TIDEMARKS:

Some Records of a Journey to the Beaches of the Moluccas and the Forest of Malaya, in 1923

by

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FROM HIS high window he could see where the Thames, once upon a time, was crossed by Charing Cross Bridge. But not on that winter afternoon. The bridge was a shadow in a murk. It did not cross the Thames. There was no Thames. It was suspended in a void, which it did not span; there was no reason to cross because the other side had gone. The bridge ended in midway space. It was but a spectral relic, the ghost of something already half forgotten, above a dim gulf into which London was dissolving in the twilight and silence at the end of an epoch. For the twilight did not seem merely of a day at the end of another year, but the useless residue, in which no more could be accomplished, of a period of human history, long and remarkable, that had all but closed.

He wondered whether he would ever cross that bridge again, outward bound. What, a broken bridge? And is there any escape from your own time, even though its end seems so close that you feel you could take one step and be over in the new era? No. There is nothing to do but to
put up with the disappearance of the everlasting hills and safe landmarks, and grope about in this fog at the latter end of things, like everybody else. The bridge that day went but half-way across. Once it carried men over to France. It was not wanted for that now. The rocket which he heard burst above it to announce the long-desired arrival of a lovely dove was welcomed four years ago; and the dove either did not stay long or else it had turned into a crow.

A postman burst in with a parcel, and went, leaving the door open. Another book! He cut the string, in his right as guardian of literature in that newspaper office. The volume disclosed had a coloured wrapper with the seductive picture of a perfect little lady smiling so fatuously that St. Anthony would have laughed miserably at the temptation. Again a novel! He dropped it on the heap behind him—a detritus of beautiful fiction piled in a slope against the wall, a deposit of a variety of glad eyes and simpers. What a market for green gooseberries this world must be! That deposit slithered over a wider area whenever the energetic editor in the next room was trampling to and fro in another attack on the Prime Minister. Then some of it had to be kicked back. But kicking never made that deposit of literature better or different, any more than it did the Premier. Only the cleansing junk-shop man with his periodical cart for the removal of refuse ever did that. And the same trouble sprouted again next day. Trouble generally does. A literary
editor, he thought, might be better employed peddling boot-laces for all the traffic he has with literature; yet it was plain that if he began to edit boot-laces instead, then most likely people would take to wearing buttoned boots, or even jemimas. For in spite of the Sermon on the Mount, crystal-gazing, spiritualism, Plato, wireless telegraphy, Buddha, and Old Moore’s Almanac, there is no telling what the world will be doing next. The barbarian of ancient Europe who trusted to his reading of the entrails of a fowl when looking for the hidden truth was quite as reasonable as the editor in the next room frowning at the signs of the times through his spectacles. Moreover, at the moment the editor was not doing even that. He was on a journey to interview the proprietor, to learn whether he should continue to hold up a lamp in a dark and naughty world, or blow it out. Oil costs money.

The open door let in a draught, and with the draught blew in a figure which might have been a poet, but was certainly not an advertising agent. It was a bundle of clothes which looked as though it had been abandoned under the seat of a railway carriage, and had crawled out because nobody had troubled to remove it. But its face was still new. It had diffident eyes and a greyish beard. Most likely it was another poet. The lines of that thin face had come of contemplating the glory of the world, and had been deepened by lack of bread. The figure hesitated, knowing that it ought to have remained where it had been thrown. It did
not speak. It took off a matured cloth cap, and offered for sale some Christmas cards. It had a difficulty in getting them out of its pocket, because one sleeve of its jacket was limp, being empty. But the literary editor was patient, for this visitor had a rare and attractive virtue. He was modest; more modest even than the veiled ladies who brought secret information from Poland, or an editor with a new idea. He seemed uncertain of his rights, unlike the publisher who had called because his important work had been overlooked, and the politician who was cruelly wronged because the reward he had earned in bolting his principles had gone elsewhere. What had purified this human wreck? He seemed to be unaware of what in justice should be done to him, and was an enjoyable relief from the reviewer who could have handled the job so much better than the fool who did, the inventor of the machine for converting offal into prime cuts, and the superior mystic who knew it long before Einstein. In what school had he learned to be a gentleman?

The man of letters examined the Christmas cards, and read on most of them, "Love one Another." This spiritual injunction was made authoritative with realistic sprays of mistletoe. "Where," asked the literary editor, rising and pointing to the place where his visitor's right arm used to be, "where did you stop your packet?"

The visitor became very embarrassed. "Well,"
he said in doubt, "well, if you were a nice lady, I'd say it was cut off by a German on the Somme, if you understand me. But it was an Army mule at Arras. It bit me. And heroes ain't bitten by their own mules. Not in war, sir. Not for home consumption as you might say."

"But there must be accidents in war."

The visitor rubbed his nose briskly with a dark white handkerchief. "No, sir. Believe me, no. I saw a pal o' mine drowned in a mud hole, but he had to be killed in action, being a gunner, for his friends' sake, like. In war, heroes are either shot through the heart at the moment of victory, or else they gets their arms in slings. Don't you believe nothing else."

"You've come to the wrong office. Everybody here knows that mules are ugly brutes, and never rise to Christian feelings even when war ennobles them."

"Not at all, if I may say so. You don't understand, sir. If I tell people that our mules kicked the enemy, that's all right. But if I tell 'em one of our gun mules bit me, why, I don't know but they'd think the artful patriotic swine saw through me, if you know what I mean. Got to be careful. Besides, that's nothing now."

"What, nothing to lose your arm?"

The shabby figure stared over the literary table to the shadow of the bridge beyond. He spoke with the quiet confidence of a man whose rich uncle had unexpectedly left a fortune to him. "Nothing at all, sir. I've found God. I've
found God.” Then he looked at the journalist. “Do you believe in God? You don’t begin to live until you do.”

The journalist rose in alarm. Not in all his life had another fellow-creature asked him whether he believed in God. In that office it was assumed that the name of God should never be used except rhetorically.

“Of all the swindling rogues! You talk to me like that, after telling me that you’d have lied, if I’d been an old woman!”

“Sorry, sir, but you were not an old lady, so I give it to you straight. I give people what they can take, just to make the world go round, you understand. What does it matter? People who can’t see the light—well, you can’t blame ’em.”

“So you think there’s a chance I may see it? I wish I knew how to tell whether you are only another hypocrite or not. Here, I’m living in darkness, too, but I’ll buy your stock of cards if you’ll tell me whether you’d have mentioned God to me if I’d been a nice old lady. What about it?”

“Not a word about God to the old lady, sir. Not a word. On my oath. And for the same reason. She wouldn’t have known what I meant. She wouldn’t understand that a hero nearly lost his life in a righteous war through the bite of a mule, if you understand me, sir, but if I said I’d found God she’d take it for granted I was all right, like herself. Why get her mixed up, the old dear?”
“So you’re all right, are you?” said the envious man of letters mournfully, who had no God to whom he could give a name. He pointed to the vision of the dissolution of London in the murk. “How do you feel about being at the fag-end of everything in that?”

The pedlar looked puzzled. “Me? Do you mean the fog? What’s that to do with me?” He had accepted a coin, and now he eyed it on his palm, and graciously spat upon it before putting it in his pocket. He sidled to the door, and from there he said, “Guv’nor, I’ll tell you something. Do you know what we’re told?” . . . But the oracle was not revealed, for the fellow turned as though he knew of an interpreter outside, closed the door respectfully, and was gone.

The eye of the bookman wandered to the bridge again. Where did it go to now? That was a rum fellow who had just gone. Had he really seen a light which could shine clear through the fog and confusion of the earth? But what was the good of trying to see such a light because another man said it was there? Besides, to distinguish between shell-shock and God wanted a bit of doing nowadays. Confound that bridge! Why wasn’t it blotted out altogether? What was the good of half of it? It used to go to France. Now it projected over a bottomless gulf of time, and was lost midway. It was broken. Where were the fellows who once crossed it? Now they could never get back. It ought not to
be looked at. One’s thoughts got on to it, fell into the emptiness beyond, and were lost. Yet it was hard to keep the eyes from it. The printer’s proofs were the same dust and ashes as ever. No light or humour in them except the places where the compositor had happily blundered. And there the blessed relic still floated in the outer fog an instant road for vagrant thoughts. And odd visitors, like poets with messages from a world not this or from no world at all, or like the armless man with his seasonable message to love one another, kept blowing in with the cold draught when the careless door was ajar. Perhaps a ghostly traffic moved on that spectral relic. That bridge should be either abolished or adventured upon again. What was the good of sitting and staring at it, while fiction not fit for dogs accumulated against the wall behind? Life was standing still.

At that very instant some of the fiction shot fanwise abruptly over the floor. Was the editor back in the next room? Literary editors might be at the dead end of things, but was life? He went to interview his chief.

But the great man—all editors are that naturally—was not at his desk. He stood at the window, looking out, though not as if he saw anything there worth having. He turned to his assistant, and began to unwind his muffler.

"Well?"

"Not at all," said the editor cheerfully; "by no means. We blow out the lamp of our vestal,
and the chaste darling is to be sold as a slave.” They stood regarding each other.

“What about us?”

The editor smiled and poked his finger at the bridge in the fog. “We get a move on. Out into the snow, my child, out into the snow.”

II

THE LETTER, there could be no doubt, was addressed to me. This fact, apparently so doubtful, I was careful to verify at once. And so far as English can be plain it told me to go to the Moluccas. Nor was its purpose merely abusive and figurative, as would be the letter of a friend. The letter was typewritten on a commercial form; it was direct and curt; it gave telephone and reference numbers in case I wished to answer back. The letter advised me to pack up, and the place it told me to go to lies—as anyone may see who uses a magnifying glass—between Celebes and New Guinea. But it would take more than a business letter, however formal, to compel us into a belief that we are to travel to a place with a name which can be spelled out only with a strong glass. You experiment with such news on your friends. They will not contradict you; they will be too polite. They will merely stare