THE CRATER

BY

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EPILOGUE

THE CRATER

PROLOGUE

"Her story," said Ross, aiming his cigar-end at a phosphorescent patch of ocean, "was discreditable enough to be true." He drew an immense red handkerchief from the pocket of his pyjamas, and wiped his extensive forehead, muttering, "As far as a woman ever tells the truth about herself."

I sat on in silence waiting for the epigrams to end and the narrative to begin.

It was a stifling night off the East Coast of Africa. A wind that blew from the Equator and followed a crowded ship made sleep impossible. Nightly it drove Ross and myself on deck to spend the intolerable hours in talk.

I did not know much about Ross; no one on board did. A big man with a walrus moustache and a bald head, he had joined the vessel at an unusual East Coast port with few possessions—a rifle or two, and a green kit bag. His preposterous opinions were enunciated with the precise utterance of a spinster, and punctuated by pulls at a virulent black cigar. He knew men and cities; he knew Africa at its heart, where are neither men nor cities.

Our mutual acquaintanceship exhausted, we had drifted to anecdotes of the improbabilities that happen daily in that improbable continent.

"You can never tell what the most normal folk will do," he had said. "One of the most charming girls I know—in three weeks she

and her husband had reduced the Decalogue to ribbons...." He broke off, and I had difficulty in inducing him to begin again.

"The girl," he said at last, between puffs of his cigar, "came to me for advice. This implied no particular compliment to my wisdom, since I was the only disinterested white man for a hundred miles. I told her that only fools gave advice, and only wise men took it.

'God knows I'm not wise,' she said, 'but I'd do anything to...'

'My dear, I'll do my best,' I said when I saw that she did not mean to finish her sentence, 'but even for that I must hear a bit more.' She looked at me a little startled, then threw up her chin and plunged into her story. And, as I said, by most standards, it did her little enough credit. Unless courage covers as much as charity. Courage is even needed for a proud woman to tell a man whom she'd met half a dozen times the full story of her ... 'indiscretions' shall we call them?" He paused and seemed to ponder the qualities and failings of his heroine. "Still, most of the other animals have courage," he added. "And no doubt if she was to stay sane, she had to get things clear in her own head. Anyhow, she spared me no detail or digression in the telling of her deplorable history."

Ross got up and walked heavily to the rail where he stood staring down at the sea, which parted before our bows with the sound and motion of split silk. His voice came to me a little muted by the night.

"I didn't know the Sinclairs well," he continued, "but by using my eyes at our occasional meetings, I had a pretty correct idea how matters stood. And Archie told me as much as he told any one. More, while I was nursing him through three days of delirium."

I ventured to suggest that it would be more interesting for me if he began the story at the beginning instead of the end. He shook his head: "The writer of the Book of Genesis was the last story teller who could begin at the beginning. So much has gone before.

If you want the beginning, you'll have to listen, for instance, to the history of the house of Cleverly, from its first earl, the bandit, to its last earl, the bankrupt, while I trace you Norah's inheritance of the maxim of that race of rakes ... and occasional heroes—'Risk before Repute.'

And don't forget we'd have to blend in a survey of Archie's hard-headed lowland forbears, measure the immeasurable pride of his Highland mother, estimate the weight of the legal tradition he inherited from sire and grandsire, which sees both sides of everything, and commits itself to nothing, superimpose Archie's own Oxford training which forbade him ever to back his fancy—all that made him that loyal, hardworking, and in every way estimable stone of stumbling and rock of offence to poor Norah.

And then the scene is set in Africa. By now the power of Africa has passed into platitude, but like most platitude, there's something in it.

Every one knows that good fellow, Brown, who gets through a case of whisky a week on his one-man station; and that decent chap, Smith, who is living with a brace of black women somewhere at the back of beyond; while White's temper has become so ungovernable that no wonder his wife ran away from the farm; and, of course, no one believes that Black's shooting accident was accidental.

Many explanations are given. Medicine, physiology, geography, psychology, all make their guess. Superstition too, for if you are living far away in the great silence of Africa, the silence that is woven out of a million minute or distant sounds, it is not difficult to ascribe power over protesting man to insentient things (if insentient they be); to see the innumerable trees, the unexplored swamps, the fantastic rocks as gods or devils, older and crueller than Jah or Moloch, inexorably shaping the lives of the foredoomed mortals who have invaded their sanctuaries."

"Plainer men," went on Ross after a pause, "see there no strange gods, see rather the dangerous absence of that unromantic Deity, Public Opinion. In civilised life man's every action is preordained by the opinion of his fellows.

Your young revolutionary may deny this, claiming that he, at any rate, is a free agent. But is not he too bound on the wheel of revolutionary opinion? Does not the Bolshevik follow the tradition of his class—to spit at a bourgeois or whatever it may be—as slavishly as a Die-hard peer?

In the solitudes, the force is unborn and the individual is left, now hell is discredited, a law to himself.

So if you ask me to foretell the change that Africa would work in any given individual, I say, 'Take his ruling weakness, his Lowest Common Failing: cube it. The result will be the man when Africa has done with him.'"

Ross re-lit his atrocious cigar.

"By now," he said, "you must regret that you asked for the beginning of my story.

Are you not convinced that it is better to let me start in the middle of the story and incidentally in the middle of a lake in the middle of Africa?"

"Suppose yourself dead," he continued, taking my silence for assent, "and seeking variety from twanging harps round a glassy sea or banging tambourines in a medium's cabinet, you look down from the upper air, one day in October, 1921. Suppose your eye falls on Tanganyika—that sapphire coloured cleft which runs eight hundred miles long by fifty wide through the endless forests of Central Africa, with the old German Colony to the right, Belgian Congo to the left, North Eastern Rhodesia at the near end.

Not much humanity for you to patronise: every thirty miles or so along the edge of the water a cluster of thatched huts providing a measure of shelter for a handful of savages who live on fish and mangoes, careless of the future, indifferent to the past. Every 300 miles or so, at a Catholic Mission, a couple of white-robed Fathers issue rosaries to their less enlightened neighbours, who until the missionaries came had to rely on amulets made of python hearts. Between these centres of human endeavour, an uncharted belt of forest fringes the lake, and climbs the sides of the great cold crater, until these slope so steep that not even a creeper can catch hold. For the last thousand feet the rock is bare.

Forest rings the crater, stretching further than even you from your advantageous position can see. Nor can you see through the peacock-blue water to the bottom of the lake. They say it hasn't one.

On this particular day of your ethereal view, there is even a bit of human interest in that splendid but desolate vista. At the

southern end of the lake a herald of European culture, a broad-beamed steam tug, lies black and ugly on the fantastically blue water. In the bows you may see two figures; from your remote standpoint, insignificant enough. You can discern the features no more than you can read the passions of the tiny puppets holding each other close, as if for defence against the indifferent majesty of nature.

From your elevation you can see a third figure. It is thrusting its way through the forest that borders the lake at the head of a train of diminutive black carriers. Ignorant of each other, the two groups of marionettes are drawn by wires of Fate, invisible even to you, into a contact all but fatal to both."

PART I

"If sanctimony and a frail vow betwixt an erring barbarian and a supersubtle Venetian be not too hard ... thou shalt enjoy her."—W. SHAKESPEARE.

CHAPTER I

"Whatever Norah lacked, it was not looks," said Ross, leaving the rail to fling himself into a deck-chair that creaked under his weight.

> 'Beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart
> And a good stomach to a feast are all,
> All the poor crimes you can charge her with,'"

he murmured.

"Not that her heart stayed very merry: while, for the matter of that, even her beauty was a good deal altered the last time I met her and heard from her lips the story I am going to tell you.

By then life and Africa had handled her and treated her as an etcher his plate with steel and acid, adding something which was not there before, call it a soul or a complex according to your creed.

Well, if from heaven that day you could have seen her clearly as she sat beside Dick Ward on the deck of the *Mimi* you would have remarked, a bit of a thing, who rode some seven stone, neatly cut as a Chinese carving, legs and ankles to make you praise the name of short skirts, short dark hair that entangled the gleam of shaded lamplight on mahogany, cheekbones curving out from cheeks, whose blood (unless that carmine could be claimed for lip salve) had ebbed to her mouth, on which a smile mocked more often than it flattered.

This smile, her pretty slimness, her moods, mobile as quicksilver, might have left her what old men call 'a divine imp,'

and you could have forgotten her in the next pretty girl you saw, but for some subtle, elusive quality—like a barely perceptible perfume—that, troubling and tantalising, forbade oblivion."

Ross seemed to meditate.

"I doubt," he said at last, "if it be profitable to anatomise magic; but if I must satisfy your inquiring turn of mind, I would hazard that it was the presence of two conflicting strains in Norah that fascinated the senses.

At some time you must have visited the Small Cat House at the Zoo? Those drowsy, furry, definite, little entities. A trifle sensual, a trifle cruel. Lazy, individualistic, practical, wicked, fascinating. Small, pointed faces, red tongues, sharp claws, sudden motions, quick wits.... Behind the prettiness and softness something lurks, something of the night, of the wilds.

Well, there was a quality in Norah that provoked one to the same admiration. When you listened to her deep, caressing voice—as deep a voice as I've heard in a woman, (some undergraduate once compared it to the dusk of a summer's day)—you were in the presence of something as strange and as primordial as the dances of the East.

Or when you glanced discreetly (should you be a foreigner, 'when you stared admiringly') at the elusive line of her face, which fined down to that evanescent oval, common enough in Italy, so light, so feminine, or should I say 'so female,' you were aware of something ... well, there isn't a fair word. To describe by opposites it certainly was not spiritual. But neither was it animal. Perhaps 'Southern' is as good an adjective as any. Not that she could really trace any meridional blood. If the Cleverlies went to the Continent

for their mistresses, they stuck to the Shires for their wives. But unless you are satisfied by a wave of the hand towards the Small Cat House, 'Southern' is as good an adjective as I can find you.

Then, when you thought you had her classified, you met the second strain. Your ears lost her voice, your gaze left the line of cheek and chin and travelled to her narrow eyes, dark as night before sunrise, as a velvet curtain hiding a smouldering fire; at once you passed to the presence of a different animal.

The Small Cats don't bother their heads about romance, adventure, rebellion or any generous folly. I doubt if any occupant of the Zoo does; for that look you must search the human prisons.

But Norah's eyes made you remember forlorn hopes, lost causes, desperate adventures, despairing loyalties; all that uncomfortable side of life which the prudent man avoids. And when they gazed at you under their arched, delicate brows, you felt admiration or pity according to your lights, for a fellow mortal, spurred by impractical generosities, dazzled by romantic imaginings, ridden by rebellious longings, who'd funk no fence that Life might offer—Life isn't only fences," broke off Ross to mutter. "It's the plough that kills the likes of her."

"Dick Ward," he went on, "was gazing, no doubt, into those romantic orbs at the minute my story begins, and reading a flattering message in their courageous depths.

One could not look at Dick without pleasure. He presented a Lucifer-son-of-the-morning effect.

The 'Greek god' type, which fluttered our grandmothers, lacks sufficient kick for the Neo-georgian maid. His hair was perhaps a

shade too long for male taste, though women seem in this to be more lenient. That people, on first acquaintance, were apt to take him for an American was possibly due to his faint Irish intonation, and he was so wonderfully sure, so well poised, and so preposterously good looking.

During the war he served in the Air Force. When peace returned, a rich uncle's death saved him from the horrors of work. Wealth was added to charm, wit, good looks—unless vows matter, can you blame Norah so much?

'Marriage laws are drafted by the old,' he had just said, to calm some scruple, 'to be broken by the young.'

'Dick, don't be so Wilde!' she retorted. This isn't the setting. Look at the Lake....'

'I'd rather look at the woman!'

'Don't be an ass. The woman's there any day, Tanganyika——'

'I can't believe yet she will be. I'm afraid of waking up.'

'I feel I've dreamt away my life till now: I've only just woken up. Woken up from a bad dream about Africa.'

'Africa is nearly over. Two days up the Lake to the railway, then——'

'Do you so badly want the time to hurry?'

'Every second with you is worth a life, only——'

'Only you'd sooner catch the train.'

'Aren't you ever serious, Norah? You know I love you with——'

'I often wonder if you love me at all, Dick.'

'No one has ever loved a woman so.'

'Supposing, of course, there is such a thing as love.'

'Norah!'

'Love that survives appetite.'

'Darling!'.

'Well, you see, I loved before.'

'As much as ... now?'

'Differently, perhaps.'

'And my love is different. My love....'

But we'll leave Dick's amatory eloquence to the sufficient audience of Norah and the extinct volcanoes that ring the Lake. In their youth, they, too, had known outbursts of fire and passionate contortion: now cold and desolate, with puffs of cloud nestling like patches of snow in their hollow flanks, bluer than any precious stone, they stared down in unmoved silence.

All day the *Mimi* steamed slowly and fussily, the sun beating fiercely on her crowded deck through the thin awning. Norah lay full length on the camp bed her body servant had put up. The *Mimi* did not run to cabins—you shared her deck with her doubtfully Arab captain, who lounged in a three-legged wicker chair. Other competitors for the narrow space were the negro crew with their

household gods, the couple of lean goats, and the dozen lousy fowls that formed the vessel's food supply.

A portion aft was reserved for native passengers, a class represented this trip by one incredibly lean Indian, with a wiry beard and a blue and white check turban. He sat on a hatch, naked to the waist, his thin legs crossed, motionless for hours. Each time that Norah glanced in his direction his brows seemed to bend in a scowl at the two Europeans.

So all that day they steamed over the Lake, whose sapphire waters were cool to the eye and tepid to the hand. Towards evening they anchored off a fishing village where the captain had told them an Arab was waiting with oxen to ship to a mission up the Lake. He had driven them from a village, a hundred miles to the south, where his father had settled in the days of the slave trade.

Norah was roused from drowsy contemplation of Dick's profile by a shout; she felt the engines go half speed and idly she watched a ragged silhouette sounding over the bows with a painted rod.

'*Bili ... bili*—two fathoms ... two fathoms.' Another shout, and the engines were silent. She rose and took Dick's arm as he leaned over the bulwarks gazing landwards.

'What is it?' she asked.

'I was planning.'

'About us?'

When we're home. What we'll do; where'll we go; what we'll see.'

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