

THE HEART'S AWAKENING

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I. PLUNDER FROM THE SEA.



WANING moon, vast and vague, hung above the icy blue of dawn, and all down the coast the sea, beating upon the rocks, sang to the land a thriddy song, desolate as the wind that blew

from the distant mountains.

The mountains lay to the east, the sea to the west, to the north lay mountains, and to the south a vast plain bordered by the sea and reaching to the eastern foothills; and north, and east, and almost to the sea-edge in the south, the forms and fumes of volcanoes stamped and stained the sky.

Some inhabitant of Mars, had he suddenly been placed here, would have stood fascinated and held by two things—the enormity of that awful moon, so huge, so ghostly, yet so vividly real and, despite its vagueness, so evidently a solid body and not a cloud, and the activity of those volcanic hills in the midst of the absolute and utter desolation. Then, had he stood long enough and scanned the scene attentively, other things stranger than the moon, or the silence, or the furiously active hills, might have drawn his attention. Those great rocks by the sea border in the middle distance, could it possibly be that they were in motion? That flight of giant birds, breaking the sky now above the hills, was that an illusion?

Then, had he carried here with him from Mars a human intelligence, he would without doubt have forgotten all

else in contemplation of the man and woman coming up from the sea-edge and making eastward along the flat lands in the direction of the distant mountains. The woman was walking first, laden with a bundle of sea refuse collected beneath the light of that vanishing moon—a light that had been brilliant almost as the light of day. She was carrying the bundle by a thong of hide on which the fur still remained, and from amongst the fucus and sea-wrack the claw of an enormous crab hung loose.

The man following the woman carried nothing but a club, black as ebony, made from some heavy wood and charred into shape by fire. They wore no semblance of clothing, and the man, as he walked swinging the club, gazed about wildly and vaguely, sweeping all the landscape near and far, to right, to left, in front, and now and again, glancing back, behind.

His gaze from time to time, losing its vagueness, concentrated on some point, and then became piercing and hard as a dagger. He seemed the incarnation of watchfulness—tireless, mechanical, eternal watchfulness. The woman looked neither to right nor left. She carried the load.

Her legs were marked by old scars, as were her sides and arms. The man was terrible with old wounds long cicatrised, and his face wore scars that were features.

They seemed to have travelled all their lives through some great bramble that had clutched and torn at them without being able to stay them or kill them. Their appearance, far from being pitiable, was terrific, emblematic of the truth that Man, though Nature has denied him fangs and claws, has always been the most potent and terrible animal in the world, and ever will be.

II. THE VALLEY OF THE LITTLE HORSES.

As the sun broke above the eastern hills, and the level beams struck across from the hill shadows to the blue blaze of the sea, the air became filled with a dolorous piping and droning. Millions of squat-shaped lizards and flying and crawling insects were giving tongue, and from the rock shadows round about creatures like plucked chickens, with huge membranous wings, fluttered up and fled away on the air to right and left before the advance of the human beings.

The man noted everything, missed nothing of what was happening within reach of his eyes and ears and skin, for his skin, though absolutely indifferent to changes of temperature, told him with unflinching sureness of the approach of those awful thunderstorms that shook the world to its foundations, and of the earth storms that now and then made the hills heave and tumble to the light of new blazing volcanoes, the great bogs to break their beds, and the geysers to roar and thump and boom.

And just as his senses told him all things without language, so his mind accepted all things without question, and saw all things as they are. No thing had for him a name, not even the woman tramping before him.

Speech was only a means of communication, a method of expressing sudden anger or dislike, rebuke or encouragement.

Now, as the man tramped behind his mate, he would call out occasionally, if she slowed her pace or paused for any reason, "Hike-Hike-Hike!" a sound monotonous and hard as the clapping of a rattle. The voices of the pterodactyls clacking in the distance were no less human, and the voice of the far-off sea scarcely less articulate.

They were making across the boulder-strewn plain towards a spot where every now and then a white plume rose into the air, wavered, and vanished.

It was a geyser, and, as they neared it, its voice came to them on the wind; and as they passed it, the water spouted and splattered, booming up, snarling, snorting, and spraying them as they went by, absolutely heedless of it.

Beyond the geyser the ground dipped into a vast basin, a valley where rank grass grew and great boulders stood about like stone figures, and little forms moved here and there singly and in groups.

They were horses—tiny horses of a height scarcely reaching the height of the man's knee, wandering about like moving toys,

cropping the grass, and scattering now at the sight of the new-comers with shrill cries and a sound like the beating of little drums.

In a moment not a horse was to be seen, and the man and woman were the only moving things in all that vast valley, with the exception of the lizards that haunted the rock shadows—enormous dun-grey lizards, a dying tribe, sluggish and so given over to inertia that they scarcely moved from the path of the human beings, lying like creatures in a great infirmary, patients given over by Nature and doomed to die.

They were the last patterns of an extinct age, a fashion in form that Nature was discarding.

The great pterodactyls sometimes made raids here when food was scarce elsewhere, but the great pterodactyls, for some mysterious reason, dreaded the little horses, and the dying tribe was left in comparative peace.

The rock shadows were now shortening, and they had almost vanished when the man and woman reached the rising ground that marked the end of the valley and the beginning of a country hard and fierce and fantastic with the fantasy of basalt. Giants seemed to have fought here with rocks, and left behind them the silence that held the place, which, seen from a distance, had the appearance of a broken plain. But it was not that. To cross it, you had to follow gullies that sank hundreds of feet between walls of basaltic rock, cañons that seemed valleys in a hilly country.

III. THE HOME OF THE DYING PTERODACTYLS.

THEY were nearly through the place when they came upon a horror.

Where the cañon they were following broadened out to begin the ascent to higher and less dismal ground, a croaking sound filled the air, and was amplified by the cliff echoes; and now, amongst the rocks and perched on the rocks, might be seen vast forms, like the forms of birds that had lost their feathers, birds with huge, membranous, half-folded wings, birds with the heads of demons, spectres that had once flown, but would never fly again.

They were the sick and old of the great pterodactyls. This was their hospital and last home. No longer able to hunt and seek their food, they came here to die, and, being things almost indestructible, they did not die quickly.

In a more hungry land they would have been sought out, even in this last retreat, and devoured by all sorts of creatures; but in this world food was plentiful for all who could pursue and strike, or even move about to graze under the protection of armour-plating, and these bloodless things were left in peace. Besides, though capable of being easily attacked by their own kind, they were still capable of evading the attentions of footed creatures by fluttering to the rock shelves and the higher rocks.

The wayfarers, steadily pursuing their path, took no notice of these familiar ghosts or the ghastly and faded odour of the air around them, but pushed on to the higher ground, where they paused for the first time in their journey, whilst the woman, putting down her bundle, produced some raw fish for the mid-day meal.

It was now slightly after noon, and from this high point of ground the country lay spread before the eye far and wide—a terrific desolation lit by the sun for the blowing wind that seemed its only denizen.

As they fed, the woman sat with eyes fixed before her, chewing as a cow chews the cud. Thought with her was a half-brother of sleep, her life a gigantic labour in a dream.

The man as he ate stood erect and watchful. He had no need for rest; he never rested, except when he slept, stretched out in the cave that was their hiding-place and home.

The cave was still far away.

Once every season, when the new grass was showing, they left it, drawn by some irresistible instinct to the sea. The sea began to talk to them and call to them with a voice that was not to be resisted. All over the land this migration of cave-dwellers to the sea took place at the same season, and the eternal warfare and feuds between man and man ceased.

Life by the sea-edge was safe from human attack—the migrants seemed under a common pledge to observe peace—but here it was different, with the sea out of sight and in a country that seemed constructed with a view to ambush.

IV. THE ATTACK.

It was long after noon, amongst a country broken and boulder-strewn, that the ever-expected happened. Something whistled past the man's head, and a disc-shaped stone smashed itself to pieces against a mass of basalt, and from the rocks around three

forms appeared, shouted one to the other, and then came on the wayfarers with a rush.

They were armed with great stones, and the man with the club, attacked by two adversaries, and knowing that they would only strike with the stones when at close quarters, ran, taking a half-circle round a rock and instantly doubling back again. He met his first pursuer full face, and dashed his chin up with the end of the club before the stone could be raised for attack. Leaving the corpse, he faced like lightning towards the second attacker, who had drawn off, and was now rushing in with stone upraised. It flew, was evaded, and now the stone-thrower, running and screaming, was the man attacked.

The club man held on his heels, doubling as he doubled, twisting as he twisted, and now, as the pursued took a straight line, gaining on him as a greyhound on a hare. A watcher would have seen the club rising as the striking distance was slowly gained, and then falling, lethal and swift, and so perfectly aimed that the head of the stricken man flew outward from the crown, and he fell as if cut off at the knees.

Without a second glance at him, the club man wheeled and came running to where the woman and the third attacker lay fighting and struggling on the ground. This man had got the blow of the stone in, catching the woman on the side, but without entirely disabling her. The great crab and the bundle of sea refuse was the prize that had drawn the plunderers, and they were the objects for which now the woman was risking her life—she who could have obtained safety at the outset by dropping her load.

The man with the club drew near the strugglers at a swift run, half bending, trailing the club behind him and crouching, like a cat prepared to spring, when he reached them.

The bundle was lying loose on the ground, and the struggling forms were so interlocked together that to strike might have been death to the woman. She had her teeth fixed firmly in the shoulder of her assailant, her left arm was round his body, and her right hand fixed in his hair. As they rolled over and over, biting and fighting like mad cats, the right hand of the man suddenly shot out, grabbing along the ground as if in search of the weapon it could use so well—a stone. The man with the club instantly saw his chance, and brought the club down with an awful blow on the hand.

Just as the octopus drops from its prey when the brain is pierced, so did the man on the ground when his hand was shattered. He fell away from the woman, she sprang to her feet, and the man with the club struck home. He struck solemnly and hard, like a workman completing a good job; then he rearranged the bundle, from which the precious crab had nearly broken loose, and the woman standing by let him fasten it upon her.

It had been a great fight, yet there was no jubilation shown by the victors; the

plunder the returning travellers of their fish and crabs.

They never attacked unless in superior numbers. These three had fancied that a man and a woman would be fair game for them, and they lay now amidst the rocks, never to fancy anything more, whilst the man and the woman passed on.

They could see now the low range of hills beyond which lay their home; but the range was a good way off still, and between them and it lay a bog that was bad to pass—a

lake of mud through which a ridge of firm land ran, making a road. They reached this place and began to cross, walking warily, whilst the woman, for the first time on the journey, looked incessantly to right and to left of her, as though dreading some trap or antagonist.

They had nearly reached the opposite bank, when the mud on their right suddenly heaved and broke, and a vague head, that seemed roughly compounded of mud broke up, rose on a long ringed neck and shot towards them. It was met by a blow of the club and collapsed, sinking back into the mud, which closed on it.

V. THE LAST HALT.

It was nearly sundown when they reached the crest of the hills, and here the woman stopped. She let the bundle slip from her back, and then, just as though all life were going out of her, she fell together and sank to the ground. The man, uncomprehending, stood and looked

at her. The blow of the great stone had inflicted a mortal injury, affecting the heart and lungs, yet she had carried her load and walked forward to the last. It was impossible any longer to stand, impossible to lie on her left side. She lay supporting herself on her right arm, breathing hard and looking up at the man.

From the hill-top, away beyond the broken plain, could be seen the sea, nearly touched by the setting sun, to the east the volcanic mountains, all mauve and purple



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three dead men might have been three rocks that they had succeeded in climbing over, for all the attention they paid to them. The crab was everything, and the bundle of sea refuse. There was two days' food in the crab, and the refuse was mostly edible seaweed. The migrants to the sea always returned laden with whatever sea-food they could find to bring back, and this fact was known to the few men who did not migrate, preferring to remain in the solitudes, hearing no call from the sea, but always ready to

and grey, and between the mountains and the sea-line no living thing or sign of life, with the exception of the two forms upon the hill-crest.

The woman's eyes were still fixed on the man, filled with a wild perplexity, and her breathing, heavy and laboured, was that of a creature drawing to its last gasp.

The man squatted down beside her, knowing nothing of the extent of her injury, knowing nothing of that last desperate effort that enabled her to climb to the top of the last barrier dividing them from their home. He saw the light now fading out of her eyes. He placed his hand upon her chest. He felt her body arch upwards, stiffen, and collapse. Then he knew that she was dead.

She would never walk again, or move, or help him or be with him.

He knew little of pain, and he had never known sorrow. His memory was so vague that in his mind the woman had always been with him.

And now she would never be with him again.

He looked at her, and then looked away to the great setting sun and the blazing western sea. Then, as if stricken by the desolation that lay before him, he raised his face to the blind skies above, calling to them in a lamentable voice, waking the echoes of the hills to repeat what they had never heard before.

