Forgetting? Are there not those among them that are as vigorous as yourself, and with a beauty that may last for millenniums? Yet love cannot allure them. If those that have been dearest approach, they

regard them with indifferent eyes. We show them birth, and they are not wakened: they see death, and have no care to avoid it.

“Look at myself!”—he rose up from the throne, and stood erect, strong, active, as though he were an ivory statue of perpetual youth,—“is there one of the young men who seek the Place of Twilight who is more strong or more graceful?—One whom I could not overcome with my hands in the Place of Trials? Will it not still be so for a millennium of the years to be.—And for another—and another?”

“*And yet I know.* I have heard the call that will grow louder. I have felt the desire of the Silence,—and it will grow, though to-day it be powerless. It will conquer, though to-day it be impotent.

“As you boast to-day, have we not boasted before you?”

“We think to last in the Perpetual Places, but the night will find us, even as it falls on the rain-drenched roof of the world, where our ancestors once crouched and shivered.

“We have conquered cold. We have defeated darkness. We have tamed heat till it licks our feet like a fawning dog. We have resisted corruption. But there is a night of the soul that falls across the procession of unending years, against which, one by one, we fight a battle that is always lost.

“... And every year our race declines, and our women-children are fewer.

“Therefore, each for each, shall you take the Males of our choosing, forgetting the Caprice of Choice, and the Seven Grounds of Rejection. Therefore shall the girl go not to the Place of Preparation, but to the toil of the fish-tanks, and so in turn shall the two that are younger——”

It was at this point that my comrade interrupted, not impatiently, but with a quick suggestion that the discussion to which we were attending was of no immediate assistance, and when I assented somewhat reluctantly,—for I had been more interested than she in the situation which was revealed by the disputation,—she went on to suggest that the book we were consulting so industriously was not likely to contain anything of a greater value.

She added, "I think that we are not merely wasting time, but incurring a needless peril. I think that there is little doubt that we have penetrated into the Sacred Places where the Dwellers did not wish us to enter, and it may be that we have already encountered the reason for this reluctance. It is not likely that they would wish this information as to the condition of their nation to be known, even to their friends, and still less that there should be any possibility that it might be carried farther to those who are at enmity with them. There may be other things which might be learnt which would be still more to their detriment. It might be fatal to both of us should we be discovered in this occupation, while we have little hope of any resulting gain, for it is not the history of past days which we need to know, but rather the place where your friend is confined, the means of secret approach, the method by which he may be freed, and the safest road of escape to the outer world when we have released him."

I answered, "You are right, as you usually are. But we have a proverb that we may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, which appears applicable to our present circumstances. If our movements and occupation be within the knowledge of the Dwellers, our prospect of escape is already too small to be interesting. If they have no knowledge, as yet, of where we are, I suggest that we may do well to discover the library from which this volume had apparently been taken, where there may be other books of a more direct utility."

My companion assented, though doubtfully. "It is an added risk, for an uncertain gain; yet it is true that if we turn back now, we have very little to set against the certain peril which we have incurred by penetrating into these secret places. Nor have we any guidance to direct our search in subterranean ways, the extent of which may be greater even than we have previously anticipated,—and even the search for the library which we suppose to exist does not appear to be a very simple enterprise."

I knew that. The librarian, if such she were, had followed us down the passage, and must have come either from the surface world, or from one of the other passages that we had passed. The latter was the more probable supposition. But which passage should we prefer? And how far should we explore it before turning back and attempting the other?

The search for such a library, even should it exist, might be as difficult as for the ultimate destination at which we were aiming. I saw also that time had become of greater importance to my companion than to myself. I had still the best part of the year before me. She had days only, if she were to return within the limit fixed by the treaty. To both of us it might be of the greatest moment to escape unseen from the Sacred Places, if these were really they. For myself, there was the consideration that, should she return within the allotted period, I should be left without the aid of her counsel, or the support of her vitality.

It was under the influence of these thoughts that I suggested, "Suppose we wait here for a time, watching from the farther side of the passage. It may be that she will wake, and herself return the book to the library, and we would follow unseen. Otherwise, we might follow her in any other direction which she might take, which would be as likely to bring us to some definite issue, as wandering blindly in the darkness of these passages—and we know how much easier is the walking when she goes before us. But if she should sleep beyond our patience we will search ourselves without further waiting."

My companion answered, still doubtfully, "I don't think it likely that she brought the book simply to return it, for why then should

she not have given it the information where it was, without bringing it here at all? But it may be so. It is all guesses. It shall be as you will."

Before we commenced our vigil, however, I made a further venture into the lighted room, for I had seen that both water and food (the bread-like cake which I had found when first I ventured below the surface) were among the articles that stood against the left-hand wall, and the chance was too good to lose.

I have wondered since, in the light of these experiences, how far the furtive lives of those creatures who exist behind the skirting-boards of our houses, are to be either pitied or envied. I feed, as a mouse feeds, venturing audaciously for bedside crumbs while a light still burns, and the fear, real enough, and with sufficient cause, which came as I watched the huge form that might rise at any moment and chase me with a monstrous hand outstretched, must be off-set by the satisfaction that the meal gave to the alertness of my physical being, and to the joyous sense of a hazard won with which I rejoined my companion in the outer darkness.

For (have I not said already?) the darkness in the passage was absolute. Even immediately in front of the open doorway, the darkness fell like a curtain.

Here arises an issue on which I am in two minds continually. In this strange world we were constantly surrounded by phenomena which were not explicable by any knowledge I possessed, nor consistent with any previous experiences. So was it here. I was accustomed to light that invaded darkness and gradually died as its source was distanced, but here was light which was sharply defined in its area,—which ended evenly and abruptly. To explain this is necessary for my narrative. But that necessity is incidental. We were surrounded by phenomena which were equally new, but which were entirely irrelevant. Sometimes I was able to imagine an explanation: sometimes not. Sometimes the cause became clear subsequently, or was told to me. I should like to tell of all these things, but I have a tale to tell also. I am of one mind to turn aside, and of another mind

to go forward. But I see that if I would reach the conclusion at which I aim, I must restrain my desire to wander.

We sat for some time in the darkness against the opposite wall watching the form of the Dweller, who did not move, and was still apparently sleeping. There was no means of judging the passage of time, but it was long since I had slept, and after the meal I had to confess to an increasing drowsiness, on which my companion suggested that I should use the time in sleep, which I required at shorter intervals than herself, while she would watch for us both.

CHAPTER X

VISIONS

I do not know how long I slept, but suppose it to have been for many hours. I waked to find that nothing had changed.

Invigorated by rest, I was quite willing to agree that we should wait no longer, but proceed upon our own investigations.

Rising with this purpose, our eyes were first attracted to the wall behind us in which was depicted one of those living scenes with which we had already become familiar.

Strange and wonderful as they then seemed, I have since realised that there were many simpler-seeming things around me which are less easily explicable.

Knowing, as we do, that sight travels through space, bearing the vision of that which was, to the infinite distances, and that we ourselves can behold the stars of earlier millenniums in positions which they have long ceased to occupy, it is not difficult to understand that the Dwellers must have discovered a process by which such visions could be deflected or reflected back to the earth from which they originated, and that it was the past history of the earth which was unfolded through the walls of these dark and (as we subsequently realised) seemingly unending corridors.

The substance of the walls on or through which these scenes were displayed excited but did not gratify my curiosity. The effect was as though looking through a dark mirror which gave a moving scene on a large scale. The impression was not as is that of a moving picture, but of great actual distances opening before us. Or, in another place, the view might be blocked immediately by rising ground, by trees, or by buildings. There did not appear to be any selection either of place or time. They were not scenes of dramatic moment, or of selected beauty: they were not seen from any position of special advantage.

They appeared to develop at the same rate that they had done in original fact, so that, if you should wish to know what would happen next month you must watch or return at that interval, to observe it.

I tried to place my hand on the wall, expecting to encounter some substance of a glassy smoothness, but I felt no physical contact whatever.—Only an inability to move my hand farther forward.

My companion, more sensitive than myself to any neighbouring substance, could only tell me that she had an impression as of a transparent solidity, but of a substance which she had never previously encountered.

It was another point of interest, for which I have no explanation, that these scenes, or pictures, were not continuous, nor were they divided sharply from one another, but the outlines would become faint and blurred, till they were no more than faintly-coloured mist, which, as we continued to move beside it, would again show blurred outlines that would develop, farther on, into a quite different scene.

The view which we now beheld was that of a sunny downland, unfenced and green, beside which we might not have paused but for the sight of a mass of rock, the memento doubtless of some volcanic or glacial activity, which rose from the level green. It was flat-sided at its nearest view, and a figure crouched before it, with his back towards us, but somewhat sideways. He was man-like in shape and size, quite naked, olive-green in colour, with a round blue patch, of the size of a tea-plate, stained or painted between his shoulders. It may have been a mark of honour, or a sign of servitude, or of merely ornamental significance. His hair, which was thickly coarse, and black, was drawn over one shoulder in a heavy plait.

He was sitting on doubled legs, the feet showing clearly. They were strangely long, and slender. The middle toe was the longest, and ended in a strong curving claw.

He was carving on the face of the rock with some rude tool that I could not see plainly. He was so absorbed in his work that a small bird, which was hovering restlessly near, took courage, and slipped into a thorny gorse-like bush, which grew against the stone, doubtless to the rescue of eggs that were chilling. I cannot say that it

was gorse. It was not in flower. But the grass might have grown on the downs of my own time. I saw the fragile blue of harebells among it, and only one plant, a clover-like copper-coloured herbage, which I could not recognise. Yet the man, if such I may call him, was strange enough, and so was a small rabbit-like creature, with a long tail, thick at the root, which slapped the ground as it moved, which was feeding nearer and nearer to the silent figure,—only to disappear with a series of zig-zag rushes when the man sat back suddenly.

But he had only paused to consider his work. He showed his face now, low, broad, angular, but not uncomely, or unintelligent, having very prominent black brows that balanced the sharp projecting tusk-like teeth at the mouth-corners.

He sat back now to survey his work, with eyes that were yellow and very bright. He was evidently absorbed in it, to the exclusion of other consciousness. As he sat and considered it, he bent round a flexible leg and scratched his belly absently with the long central toe. It was not a human action. I could see what he had drawn now. It was a bird, in shape somewhat like a hen, of the old-English game-fowl breed, not with the distorted lankiness of the show-pen monstrosities which succeeded it. But it had an impression of great size, and, rudely though it was drawn, the head and beak had an expression of vulture-like rapacity. There were no spurs on its legs.

And then we saw the bird itself, advancing quietly over the down behind him.

It must have been eight or nine feet in height, possibly more. It was obviously stalking him, moving with careful slowness, foot by foot, its neck stretched before it, its great beak half-open, its wings (which were short, and showed a mass of fluffy feathers, somewhat like those of an ostrich) lifted, but not moving.

He was absorbed in his work again, and appeared unaware of the approaching danger. I felt an impulse to call, to warn him. It was all so near, so real, watching the sunny scene, and seeing the grass move as the wind stirred it.

The great bird was within twenty yards now, a greedy anticipation in the eyes that never left the prey they were stalking. I knew that the

lifted wings and the stretched neck were in a tremor of anticipation for the final rush, when it should have crept so near that to attempt escape would be hopeless. Would nothing warn him? Had those long, queer flexible legs the power to outdistance such a creature? Or had he any means of defence should the warning come?

The twenty yards were ten now,—and the rush came. It was too swift and sudden for the eye to follow, and yet it failed of its object. The bird's impetus simply dashed against the bare rock, on which itself was depicted. The expected victim—had he really heard the approach and feigned his ignorance till the last second?—had leapt straight upward, more, I thought, like a kangaroo than a man, touched a moment upon the top of the stone, and descended upon the farther side.

The bird rushed round it. So did the man. The circuit was so short, the speed so great, that it was difficult to say which was pursuing the other. I thought that if the man increased his speed but a trifle he would be on the flying heels of his pursuer. In fact, that happened. The bird knew it, and tried to turn, but was a half-second too late, as it had been previously. The man had leapt on to its back. Its beak was twisted round to tear him, but his two hands gripped the scraggy feathered throat and held it off. The long neck jerked desperately. But the man's grip was inexorable. It found that, with all its wrenching, it could not break clear: with all its efforts it could not get its beak near enough to tear him.

Balancing on one leg, it raised the other to pull him off, as a hen scratches her eye. An olive-green thigh reddened where a long claw caught it, but then the man's leg, that seemed so strangely flexible, was twisted round the attacking limb, and had gained control of the danger.

The bird staggered, and its leg came to ground again. As it did so, I saw the man reach up his other foot, the long central claw catching in the skinny throat, just below where he had gripped it beneath the beak. He drove it in, and tore downward. The bird plunged violently. Bird and man came to the ground together in a flurry of feathers. Then the man leapt clear. He leapt far forward, over its head, a

bound of twenty feet, if not thirty, with a head that looked back as he did so. But the bird did not follow. It lay where it had fallen. Blood poured from the opened throat, a bright scarlet on the green grass. The legs kicked, and were still.

The man came back cautiously. The bird had died just beneath the picture which he had made. He looked from one to the other, and his gaze was troubled. He picked up the head, and raised it with the limp neck till it was at the height of his shoulder. He appeared to compare it with his drawing, and was not contented.

It was only after this that he showed consciousness of his own wound. There was a long gash on the side of the thigh, and the blood ran to his foot. Probably it was not deep. He jumped twice, and the bleeding increased. He threw back his head, and his mouth opened widely. We supposed that he was calling loudly, though we could hear nothing. He did this several times. Then he sat down by the dead bird, and waited.

We stood there for a few minutes longer, but nothing happened, and we passed on.

I was puzzled by the sight of creatures different from anything of which bone or fossil had told us, and yet seeming to be of an earlier world than mine. But perhaps they were later. There had been time for many changes since then.

Then I caught sight of my companion's foot, with its central toe. A grotesque resemblance struck me between the two feet. Had I witnessed a link which connected her through the changing millenniums with my earlier humanity? No, there was no other resemblance. The idea was absurd.

Yet I gave her the thought when she asked it, though I meant it for her amusement only.

She took it with an abstract seriousness, pausing before she answered, "You are giving me new thoughts, as you often do. The resemblance seems slight, and the connection unlikely. What is the shape of a foot, considered beside the other differences? In many ways we are less unlike to each other than is either to the creature we have been watching. But I have not thought of these changes. In

many centuries there has been little difference in the sea-creatures. Perhaps such changes take place more rapidly on the land. Yet there have been changes in the sea, enough to show that such things are.

“And if they be, they must have been in every grade of difference, and in others beyond thought or counting. Can we, who are the thoughts of God, imagine what He had not thought? Must it not be, if we think it?”

I answered, “I cannot follow that. To the thinking of my kind, we are, in part at least, alien from, and displeasing to our Creator, Whose thoughts are very different from ours.”

She replied, “You may be right. I have no opinion on that. For, to me, your thought has no meaning.”

CHAPTER XI

WAR

I do not think that I should have been content to leave the argument, for it was ever our way to continue through disagreement or misunderstanding until we had arrived at a point of harmony, but that, at the moment, we both became aware of steps that were approaching to meet us.

We had not gone many yards from the lighted doorway, and we withdrew against the wall in a common impulse of silence.

The steps were evidently those of another of the Dwellers, and as he passed without apparently becoming aware of our presence in the darkness, and continued along the passage, we should probably have gone on our proposed way, as soon as the dangers of detection were over, had he not turned in at the open doorway, on seeing which we were at one in our inclination to return sufficiently to observe what would happen.

We were well content that we had done this, when we observed him go to the living ball, and bend down beside it, putting a hand to the ground after removing the imprisoning ring, on which it began at once to clamber up the slanting arm, turning over with a ball-like motion, and perching on his shoulder, in the manner which we had observed already.

We noticed that the newcomer was much less in height than were the Dwellers, either man or woman, that we had observed previously, and from this, and other youthful indications, it was not difficult to understand that we were watching a youth who had not yet gained his full stature.

The sleeping figure did not stir, nor did he address himself to her, and I suppose that he would have gone on to the library to which the book was to be returned (for we had been right in this supposition, as

the event proved, excepting only that it was the work of a subordinate, and not of the Librarian herself), but that, as he turned to leave the chamber, he was confronted by another youth, of his own age, who came from the opposite direction, and with an appearance of haste and excitement, such as I had not observed among these people previously.

He commenced speaking immediately, and, as he did so, the Librarian arose from her couch so instantly and so quietly as to lead me to wonder whether she had been asleep at all.

The messenger assailed her mind as she rose with a pressure of thought of which I could feel the impact, though I could not interpret it clearly, and appeared to be unable to avoid supplementing it with a useless triplication of speech and gesture. His auditor surveyed his excitement with a cool detachment which emphasised the millenniums of years that divided them. When he had finished, she took back the book from his waiting companion, and gave it an obviously quieter and briefer narrative. Then she lay down again, while the two youths left the chamber together, taking the book with them.

It was doubtless their excited condition that caused them to move so rapidly that we had to quicken to a run to keep within sound of their footsteps.

They led us back to the end of the passage, and then along the curving way, till we came to the next of the dark openings,—the one that led directly opposite to that by which we had entered beneath the temple. We followed them along it for about a quarter of a mile, finding it was in all respects alike to the other, being entirely dark, but having similar scenes developing within its walls continually. Had I been alone, I think that I could hardly have controlled my curiosity concerning some of them,—for I kept sufficiently close to the wall to observe them as we hurried past,—but I was too conscious of the useless folly of lingering to make such a suggestion to my companion.

I had short glimpses of a score of scenes which I had no time to consider, and which left no clear impression, but of a bewildering

variety of landscapes, and once of a tossing windswept sea, beneath a clouded moon. I caught no sight of human life, except once only, when I thought there was a distant string of horsemen trailing wearily along a muddy trampled road, but the scene was obscured by a storm of hail, and before I could be sure of what I had seen, it had been left behind.

Following in the wake of the two youths, we moved without difficulty, and kept so nearly behind them that it became necessary to stop very abruptly when they halted in the darkness.

We heard them turn to the left-hand wall and then a vertical line of fuchsia-coloured light showed and widened, as a double door slid backward on either hand.

They went in through this door, and we followed to the entrance, secure in the fact that no light fell outward. It rose up like a wall of purple transparency where the door had opened, but it did not penetrate the darkness in which we stood.

Looking inward we saw, on either hand, high and low, long tiers of racks on which such living books as that which we had already seen were ranged in close and orderly rows. They were of somewhat different sizes, usually about twice that of a man's head, but more like a large marble in the hands of those who owned them.

The space between the shelves was wide enough for the two Dwellers to move side by side, and was more than proportionately lofty; yet, by reason of its length, it had an effect of narrowness.

Down this alley the bearer of the living history strode for a few paces, to put it in its place on the rack to which it belonged, his friend moving beside him. My companion's mind called me, "Come quickly" and together we crossed the threshold.

As in our own libraries, the lowest tier of books was close to the ground. There was just room beneath the rack for us to stand in comfort. We were under it in a moment.

As we reached this shelter, they turned back. They went out, and the sliding doors closed behind them.

I disliked the closing of those doors. It reminded me of one that had closed three nights ago in the darkness. My companion read my

mind with some amusement. "It was your proposal," she suggested.

"But I don't like being shut in."

"How can it matter, till we want to get out?" she answered. "Why will you always worry over troubles you haven't got? We wanted to find the place, and here it is. We wanted to get into it, and here we are. Even though we should worry later, when we may want to get out, we ought to be glad now. Let us be glad that we are undisturbed, and see what knowledge we can acquire which may aid us."

Her coolness made my fears seem foolish, (as, indeed, they were), and it was in a recovered serenity that I joined her mind to my own in exploring the storehouse of knowledge which we had penetrated so strangely.

We emerged from our cover, and walked along the lofty aisle between the racks,—pigmies whose hands would scarcely reach to the second shelf, and whose heads did not reach to the first one.

It was a strange sensation. Even in a library of dead books there is an atmosphere of knowledge, and of the presence of many forgotten, ghostly minds. Each room has its own aroma. You may wander with closed eyes into the divinity section, but you will know at once that you are not in that of fiction or biography. The atmosphere in a room devoted to sporting books is different from that of one which is occupied with medical subjects. That is so with dead books; but these were living. Living books on either side, clamouring to be read, and we could not read them. Their desire met ours, but we had no key to their treasures. They would each answer to the right question, but having no knowledge of what they contained, we asked of each in turn for that which it could not give, and an unwilling silence rebuffed us.

Faced by this dilemma, we decided to seek the one book which we knew, and gain the information which it had received since last we probed it.

We found it without difficulty, about forty yards along on the seventh tier on the left hand. We both recognised it, high above us though it was, for these books were not alike. They were all of the same colour, lobster-red, but the shades varied with each. They all

had the little swaying hands that turned and balanced the living globes, but there was a difference in each: a difference of personality. They were subtly individualised by the kind of knowledge which they contained.

So we came to the one of which we knew something already, and received the last record which we had seen communicated to it. It was brief and colourless, compared to the evident excitement and long report of the mind which had brought it, but it was sufficiently momentous, even to me, and more so when my companion (who had already followed much of it, and on some points had learnt more detail than was in the recorded narrative) had explained it to me. It ran thus:

At one fifth after dawn on (here followed a symbol of date, which conveyed no meaning to my mind) the fourteenth patrol, on reaching the coast-ridge, observed two Antipodeans approaching from the east. After skirting the protective belt for some distance, one of them attempted to turn into it, lost balance, and recovered with difficulty. They then soared to a height of ... (about four miles) when one of them drew backward, and charged the belt at a very high speed. It fell when the most part of its bulk was over the belt, but so that its tail lay in the sea. It was then inspected as closely as possible, and was seen to be disabled, but not dead. It was observed to be differently formed from any previously seen, so that it was less damaged than would have been anticipated from so great a fall. It was presumed to be dying, as its companion descended to the surface of the water, and commenced to take off its contents through the tail. Orders were given for the Blue Fire to be used, which was done twice, but with only partial success, so that seven Dwellers are dead. Before noon, it was observed that life was extinct in its main cell, and its companion retreated. Report was made to the laboratories; from which orders were issued for the sufficient flaying of two thousand of the grey-skinned males.

It was clear from this, even to me, that war was commenced against the Dwellers by some alien species; but the record was exasperating in its brevity, and puzzling in the particulars which it supplied, so that I turned to my companion for explanation.

She answered me readily, though not without a suggestion that we were wasting time over matters that did not directly concern us.

“Of the last sentence I can give no explanation, but the remainder is clear enough, excepting only that I do not know how or why there should have been any deaths to the Dwellers. We knew already that war was recommencing between the Antipodeans and themselves, which could only mean that they are being attacked, as it is not likely that they would attempt to cross the sea or air to assail the Antipodeans, which would be absurd. Why should they? It would be too unpleasant. The Dwellers cannot travel under water, and even we avoid the surface around the coasts of the Antipodeans. Some of my nation have seen the Dwellers experimenting with the Blue Fire, though I have not. That was many centuries ago. It moves about like a living thing. The report suggests to my mind that the result of the attack is not entirely satisfactory to the Dwellers, though it had resulted in the destruction of one of their enemies. But if we allow our minds to be occupied by these events, which do not concern us, we are making them detrimental rather than helpful.”

I answered, “But, surely, they are of interest to you, because of the alliance you have mentioned, for which I suppose that your own nation might suffer, should the Dwellers fail in the conflict.”

But this suggestion did not perturb her.

“It is difficult to imagine how we could suffer,” she replied, “for though we might, in theory at least, be attacked on the Grey Beaches, it could not be done without our having ample time to vacate them, and we could retire, were the need sufficient, to the ocean depths, where we could dwell for ever, and where neither side could pursue us.

“The position of the Dwellers is different. Although they have made their homes within the body of the earth, they appear to find it necessary to control, or have access to, some portion of the surface;

or, at least, they are unwilling to resign it. Obviously, they could not hold it in safety or comfort, if the Antipodeans were always likely to be feeding upon them.”

“I wish,” I answered, “you would give me some explanation, or sight, of what these Antipodeans are, when many things might be clearer to me. The Dwellers do not appear to me as creatures who would be easily eaten, or who lack means of defence. I suppose that these creatures, which have the power of flight (which the Dwellers do not attempt?) must be as formidable in mind as they appear to be huge in body.”

“They are certainly large,” she answered, “but I can say little as to their minds. I am not sure that they have any. They are not easy to understand. But I can show you them as they appeared in the mind of the messenger, when he reported of this fighting.”

Then she gave my mind a vision of sunlit space, with some white cumulus clouds drifting below, and of a flying insect,—nothing more than that.

It had three pairs of transparent horizontal wings, and beetle-like, copper-coloured wing-cases, stiffly lifted, but moving occasionally, as though to steer or balance the flying form.

It seemed small to me, because there was no standard of comparison in that high void, and because I had a mind which assumed the smallness of insects.

It drew back—hovered—flew forward at its utmost speed, with wing-beats too swift to follow,—checked in its flight with an incredible suddenness, as though it had struck an invisible obstacle,—and fell headlong.

My mind followed it as it fell, and it was only as the earth rushed upward to meet it that I was aware that it was of such a size that an elephant might have travelled as a flea on its back. Though it fell headlong, it did not turn over in the air, but appeared to be steadied from the tail.

Though it was so huge, and fell from so great a height, it was not destroyed by the impact. It was not even broken. It lay with wings

spread flatly over such a growth of glossy leaves as I had seen on my first morning with the pink tongues licking upward between them.

There was no height of cliff at this point. Compared with the monster's bulk, the shore showed no great shelving. It lay with a long tail in the water, and the end afloat on a calm sea.

But though it was unbroken, it did not appear uninjured. It had a curiously flattened appearance, and though the tail moved at times, the rest of the body appeared unable to do so.

Then the scene blurred, as though the narrator's mind had failed to picture its report, and cleared again to show it lying beneath a hail of blue lightning. Only, the shafts of light did not flash and cease, but remained visible, like blue whiplashes, striking and recoiling around their disabled victim. I could not see from where they came.

Beneath this attack, the gauze-like wings shrivelled and disappeared. The long tail lashed out, beating the water to tempest.

But when the lightnings struck the still-lifted wing-sheathes, or the lustrous head, they slipped off harmlessly; and when some of them attempted to penetrate beneath the sheathes, they were not repelled, but appeared to be drawn in against their own wills, by a force which they resisted vainly, though some made a better struggle than others, and disappeared very slowly.

Then I was aware of another of these monstrous insects flying low over the water. As it neared the conflict, its head drew back into a neck-like collar, which shone with a metallic lustre, similar to that of the wing-sheathes. The front pair of sheathes lifted and adjusted their positions, till they formed a vertical shield to the advancing monster.

The blue lightnings, under no visible controls, grouped and advanced through the air to meet their new adversary.

Swiftly as an eyelid winks, a glow of petunia-red appeared and faded on the polished sheathes.

Instantly, the lightnings separated, and drew back. They reminded me, grotesquely enough, of a pack of dogs that had brought a beast to bay which they would not leave, but lacked the strength to pull down.

Then, almost too swiftly for sight to follow, they struck,—all, I thought, at one spot beneath the withdrawn head. As they did so, the petunia light glowed again, and in the same instant they recoiled, writhing curiously, as though sentient and damaged.

After that, they disappeared entirely.

Freed from the annoyance of these attacks, the fallen monster lay quiet. The convulsions of its tail ceased.

The rescuer, still almost upon the surface of the water, turned its head seaward, and twined its tail around that of its companion.

So it remained for some time, with rapidly-beating wings, stationary above the water. While it did so, its bulk appeared to increase, while that of the fallen appeared to lessen, so that it lay flatter than before, and its tail became flabby.

When they parted, the one lay inert, with no further sign of life, while the other rose heavily, as though sated by a full meal.

I was stopped from further observation by the impatience of my companion's mind.

"Shall we not seek the things that more nearly concern us?" she suggested.

I agreed, but added, "I am puzzled by what I have seen, and it would take you little time to explain it, if you are able to do so. Are these great bulks alive? Or do they contain smaller living creatures that control them, as did an airship in the world I left?"

She answered, "Why not both? And if both, why should you suppose that the smaller will control the greater?" And when she saw that her thought confused my mind for a moment, she went on, "You know that I have a body which is entirely mine, and which is clear of any alien life; and I know that you have a body over which you have little influence, except in some of its muscular activities, because a countless number of separate lives are within you, and do not accept your authority. You have shown me that you do not control the actions of a single corpuscle of your blood, and were you able, you have not the requisite knowledge to enable you to do so intelligently.

"But why should there not be such separate smaller life existing either in subordination, or in control, of a larger physical body, and

yet able to sever connection without loss of vitality, as the dominant will may direct?"

"The idea you give me," I answered, "is as that of a living ship, which is yet controlled by the crew it carries. Are the Antipodeans really of this kind?"

"I cannot tell you that," she replied, "I only showed you that you were assuming more than is indicated by what we have seen. I can only tell you that they dominate the most part of the world, and that their dead bodies are so frequently lying on the shores of the lands they inhabit as to suggest that they must be very short-lived. But they are too antipathetic for us to land on those shores, or have any dealings with them."

CHAPTER XII

THE FATE OF TEMPLETON

Whatever interest might lie in the spectacle of Titanic conflict which we had witnessed, it was of little direct assistance to our present purpose. It showed that the Dwellers might be sufficiently occupied by more important matters to be unlikely to give much attention to our escape or capture, but we had known that already. If the moment were propitious, there were the greater reason for acting swiftly, and when we found that there was nothing further to be gained from the one volume which we had been able to interrogate, we resolved to cut the knot of our difficulty by a systematic inquiry, from corridor to corridor, for any record of the Vivisection Department, which had been mentioned as dealing with one, at least, of those for whom I was searching.

Even then, our inquiry might have been long and difficult, had we not obtained an immediate response from an index, which was almost beside us, at the entrance to the library, from which point we had resolved to commence our inquiry.

It replied, "The 92nd on the 14th row, in the Hall of Dead Books, contains a plan of the Level of the Inquirers, which includes the Bureau of Prehistoric Zoology, and the Places of Vivisection. The plan is that of the 28th of the Lower Levels, below the Division. The 73rd book on the 2nd tier on the left-hand side of the 83rd corridor, contains an account of all vivisections during the last five moons."

We went at once to the latter book, as it was the nearer, and it was here that we gained the first sight,—at least in picture,—of one of those whose absence had brought me on this strange adventure.

After we had inquired through much detail, sometimes fascinating in its enigmatic suggestions, sometimes repellent in its exhibitions of what appeared to me to be a very callous brutality, we were shown a

table, by the side of which, as I thought at the first glance, a naked man stood with a pair of pincers in his right hand, in which something of the size of a large rat was squirming.

There was a row of five large jars upon the table before him, into the first of which he plunged the object of his attention, holding it immersed for about half-a-minute, and withdrawing it in a half-drowned condition.

I saw it clearly as it came out, and recognised the red hair of Templeton with a shock of horror.

Instantly, the proportions of the room were changed by my knowledge of the identity of the victim. I recognised in the naked man the giant form of a Dweller, and became aware of the huge size of the row of jars before him.

I watched Templeton, now hanging limply in the pincers, plunged into a second, third, and fourth of these jars, being raised to the level of the operator's eyes, and inspected carefully after each immersion. But the fourth inspection was more prolonged than the others, and after making it the Dweller turned to another table, and laid his victim, still in the grip of the pincers, upon a yellow disc that was let into its surface. As the limp body touched the metal it was galvanised into an activity that kicked and writhed with a furious impotence. Lifted again, it was plunged into a globe of light of a white intensity, against which its body showed transparent, every organ, every internal movement in lung, and artery, and intestine, being clearly indicated.

It appeared that this test had confirmed the unfavourable indications of the fourth immersion, for the body was now withdrawn from the light, and thrown carelessly into a mesh-sided tray upon the floor, in which a number of non-human creatures of unfamiliar kinds were already heaped and squirming. The Dweller pressed a stud with his foot, and the tray slid from the room. I did not follow it further.

I felt almost physically sick with repulsion from the brutality which I had witnessed, as I waited while my companion's mind continued to receive the picture.

After a short time, she broke connection also and addressed herself to me.

“We now know,” she thought, “the fate of at least one of your companions, and it must be a cause of satisfaction to you that you have pursued your inquiries successfully, and that you are relieved of further trouble by the fact that he had a body which was not worth preservation.”

“I felt sure that they were about to destroy him,” I answered, “and could not endure to look longer. How did they do it?”

She showed me an instant’s picture of the scene as her mind had followed it. I saw his still-living body in the jaws of half-a-dozen pig-like animals to whom it had been thrown for their fattening. My companion recognised the repulsion that disturbed my mind with a puzzled wonder, and a sympathetic curiosity.

“I wish,” she thought, “that I could understand the feeling which moves you.”

“I wish,” I answered, “that I could understand how you can reject all violence as evil, and yet condone such actions.”

“I condone nothing,” she replied, with a friendly coolness which tended to reduce the temperature of my own thoughts. “I am not concerned to defend or condemn. I am merely curious of your own repulsion. Your fellow-primitive introduced a body which is diseased or defective. It is so seriously so that the Dwellers, after a patient examination, do not think it either fit to continue, or to be used for their own food, and they therefore use it for the fattening of healthier creatures. What better could they do? If you identify yourself with him, should you not be grateful for the trouble to which they went?”

I paused a moment, knowing that the query required something better than a random answer, and the pause lengthened to silence.

Feeling might still remain, but judgment answered too plainly.

I had forgotten once again that we were alien and inferior creatures, of an uninvited coming. Did not my own race feed one living animal to another in their zoological reservations? Would they have taken the preliminary trouble to examine the body of such a creature? When they decided to reduce the number of the tame and

trusting doves in their capital city, had they sufficient care or intelligence to select the weaker or diseased for destruction?

Did they not kill and torture countless thousands of other creatures, even including those that they had bred and trained to friendship, to gratify curiosity or to gain some possible advantage to themselves in combating the diseases that their vices earned?

Could that which I had seen be properly described as vivisection of any kind? Such things might be; and I had little confidence that the Dwellers would hesitate to practise such infamies, but, in fact, I had not seen them.

I answered simply, "I was unreasonable, and you have taught me wisdom, as you do so often."

"I am less sure of that," she answered doubtfully, "for there is something in your mind by which my own is confused and baffled. I can neither understand it, nor be sure that you are entirely in error. We stand aloof from violence, as you do not, nor do the Dwellers. But you have two standards of judgment. You regard your own violence to others as more tolerable than is theirs to you. This to me appears as though you make assertion of your own inferiority. But I do not know.... Shall we inquire further as to the fate of your second friend?"

"Will you do it for me," I answered, "I do not wish to see it."

She assented mutely, and after a short interval she reported the success of her investigation.

"Your second friend is alive and happy. His body has been cleaned and improved. I cannot discover more, as there is no record of the intentions of those who are dealing with him, but only of the facts which are past already. But I think you would do well to leave him, and inquire no further. Shall we not return to the surface together, where you may find some place of hiding, and perhaps of a permanent security?"

"I cannot do that," I answered definitely. "I could not return to say that I have learnt that he is living, and made no effort to reach him."

My thought reacted more sharply to her suggestion because I feared the adventure as I had not done previously, and was aware

that, should I hesitate, my cowardice might be the harder to conquer. "Did you ascertain how far distant he has been taken?"

I suppose she recognised the finality of my decision, for she made no further protest, but answered quietly.

"He appears to be immediately beneath us, though at a great depth. But we shall have to inquire of the other book of which we were told, to learn the way by which we may reach him."

"Let us do it quickly," I replied, for the thought of Templeton writhing in the clutch of the giant pincers, while the Dweller gazed upon him and decided, coolly and judicially, upon his destruction, would not leave my mind, and I was eager to be diverted by action.

We found the Hall of the Dead Books at the farther end of that in which we were. The dead books were a livid white, and, for the most part, the little hands had withered and fallen. They lay round them in a dry dust, or hung shrivelling from those that had not been long dead.

We found the book we sought without difficulty, and though it did not react to our queries with the urgent impatience of the living, its responses were mechanically prompt and accurate.

I do not tell all that we learnt as we searched the pages of this book, such as the maps of the reverse surface of the interior, and stranger things on which I am entirely silent, because we did not actually see them, and they are too incredible to be lightly added to a narrative which must appear fictitious, in any case, to the obtuse and unimaginative. It is not every one who can realise that the human mind has no real power of invention, nor that it is impossible to add to that which is infinite.

We went down in vision for five hundred miles by one continuing spiral, seeing glimpses of inexplicable things on many levels, until we came to a place in which were two colonies of the older Dwellers, each attempting to postpone the weariness of years by activities of the mind, and who were known (by the nearest synonyms in our language) as the Seekers of Wisdom, and the Seekers of Science. I write *science* rather than *knowledge* because the impression I received was similar to that which has degraded the use of the former

word, so that its implication is of the assertion of speculative theories with a dogmatism equal to that of the theologians whom it despises, and with a lack of imagination and spiritual perception which insures that scientific hand-books of one decade become the derision of the next.

We ascertained and memorised very carefully the passages by which the descending spiral could be reached, and the ways which must be taken when we left it. We could not discover whether they were the channels of crowded traffic, or lonely as the dark tunnels which we had already penetrated, but we had gained much in having learnt the way by which we must go, and our next task was to find an exit from the library.

We should have pursued this purpose, and might have continued the adventure together, and completed it successfully, had we not been drawn aside to observe a movement among the books at the farther side of the library.

It was foolish in itself, and disastrous in its consequence, but the sight which drew us was sufficiently curious to be some excuse for our error.

CHAPTER XIII

SEPARATION

In a large room, or recess, at the side of the library, there was a tank completely covering its floor, and filled, to a depth of about three feet, with a watery liquid, slightly tinged with carmine.

An arrangement of gently-sloping boards had enabled the books of several tiers of shelves to make their way to this tank, into which they plunged, and floated with an appearance of satisfaction, working their hands in such a way that they turned over continually, in a very comical manner.

It required no very great penetration to see that this was a place of refreshment, or nourishment, which was needed to maintain their vitality, but it was one which they could not reach without an intervening danger.

As they crossed the final plank, which was horizontal, they passed over a trap which was so adjusted that it would give way if a sufficient weight were upon it, and resume its position afterwards, and the weight required to spring it was that of a book which was mature and completed.

There was a square vat beneath this trap, filled with an indigo-coloured liquid, into which, as we watched about fifty of these books hurry over the plank, two fell, their little hands struggling frantically as they slowly sank to the bottom, having found a place of death instead of the enjoyment to which they had hurried.

It was reasonable to assume that these activities indicated some directing attendant, and I had little cause for surprise when my companion's thought reached me quietly, "Do not attempt escape. We are discovered. I think you had better leave this to me. Can you be serene and confident?" Her mind closed from me, as we turned to observe the dreaded form of one of the Dwellers advancing upon us.

He stopped as we faced him, and I knew that my companion had already engaged him in the mental combat on which our lives depended. I could not follow their thoughts, which were not intended for me. I never did take the thoughts of the Dwellers with quite the same ease with which I received those of the Amphibians. Now I was conscious only of a tension of conflict, as when the swords of two duellists meet and hold, and either knows that his life is staked upon the strength of wrist that presses his opponent's blade. There was a long minute during which their wills fought in this posture, and then it was as though her blade pressed sideward, inch by inch, the one that met, and inch by inch slid down it.

Size has no absolute meaning. It is only relative, and, even so, it is of little importance. The smallest insect might control the earth as easily as an elephant, had either of them the brains to do so, though the one be many million times the size of the other.

Our protagonist could have crushed us both in one hand, but I felt that her will had triumphed against him. Not entirely; for minutes passed, and I knew that they still warred with contending thoughts which I could not read, but these were rather of the terms of treaty than of an unconditioned hostility.

While they fought, I had endeavoured to maintain the poise of mind which she had asked. I knew that I must not think of Templeton. I fixed my attention upon the giant form which confronted us. He was similar to the others I had seen, except in one particular. He moved with a slight limp, and his left hip showed a long downward scar, deepening to an actual pit at its lower end, and being black, with an aspect of charred wood. It showed that their bodies, however perfect and enduring, were not exempt from the danger of accident.

She turned to me at last. "Come," her mind said only. "There is an open way."

I followed her down a corridor which we had not previously penetrated, and we came to a doorway standing open, by which the attendant had entered, and to which he had directed her. As we

retreated, I saw him bending over the vat, as though he were unaware of our existence.

In the darkness of a passage such as those with which we were already familiar, we sat down together.

“I have made terms,” she commenced at once, “but it was not easy to do, and you may not like them. We are in the Sacred Places, as we had thought likely, and if we should be found here, or should it be known that we have been here, the things we have learnt will certainly cause our destruction. But I have given pledges which must be kept, and it will be as though he had not seen us. I could not have done it, were he not apart from his race, through the wound he bears, and angered by its cause, which does not concern us. He refused my will until he thought of the Seven Causes of Rejection, and his mind wavered.

“But the agreement is this. I must return at once to my own people, by a way which will be unobserved, which he has shown me, telling to none that I have seen him, nor of the things which we have seen and heard since we forced the barrier of silence.

“That was easily agreed; but your case was more difficult. He would have been willing that you should return with me, but we know that that would not be possible. He would have agreed that you should escape to the surface, and hide in the mountain caves, but I knew that you were resolved to seek your friend, and I feared that, if I should make such an agreement for you, you would not keep it. He showed me that it is a way of death to go downward, and I was not willing to leave you to perish. In the end, I have done little, but I have learnt this which may aid you. When you have found your friend, and have learnt (as I think you will), that you can do nothing to aid him, if you can then make your way to the Place of the Seekers of Wisdom, you will be in a sanctuary from which none will seek to remove you. They will question you of the life you left, and so long as you can tell them of new things they will be very sure to keep you in safety. Even beyond that time, there is a possibility that they may transfer you to depths into which our minds have not inquired, and of which I know

nothing, where you might even find that some of your own kind are existing, as do the Bat-wings, on an inner surface of the earth.”

Her mind paused, expectant, to receive my pleasure.

Consternation replied,—confused, hopeless, and yet protesting. Why had she agreed thus to our parting? Had she not herself urged, and did she not again suggest, that Brett was beyond my rescue? Was it not her own plan that I should return to the surface? Two passions, grief and fear, rose in an alliance of opposition. She was my one friend in a world in which I was worse than outcast,—was I to part from her for ever? She was the actual physical strength, as she was the moral confidence, by which I hoped to have overcome the dangers and difficulties of the descent,—having feared to adventure it in her company, was I now to go lonely?

She realised my mind with a sympathy which was without comprehension, as one might sympathise with pain who had never felt it. Perceiving it, she met it with all her strength of will and reason, as she had fought the mind of our recent opponent.

“Did you not say yourself that it was a needful thing that you should go downward? Had I not agreed that we should part, I should have lost all that I have won for both of us. If our meeting has been a pleasure (as it has to me), shall we spoil it with foolish protest now that it is completing? It will not cease to be, because the event is over. Will it not be actual in our minds as long as we desire to recall it?... Do you not think too much of your body, and of the risks which it must take for your service? If you heed it thus it is of less use than even so poor a tool might be under a control more confident.... You think of the period of time which will divide us, should you succeed in that which you have attempted, and return to your own people. But is not your presence here a proof that you are vexed by illusions only? When we consider time or space, we know that they are, and yet we know that they are both impossible.... Were it otherwise, would it not be true that if two companions were to turn apart for a moment, though they were both immortal, and were to continue forward on their different ways, seeking each other for a million million of eons, they would be eternally separate, with a separation

which would increase through all eternity? That is evident; but it is also incredible.... Can you not learn to become fearless of circumstance, so that you may find the freedom of living, and learn the joy of that liberty?"

So her mind struck, thought for thought, against the confusion of the thoughts I showed her.

Then she added, "I will do that which I can to secure the safety of the body which you value so greatly. I will ask my Leaders for their help when I rejoin them. If we should still be allied in the war which is coming, it will be a slight thing to require it. But does it matter so greatly? Is it not true that life is only good while we regard it lightly?"

At this she closed her mind, and rose, and left me. She gave no sign of regret, or of farewell, nor did she hasten nor loiter.

She left me with no further hope of her vitality to give me strength, or spirit to give me confidence, with a feeling of loneliness and despair such as I had not felt before, even in this strange and hostile world.

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE AND WAR

So we parted. Of the months that followed I do not write in detail for sufficient reason. I did not go straight down, as I had hoped to do. Time after time I was driven aside to avoid detection. Under the stress of war the spiral which had been comparatively little used, except at certain seasons, had become an artery of traffic. For many weeks I lived a furtive life of lurking peril. I fed at instant risk of detection, and slept without assurance of safety. On one Level, I went not only in fear of the Dwellers, but of other vermin, larger and better-armed than myself, that maintained a tolerated existence in a place that was given over to the incineration of garbage.

Once I spent a period which I cannot estimate, without food or water, in the interior of a machine of which I did not know the purpose, nor how or when it might become active to my destruction. There I lay, watching with sleepless vigilance for a moment when I might hope to escape unnoticed.

Concerning much I am silent, because it could be nothing more than a confused narrative of inexplicable things.

During the whole time I was conscious that the war continued, and that it was maintained at an increasing cost of life and effort.

In the end, when I had passed the Division, (at which point the gravitation changes, being about four hundred and fifty miles below the surface), and, after many delays and deflections, had reached the place I sought in the Lower Levels, when I was at the very threshold of the domain of the Seekers of Wisdom, a moment's incautious boldness betrayed me, and I was seen and captured. I found myself held in pincers such as those in which I had seen the writhing body of Templeton, and was carried thus into the great laboratory, and laid aside as my captor was called to a more urgent occupation.

The pincers were not uncomfortable. Their jaws were of a rubber-like substance, ductile to the shape of the body they held,—firmly as in a vice, and yet with an almost cushion-like softness.

I was laid so that I hung a few feet over the edge of a table, suspended sideways in the gripping jaws.

Expecting that death or mutilation were only delayed for a moment, I found myself roused to a vivid consciousness of the moving drama around me. I can see it still, in every detail, as, for several hours, I surveyed it.

War had invaded the laboratory, and it had become a theatre of operations, the most seriously injured bodies in which life still lingered being brought down this great distance for the facilities which it provided.

Those who had sought to postpone the desire of death by searching for curious knowledge in the bodies of other creatures, were now working with a recovered energy to repair those of their younger fellows. Those who had boasted that their youth was of an invincible immortality, were now being carried in, broken or maimed or in divided parts, to be repaired or rejected. And those who were past repair were not cast aside for fire or corruption to feed upon them, but the portions of their bodies which were still sound were used for the repair of their more lightly-injured companions, and for this purpose, (if not immediately required), they were hurried into a freezing-chamber, if possible before life had entirely left them.

I saw a surgeon stoop over a body which had been bitten through at the waist, so that it was almost entirely severed, and give a gesture of negation, on which it disappeared at once in the direction from which bodies, or parts of bodies were being brought and thawed as they were required for the repairing of others; muscles, or bones, or missing organs being grafted upon those who retained sufficient life to connect them.

On the distant surface of the world the fighting must have been of a desperate character, for while I was laid aside and forgotten a succession of wounded, most of them with ghastly injuries, were

brought in, till it seemed that the ample floor of the laboratory would be too small to contain them.

One of the last was a woman.

I had only known her before in a moment's vision, but I could not forget or mistake that flame of life as I had seen it assert defiant youth against the deepest laws of the Universe which conceived it. And the flame of life was still there, and still unconquered, though the body was torn and opened, soiled with filth from the upper surface of the earth which had been the place of its conflict, and discoloured in places to a sulphurous yellow from the action of its antagonist.

It was in tribute to that dominating vitality that the attendants paused in their work, the consciousness of my own peril left my mind, and the dying turned to regard her, as she gave her thought to the surgeon who was bending to observe her injuries.

"The tide is turned," (and the thought was less a speech than a song of victory), "the tide is turned, and we have found the way that will triumph. Eight of them we have brought down in the place of fighting, on the Grey Beaches of the Amphibians,—eight we have brought down, and the rest are scattered.... Tell the women from me that every one who is above the Youth of Motherhood is to go upward. It is the last order I give them. There are better things than the delights of the Five Approaches. Tell them that I have found death, and I do not fear it." Her eyes met those of the surgeon who was considering her injuries, and her thought was derisive. "Can you not see that I am spoiled beyond your mending? Am I one who would walk crutched who have been the Centre of Circles? You will pass me very quickly into the Place of Freezing. There are two women that follow whom you may repair from that which is uninjured, if you lose no time in the doing. You will not wait till I die...?" I was aware of a note of protest in the mind of the surgeon that met her own, and was swept aside, weak as a bird's wing in the tempest. It was not his protest alone, but that of all, the injured and the attendants, who heard her. There was one thought that broke through like a cry of agony, and called my attention to a wounded form from which it

came, which had been carried in behind her. With a surprise of recognition, I knew my captor of the first night,—he who had called in sleep for that which he would never gain.

But their thoughts were beaten down by the indignation with which she perceived them. “Do you think to thwart my will because I am fallen?” It seemed that her thought swept the other protests aside to reach the form that was behind her. “*You* who would have come a thousand miles had I called you? Who would have waited to know my pleasure like a crouching dog. You have followed well where the stings were striking. Will you follow now where I lead you?”

“Yes,” he said, “I will follow.”

There was no further protest. I heard the gates withdrawn, and the two litters, with their living burdens, passed into the Place of Freezing.

I saw that eons pass, but Love and War will continue.

CHAPTER XV

RELEASE

I remained for several hours gripped in that soft inflexible pressure, knowing not what of death or torture or mutilation I must undergo when they had leisure for my insignificance, and watching with an extraordinary mental clarity and aloofness the operations by which they built up the bodies of some of the less hopelessly injured with the limbs or organs of those who were themselves beyond saving.

But the time came when the pincers were lifted once again, and I was aware of the hatefully impartial eyes which considered my destiny. At this extremity of peril I recalled the methods of the Amphibians. Desperately I fought for the self-control which I could not gain: desperately I fought to reach some contact with the mind on which my fate depended. But I failed utterly. It was natural for the creatures he examined to protest and struggle, and the fact did not interest his mind. My thoughts were nothing to him, and he did not heed them.

But I was more fortunate than Templeton. Instead of being immersed in the successive jars, I was plunged immediately into the white light which had condemned him. The sensation was not unpleasant,—might, indeed, be described as ecstatic for a mind untroubled. My body tingled with life. Looking down, I was conscious of a new nakedness. I could see everything which my body held, and yet through them. The activities in every vein were transparent.

I was held there for some time, and then lifted out, examined, and plunged back for a further period. When I expected to be thrown aside, I was carried, still held in that vice-like grip, to a further room,

where I was thrust into one of a great number of little cages which lined its walls.

I considered my position, and was not sure that I might not come to envy even the fate of Templeton. The operation I had undergone had already disfigured me. There was no hair, long or short, left upon me. Even my hands showed an unaccustomed bareness. I looked round, and I cannot say what I saw. It is best forgotten.

I will only say that Harry Brett was in an opposite cage, and though I called over to him, he did not know me. He was quite mad, and it was true that he was quite happy. Like a child, he enjoyed to watch the colour of his flesh change ... but I have resolved that I will not tell it.

... A Dweller passed before my cage, thinking slowly and clearly. He inquired for a Primitive of the False-skin Age who was claimed by the Amphibians. With a stir of hope I responded.

After a moment's questioning, he allowed my identity. He told me, "You are released at the request of the Leaders of the Amphibians. There has been fighting on the Grey Beaches, at which they helped us to conquer. They might have had what they would, but they asked for this thing only." He looked at me with more curiosity than contempt, and I knew that he would have cut me open without scruple had he felt free to do so, to discover the secret of my importance. He went on, "You are to be given to the Seekers of Wisdom. You will be safe with them so long as you tell them some new thing continually.... It needn't be true,—that doesn't matter," he added more to himself than to me.

He lifted me from the cage, and walked on at a quiet pace, and I trotted behind him.

I was with the Seekers of Wisdom many months, till the year was completed.

During that time I was examined incessantly on every detail of the civilisation from which I came. I defended it as best I might, and I explained it where I was able. But I found that I knew few things thoroughly, and my explanations halted continually. I met a readier

understanding of social life from creatures which were more after my own kind than had been possible to the Amphibian mind, but I was still vexed by the contempt with which my race was regarded. I reflected that the antipathy which we feel for anything which is different from our own customs might be theirs also, and that they might be less than fair to us in consequence. Brief as our own lives are, we know that many of us live too long to remain in harmony with the changes which a generation brings. I could not see that their own methods of life were as far advanced as they thought them.

Yet the reactions of their minds will not leave me as they learnt of the filth of our polluted rivers, and the pall of our blinded skies.

I must still see, as they saw them, the pity of our neglected land, the folly that leaves our fields half barren while the shadow of starvation is but ten years distant, the foulness of our congested cities, the insane worship of movement which leaves its thousands slain or maimed unpitied in our bloody streets....

But to write of these things in detail would be to begin a book when it is time for the ending.

I lost the count of days, and the time came unlooked for when the year was over....

CHAPTER XVI

RETURN

“Danby,” I said, “you might fetch me an overcoat.”

Having been provided with this useful garment, I sat once more at the familiar fireside.

I looked at the clock, which had indicated three minutes after eight when I had shaken hands with the Professor, with a disliked solemnity, before I commenced the experiment. The hand was now at seven minutes after the hour.

I had noticed a lump of half-burnt coal that had poised perilously over the top bar of the grate as I had risen to leave them. It broke now, as I gazed, and fell noisily into the ashpan.

Yes,—it was the same fire,—the same night. It would be no use to tell them.

And yet I saw that they were impatient for me to begin, but how could I? How could I expect them to believe?—And so much was beyond the reach of words to tell it.

“Did you find them?” said the Professor, with a note of suppressed anxiety in his voice which would have been less surprising from one of the others, and which reminded me that the question was not merely of my own adventures. I realised the different values of that room from those of the world that I had left behind (or before) me.

“I’m afraid you won’t see them again,” I answered, “Templeton is dead. Brett is insane, and can’t live much longer. They are torturing him horribly. At least, I don’t know whether that is a fair word. He enjoys being tortured.”

Then I told them, in a confused way, with many interruptions and discursions. Frequently I saw the doubt in the eyes of one or other, and then they looked at me, and something in my appearance caused the doubt to die.

I rose, and looked in the pier-glass.

“Professor,” I said, with a moment’s bitterness, “I shouldn’t have asked for an overcoat only. I need a skull-cap.”

But it was not only that I was so utterly hairless. My face was different,—younger, and more virile, and there was a subtle change in the eyes, which I could not define. It was the face of a stranger.

I became conscious also of a bodily alertness and vigour, very different from the physical conditions of the earlier evening.

“It may grow,” he answered mildly. I don’t think he was hopeful. I know I wasn’t.

“I think you’ve made me a freak for this world. Perhaps I’d better go back,” I said, thoughtlessly.

“Would you go forward again?” The Professor’s voice was eager.

“I don’t know——” I began, doubtfully.

“Isn’t he the principal witness for the defence?” Bryant interpolated.

“I think,” said the Professor, “he might better be described as the sole witness for the prosecution. But I don’t think that we have any legal responsibility. They took the risk freely. Besides, they’re not dead yet.—Of course, we’re all sorry, but exploration is always hazardous. Really,” he said seriously, “we have postponed their deaths for a rather long period.”

Certainly, the legal position was somewhat complicated, but I felt that there must be a flaw in the argument somewhere. I couldn’t help the retort, “Just as you’ve prolonged the life of my hair for the same period.”

The Professor was not often disconcerted, but this silenced him for a moment. Then he said, “But you have come back, and they have not. Surely, even you can see the difference.”

“I would rather see my hair where it used to be.”

“Hair,” said the Professor, “has become a useless parasitic growth, which we are in process of discarding. You are only ahead of your time.”

“A bald head,” I replied, and felt the joke was out of place as I spoke it. The Professor ignored me, and Bryant reverted to the earlier discussion. “I don’t see how we can have any legal trouble, though it may be awkward to explain the disappearances of two guests in succession. Mrs. Brett will have something to say. But isn’t there a law that you can’t accuse any one of murder unless you can exhibit a body?”

“I believe that is so,” said the Professor, with relief in his voice. “I suppose that is why they always dig up the garden.”

This roused young Danby. “They won’t dig up this one.—Not till the bulbs are over.”

“Oh, but they will,” I retorted. I felt that they deserved that much. Why hadn’t they gone themselves, instead of passing on the risk to others? “The police are most painstaking in these matters, especially when one of their own number is concerned. You mustn’t forget that Templeton was a retired inspector. Why not divert their minds to the cellar?—a few bricks out of place, and a little soil, and just a trace of quicklime. They’d never miss that.... They’ll dig for a week.”

I saw that the Professor thought my levity was ill-timed. There was nothing new in that. But Bryant gave a fresh turn to the discussion. “You say that Brett isn’t dead? Suppose he comes back while the investigation’s proceeding?”

We looked at one another in consternation. In the condition in which I had seen him last he would be an awkward fact to explain to the official mind. I imagined the sarcasm of the prosecuting counsel as I told my tale in the witness-box. Doubtless, the dock would follow. The Professor was the only one who was unmoved by the suggestion.

“He cannot return now. Were he doing so, he would have been back before to-night.”

“I have no doubt he is dead,” I added, “I think they had nearly finished him when I saw him.”

“Yes,” said the Professor, “he will die during the year.” He was the only one of us who was not confused in his tenses. He thought a moment, and then turned to me seriously. “I regret the capillary

singularity of which you complain, but you will admit that you did not go without warning. I am about to ask you a further favour. I want you to write a careful narrative of your experiences, making it as accurate as is possible to your journalistic mind. For this narrative, if it be written promptly and clearly, I will give you £2000. I shall publish it,—as fiction, if necessary,—and may recover the money.

“Afterwards, I hope that, in the interests of science, rather than for any prospective pecuniary advantage, you will consent to explore this strange world somewhat further. You have shown considerable adroitness in avoiding its dangers, and you will have a great advantage over a less experienced adventurer.”

He looked for my reply with a very real anxiety, and I answered slowly.

“I will write the book willingly, but as to going again,—well, I wouldn’t do it alone. Perhaps, if Clara would come with me....”

“*Clara!*” exclaimed the Professor.

“Yes,” I said, “she might.... I know her better than you do.... I’ll think it over.”

And so, here is the book. It isn’t all I saw or heard, and it leaves much unexplained. How can a year of such experiences be clearly told, or crowded into a single volume? But I have tried to be accurate.

As to adventuring once again,—well, it depends on Clara. I’ll ask her now.

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