

The Last Dream of Bwona Khubla

From steaming lowlands down by the equator, where monstrous orchids blow, where beetles big as mice sit on the tent-ropes, and fireflies glide about by night like little moving stars, the travelers went three days through forests of cactus till they came to the open plains where the oryx are.

And glad they were when they came to the water-hole, where only one white man had gone before, which the natives know as the camp of Bwona Khubla, and found the water there.

It lies three days from the nearest other water, and when Bwona Khubla had gone there three years ago, what with malaria with which he was shaking all over, and what with disgust at finding the water-hole dry, he had decided to die there, and in that part of the world such decisions are always fatal. In any case he was overdue to die, but hitherto his amazing resolution, and that terrible strength of character that so astounded his porters, had kept him alive and moved his safari on.

He had had a name no doubt, some common name such as hangs as likely as not over scores of shops in London; but that had gone long ago, and nothing identified his memory now to distinguish it from the memories of all the other dead but "Bwona Khubla," the name the Kikuyus gave him.

There is no doubt that he was a fearful man, a man that was dreaded still for his personal force when his arm was no longer able to lift the kiboko, when all his men knew he was dying, and to this day though he is dead.

Though his temper was embittered by malaria and

the equatorial sun, nothing impaired his will, which remained a compulsive force to the very last, impressing itself upon all, and after the last, from what the Kikuyus say. The country must have had powerful laws that drove Bwona Khubla out, whatever country it was.

On the morning of the day that they were to come to the camp of Bwona Khubla all the porters came to the travelers' tents asking for dow. Dow is the white man's medicine, that cures all evils; the nastier it tastes, the better it is. They wanted dow this morning to keep away devils, for they were near the place where Bwona Khubla died.

The travelers gave them quinine.

By sunset they came to Campini Bwona Khubla and found water there. Had they not found water many of them must have died, yet none felt any gratitude to the place, it seemed too ominous, too full of a doom, too much harassed almost by unseen, irresistible things.

And all the natives came again for dow as soon as the tents were pitched, to protect them from the last dreams of Bwona Khubla; which they say had stayed behind when the last safari left taking Bwona Khubla's body back to the edge of civilization to show to the white men there that they had not killed him, for the white men might not know that they durst not kill Bwona Khubla.

And the travelers gave them more quinine, so much being bad for their nerves, and that night by the campfires there was no pleasant talk, all talking at once of meat they had eaten and cattle that each one owned, but a gloomy silence hung by every fire and the little canvas shelters. They told the white men that Bwona Khubla's city, of which he had thought at the last (and where the natives believed he was once a king), of which he had raved till the loneliness rang with his raving, had settled down all about them; and they were afraid, for it was so strange a city, and wanted more dow. And the two travelers gave them more quinine,

for they saw real fear in their faces, and knew they might run away and leave them alone in that place, that they, too, had come to fear with an almost equal dread, though they knew not why. And as the night wore on their feeling of boding deepened, although they had shared three bottles or so of champagne that they meant to keep for days when they killed a lion.

This is the story that each of those two men tell, and which their porters corroborate, but then a Kikuyu will always say whatever he thinks is expected of him.

The travelers were both in bed and trying to sleep but not able to do so because of an ominous feeling. That mournfullest of all the cries of the wild, the hyæna like a damned soul lamenting, strangely enough had ceased. The night wore on to the hour when Bwona Khubla had died three or four years ago, dreaming and raving of "his city"; and in the hush a sound softly arose, like a wind at first, then like the roar of beasts, then unmistakably the sound of motors—motors and motor busses.

And then they saw, clearly and unmistakably they say, in that lonely desolation where the equator comes up out of the forest and climbs over jagged hills—they say they saw London.

There could have been no moon that night, but they say there was a multitude of stars. Mists had come rolling up at evening about the pinnacles of unexplored red peaks that clustered round the camp. But they say the mist must have cleared later on; at any rate they swear they could see London, see it and hear the roar of it. Both say they saw it not as they knew it at all, not debased by hundreds of thousands of lying advertisements, but transfigured, all its houses magnificent, its chimneys rising grandly into pinnacles, its vast squares full of the most gorgeous trees, transfigured and yet London.

Its windows were warm and happy, shining at night, the lamps in their long rows welcomed you, the public-houses were gracious jovial places; yet it was London.

They could smell the smells of London, hear London songs, and yet it was never the London that they knew; it was as though they had looked on some strange woman's face with the eyes of her lover. For of all the towns of the earth or cities of song; of all the spots there be, unhallowed or hallowed, it seemed to those two men then that the city they saw was of all places the most to be desired by far. They say a barrel organ played quite near them, they say a coster was singing, they admit that he was singing out of tune, they admit a cockney accent, and yet they say that that song had in it something that no earthly song had ever had before, and both men say that they would have wept but that there was a feeling about their heart-strings that was far too deep for tears. They believe that the longing of this masterful man, that was able to rule a safari by a glance of his eye, and could terrify natives without raising a hand, had been so strong at the last that it had impressed itself deeply upon nature and had caused a mirage that may not fade wholly away, perhaps for several years.

I tried to establish by questions the truth or reverse of this story, but the two men's tempers had been so spoiled by Africa that they were not up to a cross-examination. They would not even say if their camp-fires were still burning. They say that they saw the London lights all round them from eleven o'clock till midnight, they could hear London voices and the sound of the traffic clearly; and over all, a little misty perhaps, but unmistakably London, arose the great metropolis.

About midnight London quivered a little and grew more indistinct, the sound of the traffic began to dwindle away, voices seemed farther off, ceased altogether, and all was quiet once more where the mirage shimmered and faded, and a bull rhinoceros coming down through the stillness snorted, and watered at the Carlton Club.