

The Place of Pain

by M. P. Shiel

The late Matthew Phipps Shiel is noted for his novel "The Purple Cloud" and for a score of lesser novels marked for complexity of style and unorthodoxy of plot. From this editor's viewpoint, complexity is the factor which was Shiel's greatest handicap to popularity—many of his best fantastic imaginings are couched in such a painfully tortured phraseology, replete with obscure wordage, and punctuation that follows some mystical rules unknown to earthly grammar. There are several extraordinary Shiel stories we would reprint save for their near-unreadability. "The Place of Pain" is probably one of Shiel's simpler tales—an unusual idea with a scientific basis.



THOUGH my theme is about the place of evil, and about how the Rev. Thomas Podd saw it, it is rather a case of evil in heaven: for I think British Columbia very like heaven, or like what I shall like my heaven to be, if ever I arrive so high—one mass of mountains, with mirrors of water mixed up with them, torrents and forests, and roaring Rhones.

It was at Small Forks that it happened, where I went to pass a fortnight—and stayed five years; and how the place changed and developed in that short time is really incredible, for at first Small Forks was the distributing center of only three mining-camps, and I am sure that not one quarter of the district's two million tons of ore of today was then thought of.

At the so-called Scatchereen Lode, three miles from the lake, there was one copper smelter, but not one silver-lead mine within fifty miles, and no brewery, no machine-shop, no brick plant. Nor had Harper Falls as yet been thought of as a source of power.

It was Harper Falls that proved to be the undoing of Pastor Thomas Podd, as you are to hear; and I alone have known that it was so, and why it was so.

I think I saw Podd in my very first week at Small Forks—one evening on the Embankment.

(You may know that Small Forks runs along the shore of an arm of Lake Sakoonay, embowered in bush at the foot of its mountains—really very like a nook in Paradise, to my mind.)

Podd that evening was walking with another parson on the Embankment, and the effect of him upon me was the raising of a smile, my eye at that time being unaccustomed to the sight of black men in parsons' collars and frocks. But Podd was rather brown than black—a meagre little man of fifty, with prominent cheek bones, hollow cheeks, a scraggy rag of beard, a cocky carriage, and a forehead really intellectual, though his eyes did strike me as rather wild and scatterbrained.

He was a man of established standing in all Small Forks, where a colony of some forty colored persons worked at the lumber-mills. To these Podd preached in a corrugated chapel at the top of Peel Street.

He held prayer-meetings on Monday nights, and one Monday night, when I had been in Small Forks a month or so, I stepped into his conventicle, on coming home from a tramp, and heard the praying—or, rather, the demanding for those darkies banged the pew-backs and shook them irritably.

When it was over and I was going out, I felt a tap on my back, and it was the reverend gentleman, who had raced after the stranger. Out he pops his pompous paw, and then, with a smile, asked if I was "thinking of joining us." I was not doing that, but I said that I had been "interested," and left him.

Soon after this he called to see me, and twice in three months he had tea with me—in the hope of a convert, perhaps. He did not succeed in this, but he did succeed in interesting me.

The man had several sciences at his finger-ends; I discovered that he had a genuine passion for Nature; and I gathered—from himself, or from others, I can't now remember—that it was his habit ever and anon to cut himself off from humankind, so as to lose himself for a few days in that maze of mountains in which the Sakoony district towers toward the moon.

No pressure of business, no consideration or care, could keep Podd tame and quiet in Small Forks when this call of the wild enticed him off. It seems to have been long a known thing about the town, this trick of his character, and to have been condoned and pardoned as part of the man. He had been born within forty miles of Small Forks, and seemed to me to know Columbia as a farmer knows his two-acre meadow.

Well, some two weeks after that second visit of his to me the news suddenly reached me that something had gone wrong in the Rev. Thomas Podd's head—could not help reaching me, for the thing was the gossip and laugh of the district far outside Small Forks.

It appears that late on the Saturday evening the reverend gentleman had come home from one of his vast tramps and truant interviews with Nature; then, on the Sunday morning, he had entered the meeting-house scandalously late, and had reeled with the feet of some moon-struck creature into the pulpit—without his coat! without his collar! his braces hanging down!—and then, leaning his two elbows on the pulpit Bible, he had looked steadily, mockingly, at his flock of black sheep, and had proceeded to jeer and sneer at them.

He had called them frankly a pack of apes, a band of black and babbling

babies; said that he could pity them from his heart, they were so benighted, so lost in darkness; that what they knew in their woolly nuts was just nothing; that no one knew, save him, Podd; that he alone of men know what he knew, and had seen what he had seen. . . .

Well, he had been so much respected for his intellectual parts, his eloquence, his apparent sincerity as a Christian man, that his congregation seem to have taken this gracelessness with a great deal of toleration, hoping perhaps that it might be only an aberration which would pass; but when the revered gentleman immediately afterwards took himself off anew into his mountains, to disappear for weeks—no one knew where—that was too much. So when he came back at last, it was to see another dark parson filling his place.

From that moment his social degeneration was rapid. He abandoned himself to poverty and tatters. His wife and two daughters shook the dust of him from off their shoes, and left Small Forks—to find a livelihood for themselves somewhere, I suppose. But Podd remained, or, at any rate, was often to be met in Small Forks, when he condescended to descend from his lofty walks.

Once I saw him intoxicated on the Embankment, his braces down, his hat in tatters—though I am certain that he never became a drunkard. Anyway, the thin veneer of respectability came off him like wet paint, and he slipped happily back into savagery. On what he lived I don't know.

I met him one afternoon by the new shipbuilding yard which the Canadian Pacific Railway was running up half a mile out of Small Forks. He sat there on a pile of axed pine-trunks lying by the roadside, his chest and one shin showing through his rags, his eyes gloating on the sky, in which a daylight moon was swooning; but, on catching sight of me, he showed his fine rows of teeth, crying out flippantly in French: "*Ab, monsieur, ça va bien?*"—in French, because Negroes are given to a species of frivolity in speech which expresses itself in that way.

I stopped to speak to him, asking "What has it been all about, Podd—the sudden collapse from sanctity to naughtiness?"

"Ah, now you are asking something!" he answered flippantly, with a wink at me.

I saw that he had become woefully emaciated and saffron, his cheek-bones seeming to be near appearing through their sere skin, and his eyes had in them the fire of a man living a life of some continual exaltation or excitement.

I wished, if I could, to help him and I said "Something must have gone wrong inside or out; better make a clean breast of it, and then something may be done."

On this he suddenly became fretful, saying "Oh, you all think like a blame lot of silly little babies fumbling in the dark!"

"That is so," I answered; "but since you are wise, why not tell us the secret, and then we shall all be wise?"

"I tell you what"—shaking his head up and down, his lips turned

down—"I doubt if some of them could stand the sight; turn their hairs white!"

"Which sight?" I asked.

"The sight of Hell!" he sighed, throwing up his hand a little.

After a little silence I said "Now, that's rot, Podd."

"Yes, sure to be, Sir, since you say so," he answered quietly in a dejected way. "That, of course, is what they said to Galileo when he told them that this globe moves."

With as grave a face as I could maintain, I looked at him, asking "Have you seen Hell, Podd?"

"I may have," he answered; and he added "And so have you, by the way. You have probably seen it since you started out on this walk you are taking, and haven't known."

"Well, it can't be very terrible, can it," I said, "if one can see it and not know? But is Hell in Small Forks? For I'm straight from there."

At this he threw up his head with a rather bitter laugh saying "Yes, that's beautiful, that the ignorant should make game of those who know, and the worse be judges of the better! But, then, that's how it generally is." And now, all at once, whatever blood he had rushed into his face, and he pointed upward: "You see that world there?"

"The moon?" I said, looking up.

"The souls in that place live in pain," I heard him murmur, his chin suddenly sunken to his chest.

"So there are people on the moon, Podd?" I asked. "Surely you know that there is no air there? Or do you mean to imply that the moon is Hell?"

He looked up, smiling. "My, goodness, you'd give a lot to know, wouldn't you? Well, look here, I'll say this and it's the truth: that I've had a liking for you from the first, and I'll make you a business proposition, as it's you. You agree to give me three dollars a week so long as I live, and when I'm dying I'll tell you what I know, and how, teaching you the whole trick. Or I'll put it in writing in a sealed envelope, which you shall have on my death."

"Dear me," I said, "what a pity I can't afford it!"

"You can afford it well enough," was his answer, "but the truth is that you don't believe a word of what I say: you think I'm moonstruck. And so I am, a bit! By Heaven, that's true enough!"

He sighed and was silent some time, looking at the moon in a most abstracted manner, apparently forgetting my presence.

But presently he went on to say "Still, a spec., you might risk it. The payments wouldn't be for long, for I've developed consumption, I see—the curse of us colored folks—had a hemorrhage only yesterday. And then, as a charity, you might, for I'm mostly hungry—my own fault; but I couldn't keep on gassing to those poor fools, after seeing what I have seen. If you won't give me the three dollars a week, give me one."

Well, to this I consented—not, of course, in any expectation of ever hearing any "secret", but I saw that the man had become quite unworldly,

unfit to earn his living, I considered him more or less insane—still consider so, though I am convinced now that he was not nearly so insane as I conceived: so I promised him that he might draw a weekly dollar from my bank while I was in Small Forks.

Sometimes Podd drew his dollar, but often he did not, though he was aware that arrears would not be paid, if he failed to present himself any week. And so it went on for over four years, during which he became more and more emaciated, and a savage.

Meantime, Small Forks and the Sakoony district had ceased to laugh at the name of Podd, as at a stale joke, and the fact of his rags and degradation had become a local institution, like the Mounted Police or the sawdust mill—too familiar a thing in the eye to excite any kind of emotion in the mind.

But at the end of those four years Small Forks, like one man, rose against Podd.

It happened in this way: at that date the Sakoony district was sending an annual cut of some four hundred million feet of lumber to the Prairie Provinces; the mining and smelter companies had increased to four—big concerns, treating three to four thousand tons of ore a day; in which consideration of things all through the district had arisen the cry: "Electricity! Electricity!"

Hence the appearance in Small Forks of the Provincial Mineralogist with a pondering and responsible forehead; hence his report to the Columbian Government that Harper Falls were capable of developing 97,000 horse-power; hence a simmering of interest through the district; and hence the decision of the Small Forks Town Council to inaugurate a municipal power-plant at Harper Falls.

But Podd objected!

He thought—this is what I found out afterwards—that Harper Falls were his; and he did not wish to have them messed with, or people coming anywhere near them.

However, he said nothing; the new works were commenced—so far as the accumulation of material was concerned; and the first hint of a hitch in the business was given one midnight at the beginning of May—a night I'll ever remember—when the mass of the municipality's material was burnt to cinders.

The blaze made a fine display five miles out of Small Forks, and I witnessed it in the thick of a great crowd of the townspeople.

It was assumed that the thing had been deliberately done by someone, since there was no other explanation. But the mystery as to who had done it!—for there was no one to suspect. And, like a spider whose web has been torn, the municipality started once more to collect materials for the plant.

Then, at the end of June, occurred the second blaze.

But this time there were night-watchmen with open eyes, and one of them deposed that he believed that he had seen Podd suspiciously near the scene of the mischief.

The town was very irritated about it, since the power-plant was expected to do great things for everybody.

At any rate, when Podd was captured and questioned, he did not exactly deny.

"It might have been I," was his answer; and "what if it was I?"

And this answer was a proof to me that he was innocent, for I took it to be actuated by vanity or insanity. The authorities must have thought so, too, for the man was dismissed as a ninny.

The town, however, was indignant at his dismissal; and three days later I came upon him in the midst of a crowd, from which I doubt that he could have come out alive, but for me, for he was now nothing but a bundle of bones, lighted up by two eyes. Indeed, my interference was rather plucky of me, for there present was a North-West policeman lending his countenance to the hustling of the poor outcast, a real-estate agent, the sawdust-mill manager, reeking of turpentine, and others, whose place it was to have interfered. Anyhow, I howled a little speech, pledging myself that the man was innocent; and my eclat as a Briton, perhaps, helped me to get him gasping out of their grasp.

When he found himself alone with me on the road outside the town, down he suddenly knelt, and, grasping my legs, began to sob to me in a paroxysm of gratitude.

"You have been everything to me—you, a stranger. God reward you—I have not long to live, but you shall know what I know, and see what I have seen."

"Podd," I said, "you have heard me pledge my word that you are innocent. Let me hear from you this instant that it was not you who committed those outrages."

With the coolest insolence he stood up, looked in my face, and said, "Of course I committed them. Who else?"

I had to laugh. But then I sternly observed "Well, but you confess yourself a felon, that's all."

"Look here," he answered, "let's not quarrel. We see from different standpoints—let's not quarrel. What I say is, that during the few weeks or months I have to live no plant is going to be set up at Harper Falls—afterwards, yes. You don't know what I know about the Falls. They are the eye of this world; that's it—the eye of this world. But you shall know and see"—he looked up at the westering quarter-moon, thought a little, and continued: "Meet me here at nine on Friday night. You've done a lot for me."

The man's manner was so convincing, that I undertook to meet him, though some minutes afterwards I laughed at myself for being so impressed by his pratings.

Anyway, two nights thence, at nine, I met Podd, and we began a tramp and climb of some seven miles which I shall ever remember.

If I could but give some vaguest impression of that bewitched adventure,

I should begin to think well of my power of expression; but the reality of it would still be far from pictured.

That little dying Podd had still the foot of a goat, and we climbed spots which, but for his aid, I could scarcely have negotiated—ghostly gullies, woods of spruce and dreary old cedar droning, the crags of Garroway Pass, where a throng of torrents awe one's ear, and tarns asleep in the dark of forests of larch, of hemlock, of white and yellow pine.

We were struggling upward through a gullock of Garroway Pass when Podd stopped short; and when I groped for him—for one could see nothing there—I discovered him with his forehead leant against the crag.

To my question, "Anything wrong?" he answered "Wait a little—there's blood in my mouth."

And he added "I think I am going to have a hemorrhage."

"We had better go pack," I said.

But he presently brightened up, saying "It will be all right. Come."

We stumbled on.

Half an hour afterwards we came out upon a platform about eight hundred yards square, surrounded by cliffs of pine on three sides. A torrent dropped down the back cliff, ran over most of the platform in a rather broad river, lacerated by rocks, and dropped frothing in a cataract over the front of the platform.

"Here we are," Podd said, seating himself on a rock, dropping his forehead to his knees.

"Podd, you are in trouble," I said, standing over him.

He made no answer, but presently raised himself with an effort, to look at the moon with eyes that were themselves like moons—the satellite, about half-full, then waxing; and now in her setting quadrant.

"Now, look you," Podd said with pantings and tremblings, so that I had to bend down to hear him in that row of the waters, "I have brought you here because I love you a lot. You are about to see things that no mortal's eye but mine ever wept salt water at—"

As he uttered those words, I, for the first time, with a kind of shock, realized that I was really about to see something boundless for I could no longer doubt that those pantings had the accent of truth; in fact, I suddenly knew that they were true, and my heart began to beat faster.

"But how will you take the sight?" he went on. "Am I really doing you a service? You see the effect it has had on me—to think that what made us—our own—should bring forth such bitterness! No, you shan't see it all, not the worst bit: I'll stop the view there. You see that fall rushing down at our feet? I have the power, by placing a certain rock in a certain position in this river, to change that mass of froth into a mass of glass—two masses of glass—immense lenses, double-convex. Discovered it by accident one night five years since—night of my life. No, I am not well tonight. But never mind. You go down the face of the rock at the side here—easy going—till you come to the cave. Go into the cave; then climb by the notches which you'll find in the wall, till you come to a ledge, one edge of which

is about two feet behind the inner eyepiece. The moon should begin to come within your view within four minutes from now; and I give you a five-minutes' sight—no more. You'll see her some three hundred yards from you tearing across your brain like ten trillion trains. But never you tell any man what you see on her. Go, go! Not very well tonight."

He stood up with an effort so painful, that I said to him "But are you going into the river, Podd, and trembling like that already? Why not show me how to place the rock for you?"

"No," he muttered, "you shan't know; you shan't! It's all right; I'll manage; you go. Keep moving your eye at first till you get the focus-length. There's a lot of prismatic and spherical aberration, iridescent fringes, and the yellow line of the spectrum of sodium bothers everywhere—the object-glass is so big and so thin, that it hardly seems at all to decompose light. Never mind, you'll see well—upside down, of course—dioptric-telescope images. Go, go; don't waste time; I'll manage with the stone. And you must always say—I paid you back—full measure—for all your love."

At every third word of all this his breast gave up a gasp, and his eyes were most wild with excitement or the fever of disease. He pushed and led me to the spot where I was to descend. And "There she comes," his tongue stuttered, with a nod at the moon, as he flew from me, while I went feeling my way with my feet, the cataract at my right, down a cliff-side that was nearly perpendicular, but so rugged and shrub-grown, that the descent was easy.

When I was six feet down I lifted my chin to the ledge, and saw Podd stooping within some bush at the foot of the platform-cliff to my left, where he had evidently hidden the talisman-rock; and I saw him lift the rock, and go tottering under its weight toward the river.

But the thought came to me that it was hardly quite fair to spy upon him, and when he was still some yards from the river I went on down—a long way—until I came to the floor of a cave in the cliff face, a pretty roomy cavern, fretted with spray from the cataract in front of it.

I went in and climbed to the ledge, as he had said; and there in the dark I lay waiting, wet through, and, I must confess, trembling, hearing my heart knocking upon my ribs through that solemn oratory of the torrent dropping in froth in front of me. And presently through the froth I thought I saw a luminous something that must have been the moon, moving by me.

But the transformation of the froth into the lenses which I awaited did not come.

At last I lifted my voice to howl "Hurry up, Podd!"—though I doubted if he could hear.

Anyway, no answer reached my ear, and I waited on.

It must have been twenty minutes before I decided to climb down; I then scrambled out, clambered up again, disgusted and angry, though I don't think that I ever believed that Podd had wilfully made a fool of me. I thought that he had somehow failed to place the rock.

But when I got to the top I saw that the poor man was dead.

He lay with his feet in the river, his body on the bank, his rock clasped in his arms. The weight had proved too much for him: on the rock was blood from his lungs.

Two days later I buried him up there with my own hands by his river's brink, within the noise of the song of his waterfall, his stupendous telescope—his "eye of this world."

And then for three months, day after day, I was endeavouring in that solitude up there so to place the rock in the river as to transform the froths of the waterfall into frothless water. But I never managed. The secret is buried with the one man whom destiny intended, maybe for centuries to come, to know what paths are trodden, and what tapestries are wrought, on another orb.