

THE OPAL ARROW-HEAD

BY LORD DUNSANY

“ONCE on the Amber River,” said Locquialton.

We almost held our breath and were suddenly silent round that old table where Locquialton sat. There were five of us there besides him. An old stained table and a low room in an inn; a fire-place behind Locquialton, huge and old. You could almost have burned trees on it. The embers were low now, the fire dying; it was dark outside, and inside a few candles. Pale-blue cigar smoke filled much of the room. As I see it now, I see the pale-blue smoke, the dark blue of the night beyond the uncurtained windows, the huge chestnut-brown table, and Locquialton leaning forward. I hear that voice of his as we heard it then, “Once on the Amber River,” suddenly out of the silence. We knew what a traveler he had been. That is to say, we did not know; no man knew. We remembered long years and no Locquialton. No Locquialton anywhere, no rumor, and then his return. We knew Locquialton’s silences. And then—why, then, the world invented tales for itself, tales of amazing rivers and unknown lands where he went. He came back perfectly silent; nobody knew his business; none knew where he went and none knew why. And then one day as we smoked, “Once on the Amber River.” The words held us spellbound. And seated there so long ago, he told us one of his stories. None of us had ever heard him speak of himself before. Soon afterward other things happened. So this, as far as any one ever heard, is Locquialton’s only story. I cannot vouch for it, and no man can. I knew Locquialton as well as any man and know he was grimly unimaginative.

“Once on the Amber River”—those words alone I remember as he said them. And the rest of the story, after this lapse of time, I rather see as pictures that floated under the pale-blue cigar smoke, past our attentive faces, going away from the fire-place. And the story—it throws no light on the man, for it is as strange as himself, I think the strangest story I ever heard; but of that the reader shall judge, if I can remember it.

Once on the Amber River Locquialton was in a boat, a long boat that he did not describe, with thirteen rowers, black men; he had some strange name for it. He was so far from civilization then that at evening he used to take out a white-linen collar, all starched, and look at it. I imagine that he gazed on it wistfully, thinking of London ballrooms, but that I do not know, you never got what Locquialton was thinking. He just mentioned that collar. It gave me the idea of the sort of place better than latitude and longitude. Then he told us about the songs the rowers sang, odd songs. But I cannot remember that, though I see to-day Locquialton’s eyes as he spoke of them. And after that they came to the bend of the river, and the reed hut on the left bank, and a white man there. A white man all alone by the Amber River. Locquialton landed and went up to the hut; he thought the black men looked contemptuous of it, but could not tell, though he knew them as well as most; it was in any case poor in comparison to a native hut, no more than six feet high, about the size of a summer-house. And here this man lived alone. He was sitting outside his hut when Locquialton came, a man with a yellow beard, looking genially out at the river as though he

owned the earth. Behind the hut was a heap of untidy boxes, and from these Locquialton says he brought two bottles of the best champagne he had ever tasted. This strange white man would not drink himself, saying that he despised champagne, and looking on with a kind of amused toleration while Locquialton drank. His only talk was of mountains.

Locquialton had news to give him that was worth little less than ivory in such a place as that. He could have told him what the latest dance was in London, the latest song, the new election cry. He could have told him just the kind of gloves men wore now when they went dancing; he could have brought back something that men have lost who live by the Amber River; and yet this strange man spoke only of mountains. He seemed content where he was, at ease, even happy, yet he dwelt on alluvial plains that the Amber River divided, where there was not a mountain for hundreds and hundreds of miles, and all his talk was of mountains. Mountains were clearly to him what London must have been to Locquialton, the London of lights and dances.

And then, before they parted, this smiling, self-satisfied man raised a sort of door in the floor and drew an old, old bottle out of a box. With extreme care he poured out a small wineglassful, offering none to his guest, and carefully corked the bottle and put it back in its resting-place and closed the door in the floor. He drank, and his spirit seemed to leave Locquialton there, sitting over his champagne, and went smiling away with endless beatitude, seeming to have no part in mortal cares or any troubles of earth. If Locquialton spoke to his host the blue eyes and the tolerant smile looked far beyond him. He spoke no more nor noticed Locquialton, or if he noticed him it was only as a man infinitely happy, infinitely wise, watches small children quarrel. We gathered that Locquialton was rude to him, and still more rude when he could not pos-

sibly ruffle his temper. Then he got up and left him, having never met such a man. He went down to the boat and the black men rowed him away.

A year later, coming back, rowing against the current, Locquialton looked in there again. The hut was as shabby as ever. The man with the yellow beard sat blandly outside in the shade of it with the same look in his eyes, as though he owned infinity. And this time Locquialton got his story. He got it by talking about mountains to his host's heart's content. That man loved mountains, though he lived as far from them as Locquialton was then from the lights of cities.

His name, he said, was MacDonald, and in his youth he had been a mountaineer, climbing high places everywhere; and so he had come one day to the Huthneth Mountains. They were seated inside the hut at the table over that grand champagne which MacDonald had despised, and he took off his old jacket and rolled back his flannel shirt and showed Locquialton a scar running along his left shoulder-blade. An arrow-wound, he said. It had come one day over the rocks in the mountains, very near his neck, but had just caught the edge of the shoulder-blade and slid away to the left. They broke off the end of the arrow when he got home, and the doctor had cut it out the way it was going—you can't cut an arrow out any other way because of the barbs—and then they had cleaned it and looked at it. MacDonald's voice grew grave, even after the lapse of years. Sick though he was, he had left his bed at once and had traveled as far as he could from any mountains and never seen mountains since. For the arrow-head was an opal. [MacDonald drew out of his waistcoat pocket and handed across to his guest such an opal as you would never find in any human market, a blue like the moon at midnight flashing in lakes at noon.] Well, as Locquialton said, there was no describing it. And in the core of it was a long streak of scarlet, more like a flame

caught in ice, Locquialton said, or a tiny bit of a stormy sunset frozen. He wondered what heaven was like if you could see it far off. That opal set you thinking, but you couldn't describe it. "Only the gnomes use that," MacDonald had said. Locquialton had looked at the vicious barbed arrow-head and nodded. "I knew I'd offended the gnomes," MacDonald said.

And Locquialton said, "You must have done something pretty annoying to them," or some such thing. And MacDonald had been silent awhile; and Locquialton went on with that rare champagne. And then MacDonald sighed. A sigh from that smiling, self-satisfied, contented man had astonished Locquialton; it was like a storm on a lake. MacDonald sighed and said:

"I am going back to the mountains."

Still Locquialton was silent; and his silence somehow brought the secret out, as he had thought it would.

"I had stolen Gorgondy," MacDonald said.

Locquialton did not need to tell any of us who sat in that somber inn what Gorgondy was; we had all read the *Last Book of Wonder* and knew it to be the hoarded wine of the treasure-house of the gnomes.

"I had stolen Gorgondy," MacDonald said, "and the gnomes were after me."

And then he told Locquialton how the last bottle of hammered iron was very nearly empty under the floor of his hut and he could never go back to drinking champagne or any stuff like that; he would just as soon drink water. And life without Gorgondy might be all very well for those who had never tasted it, but life without it to those who had was no more worth while living than that Greek fellow had once said it was, anyway.

"What Greek fellow?" we asked Locquialton.

"Oh, that man who said," Locquialton answered, "that it was best of all not to be born, and after that to die young."

"Oh yes; go on," we said.

MacDonald had sighed and was soon going back to the mountains. And then he had told Locquialton of the talks he had had with old peasants down in the valleys, men who talk little at first and then give you some treasured legend, and they knew of a gnome in those mountains that never missed. The peasants there believe that the chammois never die naturally; they said that this gnome got them, a brown man, beard and all, the tint of the rocks exactly, the gnome that never missed. And he was the one, MacDonald thought, that guarded the treasure, on the other side of the rocks, the gnome whose arrow-head he had in his waistcoat pocket. The windiest day he knew, MacDonald said, and the gnome must have aimed at his spine, yet, well as he must have known the wind in those valleys, it had flicked the arrow an inch more or less than the gnome had allowed. He was going back now, for life was no good without Gorgondy; and he sighed, and muttered under his breath, "The gnome that never missed."

"For that matter," Locquialton said to him, "nor do I."

They talked it over and, briefly, their scheme was this: They should go together to the Huthneth Mountains; MacDonald should get his Gorgondy if he wanted it, and Locquialton should lie a little 'way off with his light .275, expanding bullet, and get the dwarf as he came after MacDonald. And MacDonald was to get a horse up a grassy valley that ran near to the hoard of the gnomes, and ride for it, and the gnome would come out and Locquialton would get him.

It was a queer arrangement for two men to make. We put it down to a fellow-feeling there must have been between Locquialton and this man that was hunted from his mountains, for there was a rumor that Locquialton had been hunted, too, and dared not go within a hundred miles of some valley that to him was the fairest; it was thought that he might have killed a female elephant.

These thoughts crossed our minds as Locquialton's blue eyes gazed far through the mist of cigar smoke, thinking, in silence. When he spoke again it was to speak of the Amber River two years later. He came to the hut again at the bend on the left of the river. It had all fallen in as those reed huts do; the old table was rotting away in the tropical damp, the iron bottle under the floor was empty, but thirty-two bottles of the very finest champagne still lay uncorked in the boxes. Locquialton was silent again like the man we had known for years. He had told his story of the Amber River; mountains did not interest him; his spirit, his imagination, his memory—whatever you call it—was still on the Amber River in that long, quaint boat rowed by black men. We puffed our cigars and waited.

"What happened in the mountains?" one said.

Locquialton came back with a jerk from the Amber River.

"I got there first," he said, "with my .275, behind a peak of a sort of tiny mountain, higher than the hoard of the gnomes, and about five hundred yards from it—five hundred and twenty-four, to be exact. A little high green valley ran right to a spot under the hoard of the gnomes. MacDonald brought his horse there and picketed it, then clambered perhaps thirty yards up the brown rocks, and came to the hoard and went in. He soon came out with six of the iron bottles hung by strings from his belt, in loops that he had all ready. He dropped down those rocks in very good time indeed, and mounted his horse and loosed the rope by a swivel, and the gnome came tumbling after him. The brown gnome came over those brown rocks like muddy water. I did not try to shoot against the rock; you could hardly see him; sometimes he would be behind the brown rock, sometimes in front of it; he wouldn't be much more visible one way than the other. MacDonald hit his horse, and the bottles fell and rattled, which frightened it

more, and on the downward slope of that valley they got a good pace at once. The moment the gnome touched the grass of the valley he began to run, and I got my finger tight on to the trigger. There was no wind. You allow ten feet for a man running, of course, at five hundred yards. I had thought of allowing a little less, as he was a dwarf about three and a half feet high, but when I saw the pace he ran I allowed a little more. It was extraordinary. I never saw a creature less built for speed. He was short-limbed, square and squat, but he ran with violence. He did it by sheer strength of his abnormal muscles, his feet beat the earth, his thick legs pounded up and down with repeated blows. There was none of the grace of speed, just sheer violent motion; he ran with deliberate anger, crashing down every footstep. He went like hail over the ground. He was brown all over and showed up well against the green of the valley. At first he gained on MacDonald, but just as the horse got into his full stride, as a horse does not do for about a hundred yards, the dwarf halted and threw up a bow and shot his arrow. I had already fired and missed; I had made the wrong allowance and shot behind him. No one could have hit him; no one could have guessed the pace that that dwarf was doing; it would have taken a bad shot and a fluke to have hit him, and that is all about it. So I failed MacDonald."

He was silent then for a moment. We had almost seen the Huthneth Mountains and the high green valley, and the dwarf, halting all of a sudden and shooting his arrow, and when his voice ceased the room, as it were, came back, and the blue cigar smoke and the uncurtained windows and the deep night outside. We sat there waiting for his final words, under his spell, not daring to disbelieve him.

"In that man's waistcoat pocket," said Locquialton, "and in his heart, are probably two of the finest opals a man has ever touched."