

The First Men In The Moon

by

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1. Mr. Bedford Meets Mr. Cavor At Lympne

As I sit down to write here amidst the shadows of vine-leaves under the blue sky of southern Italy, it comes to me with a certain quality of astonishment that my participation in these amazing adventures of Mr. Cavor was, after all, the outcome of the purest accident. It might have been any one. I fell into these things at a time when I thought myself removed from the slightest possibility of disturbing experiences. I had gone to Lympne because I had imagined it the most uneventful place in the world. "Here, at any rate," said I, "I shall find peace and a chance to work!"

And this book is the sequel. So utterly at variance is destiny with all the little plans of men. I may perhaps mention here that very recently I had come an ugly cropper in certain business enterprises. Sitting now surrounded by all the circumstances of wealth, there is a luxury in admitting my extremity. I can admit, even, that to a certain extent my disasters were conceivably of my own making. It may be there are directions in which I have some capacity, but the conduct of business operations is not among these. But in those days I was young, and my youth among other objectionable forms took that of a pride in my capacity for affairs. I am young still in years, but the things that have happened to me have rubbed something of the youth from my mind. Whether they have brought any wisdom to light below it is a more doubtful matter.

It is scarcely necessary to go into the details of the speculations that landed me at Lympne, in Kent. Nowadays even about business transactions there is a strong spice of adventure. I took risks. In these things there is invariably a certain amount of give and take, and it fell to me finally to do the giving. Reluctantly enough. Even when I had got out of everything, one cantankerous creditor saw fit to be malignant. Perhaps you have met that flaming sense of outraged virtue, or perhaps you have only felt it. He ran me hard. It seemed to me, at last, that there was nothing for it but to write a play, unless I wanted to drudge for my living as a clerk. I have a certain imagination, and luxurious tastes, and I meant to make a vigorous fight for it before that fate overtook me. In addition to my belief in my powers as a business man, I had always in those days had an idea that I was equal to writing a very good play. It is not, I believe, a very uncommon persuasion. I knew there is nothing a man can do outside legitimate business transactions that has such opulent possibilities, and very probably that biased my opinion. I had, indeed, got into the habit of regarding this unwritten drama as a convenient little reserve put by for a rainy day. That rainy day had come, and I set to work.

I soon discovered that writing a play was a longer business than I had supposed; at first I had reckoned ten days for it, and it was to have a pied-a-terre while it was in hand that I came to Lympne. I reckoned myself lucky in getting that little bungalow. I got it on a three years' agreement. I put in a few sticks of furniture, and while the play was in hand I did my own cooking. My cooking would have shocked Mrs. Bond. And yet, you know, it had flavour. I had a coffee-pot, a sauce-pan for eggs, and one for potatoes, and a frying-pan for sausages and bacon - such was the simple apparatus of my comfort. One cannot

always be magnificent, but simplicity is always a possible alternative. For the rest I laid in an eighteen-gallon cask of beer on credit, and a trustful baker came each day. It was not, perhaps, in the style of Sybaris, but I have had worse times. I was a little sorry for the baker, who was a very decent man indeed, but even for him I hoped.

Certainly if any one wants solitude, the place is Lympne. It is in the clay part of Kent, and my bungalow stood on the edge of an old sea cliff and stared across the flats of Romney Marsh at the sea. In very wet weather the place is almost inaccessible, and I have heard that at times the postman used to traverse the more succulent portions of his route with boards upon his feet. I never saw him doing so, but I can quite imagine it. Outside the doors of the few cottages and houses that make up the present village big birch besoms are stuck, to wipe off the worst of the clay, which will give some idea of the texture of the district. I doubt if the place would be there at all, if it were not a fading memory of things gone for ever. It was the big port of England in Roman times, Portus Lemanus, and now the sea is four miles away. All down the steep hill are boulders and masses of Roman brickwork, and from it old Watling Street, still paved in places, starts like an arrow to the north. I used to stand on the hill and think of it all, the galleys and legions, the captives and officials, the women and traders, the speculators like myself, all the swarm and tumult that came clanking in and out of the harbour. And now just a few lumps of rubble on a grassy slope, and a sheep or two - and me. And where the port had been were the levels of the marsh, sweeping round in a broad curve to distant Jungeness, and dotted here and there with tree clumps and the church towers of old medieval towns that are following Lemanus now towards extinction.

That outlook on the marsh was, indeed, one of the finest views I have ever seen. I suppose Jungeness was fifteen miles away; it lay like a raft on the sea, and farther westward were the hills by Hastings under the setting sun. Sometimes they hung close and clear, sometimes they were faded and low, and often the drift of the weather took them clean out of sight. And all the nearer parts of the marsh were laced and lit by ditches and canals.

The window at which I worked looked over the skyline of this crest, and it was from this window that I first set eyes on Cavor. It was just as I was struggling with my scenario, holding down my mind to the sheer hard work of it, and naturally enough he arrested my attention.

The sun had set, the sky was a vivid tranquillity of green and yellow, and against that he came out black - the oddest little figure.

He was a short, round-bodied, thin-legged little man, with a jerky quality in his motions; he had seen fit to clothe his extraordinary mind in a cricket cap, an overcoat, and cycling knickerbockers and stockings. Why he did so I do not know, for he never cycled and he never played cricket. It was a fortuitous concurrence of garments, arising I know not how. He gesticulated with his hands and arms, and jerked his head about and buzzed. He buzzed like something electric. You never heard such buzzing. And ever and again he cleared his throat with a most extraordinary noise.

There had been rain, and that spasmodic walk of his was enhanced by the extreme slipperiness of the footpath. Exactly as he came against the sun he stopped, pulled out a watch, hesitated. Then with a sort of convulsive gesture he turned and retreated with every manifestation of haste, no longer gesticulating, but going with ample strides that showed the relatively large size of his feet - they were, I remember, grotesquely exaggerated in size by adhesive clay - to the best possible advantage.

This occurred on the first day of my sojourn, when my play-writing energy was at its height and I regarded the incident simply as an annoying distraction - the waste of five minutes. I returned to my scenario. But when next evening the apparition was repeated with remarkable precision, and again the next evening, and indeed every evening when rain was not falling, concentration upon the scenario became a considerable effort. "Confound the man," I said, "one would think he was learning to be a marionette!" and for several evenings I cursed him pretty heartily. Then my annoyance gave way to amazement and curiosity. Why on earth should a man do this thing? On the fourteenth evening I could stand it no longer, and so soon as he appeared I opened the french window, crossed the verandah, and directed myself to the point where he invariably stopped.

He had his watch out as I came up to him. He had a chubby, rubicund face with reddish brown eyes - previously I had seen him only against the light. "One moment, sir," said I as he turned. He stared. "One moment," he said, "certainly. Or if you wish to speak to me for longer, and it is not asking too much - your moment is up - would it trouble you to accompany me? "

"Not in the least," said I, placing myself beside him.

"My habits are regular. My time for intercourse - limited."

"This, I presume, is your time for exercise? "

"It is. I come here to enjoy the sunset."

"You don't."

"Sir? "

"You never look at it."

"Never look at it? "

"No. I've watched you thirteen nights, and not once have you looked at the sunset - not once."

He knitted his brows like one who encounters a problem.

"Well, I enjoy the sunlight - the atmosphere - I go along this path, through that gate " - he jerked his head over his shoulder - " and round -"

"You don't. You never have been. It's all nonsense. There isn't a way. To-night for instance"

"Oh! to-night! Let me see. Ah! I just glanced at my watch, saw that I had already been out just three minutes over the precise half-hour, decided there was not time to go round, turned -"

"You always do."

He looked at me - reflected. "Perhaps I do, now I come to think of it. But what was it you wanted to speak to me about? "

"Why, this! "

"This? "

"Yes. Why do you do it? Every night you come making a noise"

"Making a noise? "

"Like this " - I imitated his buzzing noise. He looked at me, and it was evident the buzzing awakened distaste. " Do I do that? " he asked.

"Every blessed evening."

"I had no idea."

He stopped dead. He regarded me gravely. " Can it be," he said, " that I have formed a Habit ? "

"Well, it looks like it. Doesn't it? "

He pulled down his lower lip between finger and thumb. He regarded a puddle at his feet.

"My mind is much occupied," he said. "And you want to know why! Well, sir, I can assure you that not only do I not know why I do these things, but I did not even know I did them. Come to think, it is just as you say; I never have been beyond that field. ... And these things annoy you? "

For some reason I was beginning to relent towards him. "Not annoy, I said. "But - imagine yourself writing a play!"

"I couldn't."

"Well, anything that needs concentration."

"Ah!" he said, "of course," and meditated. His expression became so eloquent of distress, that I relented still more. After all, there is a touch of aggression in demanding of a man you don't know why he hums on a public footpath.

"You see," he said weakly, " it's a habit."

"Oh, I recognise that."

"I must stop it."

"But not if it puts you out. After all, I had no business - it's something of a liberty."

"Not at all, sir," he said, "not at all. I am greatly indebted to you. I should guard myself against these things. In future I will. Could I trouble you - once again? That noise? "

"Something like this," I said. " Zuzzoo, zuzzoo. But really, you know -"

"I am greatly obliged to you. In fact, I know I am getting absurdly absent-minded. You are quite justified, sir - perfectly justified. Indeed, I am indebted to you. The thing shall end. And now, sir, I have already brought you farther than I should have done."

"I do hope my impertinence -"

"Not at all, sir, not at all."

We regarded each other for a moment. I raised my hat and wished him a good evening. He responded convulsively, and so we went our ways.

At the stile I looked back at his receding figure. His bearing had changed remarkably, he seemed limp, shrunken. The contrast with his former gesticulating, zuzzooing self took me in some absurd way as pathetic. I watched him out of sight. Then wishing very heartily I had kept to my own business, I returned to my bungalow and my play.

The next evening I saw nothing of him, nor the next. But he was very much in my mind, and it had occurred to me that as a sentimental comic character he might serve a useful purpose in the development of my plot. The third day he called upon me.

For a time I was puzzled to think what had brought him. He made indifferent conversation in the most formal way, then abruptly he came to business. He wanted to buy me out of my bungalow.

"You see," he said, "I don't blame you in the least, but you've destroyed a habit, and it disorganises my day. I've walked past here for years - years. No doubt I've hummed. ... You've made all that impossible! "

I suggested he might try some other direction.

"No. There is no other direction. This is the only one. I've inquired. And now - every afternoon at four - I come to a dead wall."

"But, my dear sir, if the thing is so important to you.."

"It's vital. You see, I'm - I'm an investigator - I am engaged in a scientific research. I live -" he paused and seemed to think. "Just over there," he said, and pointed suddenly dangerously near my eye. "The house with white chimneys you see just over the trees. And my circumstances are abnormal - abnormal. I am on the point of completing one of the most important - demonstrations - I can assure you one of the most important demonstrations that have ever been made. It requires constant thought, constant mental ease and activity. And the afternoon was my brightest time! - effervescing with new ideas - new points of view."

"But why not come by still?"

"It would be all different. I should be self-conscious. I should think of you at your play - watching me irritated - instead of thinking of my work. Oh! I must have the bungalow."

I meditated. Naturally, I wanted to think the matter over thoroughly before anything decisive was said. I was generally ready enough for business in those days, and selling always attracted me; but in the first place it was not my bungalow, and even if I sold it to him at a good price I might get inconvenienced in the delivery of goods if the current owner got wind of the transaction, and in the second I was, well - un - discharged. It was clearly a business that required delicate handling. Moreover, the possibility of his being in pursuit of some valuable invention also interested me. It occurred to me that I would like to know more of this research, not with any dishonest intention, but simply with an idea that to know what it was would be a relief from play-writing. I threw out feelers.

He was quite willing to supply information. Indeed, once he was fairly under way the conversation became a monologue. He talked like a man long pent up, who has had it over with himself again and again. He talked for nearly an hour, and I must confess I found it a pretty stiff bit of listening. But through it all there was the undertone of satisfaction one feels when one is neglecting work one has set oneself. During that first interview I gathered very little of the drift of his work. Half his words were technicalities entirely strange to me, and he illustrated one or two points with what he was pleased to call elementary mathematics, computing on an envelope with a copying-ink pencil, in a manner that made it hard even to seem to understand. "Yes," I said, "yes. Go on!" Nevertheless I made out enough to convince me that he was no mere crank playing at discoveries. In spite of his crank-like appearance there was a force about him that made that impossible. Whatever it was, it was a thing with mechanical possibilities. He told me of a work-shed he had, and of three assistants - originally jobbing carpenters - whom he had trained. Now, from the work-shed to the patent office is clearly only one step. He invited me to see those things. I accepted readily, and took care, by a remark or so, to

underline that. The proposed transfer of the bungalow remained very conveniently in suspense.

At last he rose to depart, with an apology for the length of his call. Talking over his work was, he said, a pleasure enjoyed only too rarely. It was not often he found such an intelligent listener as myself, he mingled very little with professional scientific men.

"So much pettiness," he explained; "so much intrigue! And really, when one has an idea - a novel, fertilising idea - I don't want to be uncharitable, but -"

I am a man who believes in impulses. I made what was perhaps a rash proposition. But you must remember, that I had been alone, play-writing in Lympne, for fourteen days, and my compunction for his ruined walk still hung about me. "Why not," said I, "make this your new habit? In the place of the one I spoil? At least, until we can settle about the bungalow. What you want is to turn over your work in your mind. That you have always done during your afternoon walk. Unfortunately that's over - you can't get things back as they were. But why not come and talk about your work to me; use me as a sort of wall against which you may throw your thoughts and catch them again? It's certain I don't know enough to steal your ideas myself - and I know no scientific men -".

I stopped. He was considering. Evidently the thing, attracted him. "But I'm afraid I should bore you," he said.

"You think I'm too dull? "

" Oh, no; but technicalities "

"Anyhow, you've interested me immensely this afternoon."

" Of course it would be a great help to me. Nothing clears up one's ideas so much as explaining them. Hitherto - "

" My dear sir, say no more."

" But really can you spare the time? "

" There is no rest like change of occupation," I said, with profound conviction.

The affair was over. On my verandah steps he turned. "I am already greatly indebted to you," he said.

I made an interrogative noise.

" You have completely cured me of that ridiculous habit of humming," he explained.

I think I said I was glad to be of any service to him, and he turned away.

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