LORD DUNSANY (1878–   ), *soldier, cricketer, huntsman, and writer, possesses the lightest touch in the fantastic genre of any living writer, together with a delightful sense of humour. One of his mouthpieces is the inimitable Jorkens, member of the billiard club, from whose "Travel Tales" "A Large Diamond" is taken. No one went so far as openly to challenge the truth of Jorkens' tales—but some listeners felt a little uneasy about them.*

A LARGE DIAMOND

THERE were several of us sitting before the fire at our club, in the room in which we all gather after lunch; some of us on the sofa in front of it, others scattered about in chairs. It was a grey, dull winter evening. Evening is the word for it, not afternoon. It seemed to have begun about eleven a.m.; and now at a quarter to three night was obviously falling. Often on such occasions I've heard such talk there that you would not notice that a cheerless day was dully dying in fog, nor for that matter would you have cared if the smiles of summer were luring all others out into golden air. I've heard talk there as brilliant, and sound as well, as any one could desire. And the variety of it! And yet this evening, with the fog in our throats, and I suppose deep down in our spirits, this is the kind of conversation we were having, as far as I can remember:

"By gad, that's a big one."

"Big what?"

"Big diamond."

"Oh, I thought you meant a fish."

"No, a diamond."

"But you can't tell from a picture like that."

"Yes, I can."

"How can you?"

"It's life-size."

"How do you know?"

"Why, it says so."

"But do you suppose the editor knows?"

"Of course he does."

"How?"

" Why, a stone like that is known all over the world : he has only got to ask."

" Still, I don't see how a flat picture can give one any idea of the size of a solid diamond."

" Don't you ? "

" No, I don't."

" Well, anyway it's a big one."

" Oh yes, it's big."

" Well, that's all I said."

One thing, and one thing alone, relieved for me the tedium of this discussion, and that was that Jorkens, who was in the club that day, was solemnly shaking his head. He began at the first mention of a big diamond, quietly continuing through the whole discussion. I hardly noticed him at first, and perhaps should never have done so at all had he not shaken his head with increasing vigour whenever any one called the diamond big. But for this the monotony of his disagreement might have escaped my attention. I listened then to hear what Jorkens would say, and not a word came from him, but the confidence with which he sat shaking his head made me feel—you could not doubt it—that he really knew something about diamonds that was pretty well hidden from most of us. It wasn't like him to sit silent so long ; and it was I that eventually broke his silence when my curiosity could bear it no longer. In any case it was time these two dull fellows stopped discussing their diagram in an illustrated paper. I glanced at the paper and said directly to Jorkens : " It's a pretty big one, isn't it ? "

" Not really," said Jorkens quietly.

" Why," I said, " have you ever seen a bigger one ? "

" Yes," said Jorkens.

" Where is it ? " I asked.

" Well, people who think a stone like that is specially big," said Jorkens, " will hardly believe in my stone."

It was, if I remember right, a diagram of the Koh-i-noor.

" I'll believe anything," I said.

And one or two other fellows, bored I suppose by the fog, leaned forward and said, " So will we."

Something in that seemed to cheer Jorkens and encourage him a good deal, and without any more ado he started his tale at once.

" It was a long time ago," he said. " Many years ago a meteorite had fallen in the far North of Russia, up in the Esquimaux land, a colossal thing ; and it took a year or so for the news to reach civilized Europe. When it did, it came only as rumour. But what struck me at once, as soon as I heard the rumour, was that the thing must have been as big as a mountain. For one can sift truth out of a rumour as well as out of anything else, if you go the right way about it. It appeared first as a fable of the Esquimaux. A god, they said, had arrived in a flaming car and driven away southwards, and the sky was red all night and all the snow was melted for forty miles.

" It was not a matter of trusting the Esquimaux ; I wouldn't trust them a yard ; but simple people invent tales usually for simple reasons, and where was the reason here ? Their report passed unnoticed ; but to me it seemed that the only reason for its existence was that something like that, something that looked like that, must actually have happened ; in fact, a meteorite, and one vastly larger than any that had hit the world before. In the end I went to look for it.

" I had no difficulty in finding it, either : the Esquimaux had given geographical details. What was difficult was to find out what on earth had happened. I found a mountain of meteoric iron before I had gone a day and a half from the coast, and it seemed to be what I was looking for. It was not on the map, but then very little in those parts was ; so that proved nothing. It was of the right material, and within forty or fifty miles of the right place ; and yet, without shutting one's eyes to a very obvious fact, one could not be satisfied that one had discovered what I was looking for. My expedition was purely scientific, and in science you can't shut your eyes to facts that don't quite fit. I used to be very keen on science in those days. I made many scientific journeys. I may have told you of some of them."

I didn't want Jorkens to wander, because, if he did that, you never got him back.

" What was wrong with your mountain ? " I asked.

" Simply," said Jorkens, " that a colossal thing like that, as big as one of the Alps, could not have hit the earth at the enormous pace those things travel at, plus the pace of our own earth, without having gone right in and utterly buried itself. But here it was sticking up in the air as high as the St. Gothard. Well, I questioned the Esquimaux then. I had three or four with me, running my reindeer sleigh, and you must remember that nothing had come to our end of Europe about this meteorite except Esquimaux's rumours, so that these rumours were the only scientific data that I had on which to work. Well, they stuck to their story that the god in his car had arrived much farther North and had driven away in this direction. And the conflagration had been where he had arrived, not here. That puzzled me for a long time. It seemed simple enough. It seemed so like burning forests. And yet there weren't forests there in the North: it was just snow and ice, except for one month in the year, when the snow melted and enough sparse vegetation appeared to feed a few reindeer. I knew very few dozen words of the Esquimaux language, and I questioned them largely by signs; but there was no doubt about that conflagration.

"And all of a sudden I got it, an exposed stratum of coal. The meteorite must have hit it and set it flaming.

"There was no sign of any coal round the mountain that I had seen, so it must have struck our earth a glancing blow and ricochetted on. That was what I eventually decided on, and it turned out to be right. You see the meteorite had not merely dropped; the gravitation of Earth had not been its only influence; if so it would have come straight; but it had its own orbit and a movement of its own; this combined with the pull of the earth had made its slanting course, and it had hit us obliquely and ricochetted.

"When I had worked out this it was easy enough to follow up the course of the meteorite to where it had first struck earth. Theory is the difficult thing: any one can do practice. Well, the mountain had hit the earth in several places, leaving shallow hollows like the beds of old lakes, about a mile apart. But after a while the distances grew greater and the hollows much deeper, more and more of them being partly filled with water. I had had to leave the reindeer behind at the mountain, because the snow was rapidly melting. I had chosen the one month in the year when the snow is gone, so that I could see the ground."

"By the way," said some one, "are there diamonds in Russia?"

"Are there diamonds in Russia?" repeated Jorkens with a sort of sad fervour.

"Well, you were telling us about a diamond, weren't you?" he said.

"You shall hear," said Jorkens. "You shall hear." And then he added, "You know what a diamond is, I suppose?"

"Well, of course we do," said one or two of us, with the rather irritable confident air that so often goes with ignorance. But one man knew. "Crystallized carbon," he said.

And then Jorkens went on with his tale. " The snow had all melted; I'd timed my journey just right for that; and we went on with three donkeys that I bought at a kind of village, if you can give such a name to a cluster of huts that comes one year and goes the next. I had three Esquimaux, one for each donkey. Our kit was on the donkeys and we walked.

" We came to a huge depression in the earth, into which water had come, and frozen. A huge lake without reeds, not yet discovered by wild fowl. A most lonely waste; cold, empty, and glittering dully, the ice turning to slush. And then no more of these hollows for twenty-five miles. It was in fact the last of the bounces the mountain had made. Or the first, rather; for I was travelling in the opposite direction. We camped about ten miles North of that vast lake, glad to see the last of its chilly miles of dull loneliness. Next day we packed up our crude little tents and did fifteen miles more. And that brought us to the place where the meteor had first hit our earth, striking a glancing blow. Right on the top of the earth it had fallen, partly pulled by our gravitation, and partly flying on some course of its own, which our arrival must have disturbed. Then, as I have said, it ricochetted away.

" There was no mistaking the place where it had struck: first of all, because I had been right about the coal, and we walked over about a mile of cinders, a fine outcrop of coal burned right down to the bottom of the stratum as far as I could tell. And then we came to a wide, flat, dreary waste, going perfectly level to the horizon; and cold, it was horribly cold. And the snow still covered it though it was gone everywhere else. I intended to camp that night on it so as to take a few miles off the long journey, next day, to the other side. But the Esquimaux would not come. I asked them why not. Bad ice, they said. I stamped through the snow and it seemed hard as steel. But they repeated, ' Bad ice.' ' What's wrong? ' I asked so far as I could manage their language. ' Too cold,' they said. ' Very bad ice.'

" ' You don't like ice being cold? ' I tried to ask. But you can't be ironical with natives, in their language, helped out by signs.

" ' No,' they said. ' Very cold.'

" So in the end I took the donkey that had my own tent, and went on alone through the snow. Being unable to tether the donkey he went off that night after the rest, but I managed to get my tent up, and tried to get some sleep, cold though it was. The silence was measureless, not a sound from the cracking of ice, not a rumble from water. There are hundreds of sounds that come grumbling up through ice; but there there was not a murmur, not a whisper, and no sounds of animal life but my donkey breathing. And later on, when he went away, I thought I heard him slithering on the hardness for five miles, till he reached the shore, for there was no other sound whatever in all that waste. That silence in the cold kept me awake for a long time. So that when a sort of morning came and I put on my skates, I knew already, as well as the Esquimaux, that there was something odd about it. I put on my skates because the layer of snow had all melted. It had puzzled me to see it there at all; but I have seen the same on a hard tennis-court when it has gone from everything else. I had trudged overnight in my boots, my snow-shoes having gone back with the reindeer; but now I put on a pair of skates, and calculated on getting to the other side in a few hours. Yet I saw that there was something odd about it. The queer glitter of the thing was odd if nothing else. Well, I soon found out what was the matter with that ice. It was harder than steel. That was one thing that was the matter with it. My skates wouldn't grip at all, and I sprawled and fell till I was bruised all over. What could that meteorite have done to ice, I thought? And all of a sudden the right idea struck me. If it was harder than steel it wasn't ice. The idea came to me while I was on my hands and knees, looking down into depths of light. I pulled out my pocket-knife and tried to scratch it. Not a mark would it make. There aren't many things on earth that steel won't scratch, and this was one of them. I had a ring in those days, a stone set in gold, that as a matter of fact was rock crystal. Not the one I am wearing now, of course; that is perfectly genuine. People used to think it was a diamond, though I didn't buy it with that intention. I don't remember why I bought it: liked the look of it, I suppose: took my fancy. Anyhow, I had this bit of a crystal in a ring, and I tried it now on the cold glittering substance; and not a scratch would it make either. It would have scratched it if it had been rock crystal too. This left very few things it could be. Well, I sat down on the wet stone and took off my skates. Then I stood up and shaded my eyes from that frightful glare, and tried to think. It was no use going back to the idea that that wide plain was of ice. An unscientific mind might have wasted time considering such things; but the touch of the steel had proved that that was impossible. I had therefore to think forward to new theories. Well, it was easy enough. The first thing you do when you see a stone—I mean, if you are a scientist—is to consider what stratum you're on. The moment I thought ot it it was clear enough. I was on coal; I had seen the burnt cinders all along the edges. You know what coal is."

"Carbon, by gad," said the man who had spoken last.

"But you don't mean . . ." some one else was beginning; when Jorkens quietly said to him: "Well, you know what crystallizes carbon, or anything else."

"Pressure, isn't it?" said the other.

"Pressure beyond anything we can imagine, and heat beyond any fire we have ever lit," said Jorkens. "Well, not quite beyond, because a diamond has been made in a laboratory. Only it was so small, and the requisite pressure was so expensive, that I don't think any one ever tried it again. But imagine a white-hot mountain travelling at, say, a thousand miles a minute: add the pace of our earth, doing about the same, and a bit more for the force of gravity; and pitch the whole thing full into a field of carbon. Why, the result is so obvious that I might have guessed it, without the trouble of going to look. But now that I had gone to look I decided to go right across it and see the other side. And a weary journey it was. The awful hardness, the cold and that deadly glitter, wearied feet and head and heart. Chiefly I was looking for a flaw, in order to insert a knife-blade, or the edge of my skate, and bring a good slab back. And—would you believe it—there was not a flaw in the whole of it.

"A headache I got from the glare grew worse all the time; and there was no nightfall to help me at the end of June in those latitudes. I plodded wearily on, and the sight of any considerable display of diamonds has wearied me ever since. That is the true reason why I don't go to Lady Clashion's evening parties any more, and you can tell whom you please. Well, I went on and on; and at last, late in what would have been evening in any civilized country, I got to the other side. There was nothing much to see, just burnt cinders again; dusty to walk on, of course, but I came the whole way back over the ashes rather than cross that diamond again. I was wearing furs, so I was able to sleep on the way. I couldn't have done it in one journey, even if I'd started fresh. It was a long way round the shore of that diamond, over the ashes.

"I found my Esquimaux again, but nothing would take them near the diamond. Devils had come there, I gathered from them, after the god had gone, and had enchanted the place with coldness and glare. Whether they had pursued him to Earth, or had merely come to the place that he had vacated, I did not know enough of their language to gather. In any case there are many ways of accounting for anything, and the scientific and the religious are two of them. I was going one way, while the Esquimaux went the other.

"I might with some difficulty, and certainly with much publicity, have got a quantity of dynamite at the coast, and gone back and got enough splinters to have stocked the Rue de la Paix. You know Paris? Yes, yes; of course. But I had bigger ideas than that. I wanted to beautify homes. I wanted to form a company that would bring chandeliers of surpassing beauty within reach of the moderately rich. I had planned gorgeous vases. And I had thought a good deal along the lines of sheer utility.

"And in the end what happened? The very day that I got to London, the very day, I saw placards in the streets saying, 'Big Earthquake In ——.' Just saw those words, the top three lines. I rushed up to a newspaper man. 'Don't tell me,' I said. 'Don't tell me. It's in Russia.' And, sure enough, I was right, though they called it something ending in 'ansk.'

"I knew it was there. You see, I knew what a blow the earth had received. I knew that the strata must have been shattered for miles down, under that frightful blow. I had been thinking of nothing else. You know how, if a friend hurts an ankle badly, or has a groggy knee, and all of a sudden you see his name in the papers, or it might be a her; you know at once what's happened; the ankle or knee has given out, and they have fallen and hurt themselves. It was just the same with our poor old earth: I knew what a blow she had had, and the moment I saw the word Earthquake I knew where it was. And I was perfectly right. They had merely worked it out from the seismograph, but I could have told them the very spot.

"Of course I went back at once to see what had happened. No use forming a company to place a thing like that on the market, until you're sure that it's all right. I went back by the next boat. And I found worse than I'd feared. It had been the hell of an earthquake. And no wonder, considering the frightful blow that the strata there had received. The wonder is that they had held up so long. Worse than I'd feared, it was certainly; a long way worse. The diamond had tilted sideways. It must have been that: it could never have gone clean out of sight, as it had, if only it had stayed level. But that would have been too much to expect, with all the strata like broken arches after some unimaginable railway accident. When they went they must have just dropped in heaps, into subterranean caverns of which we know nothing. Anyhow the diamond was gone. Not even the cinders were there, that had been like a shore all round it. It was gone with every trace, and the earth had closed again over it. It almost looked as if the right thing had happened, in a kind of way, after all. We're probably better, in the end, without that diamond. But I'm not a philosopher. Not that I didn't do my best to bear my loss as I suppose one ought to. And I think I do, pretty well; considering the size of it. Only, you can understand, when I hear any one talk of big diamonds, that it upsets me a bit. I can't help it."

"Couldn't you have dug for it?" The question came out of the silence that had fallen when Jorkens ceased; it came out of the gloom of one of the leather chairs, now dim with that wintry evening but for the glow from the fire.

"Couldn't we have dug for it!" exclaimed Jorkens. "Couldn't we have dug for it! *Of course* we could. A couple of thousand men might have done for a start. But I thought we'd better do the thing properly. Fifty thousand would have been about the right number, and we could have easily got them in Russia. Labour is cheap there; ten shillings a week would have done for them. That would have been £25,000 a week. We are sure to have got results in about ten weeks. That would have been two hundred and fifty thousand in wages. Say the same again for feeding them, and about the same for transport. Then, of course, there'd have been the housing; quite primitive huts would have done. We could have done the whole thing for a million to start with. And what is a million in the City of London? But do you think I could get it? Money in plenty, and imagination simply not there. I tried talk, I tried everything, and as many drinks as they wanted; but not one would put up that million. Good Lord, when I think of the profits, the hundreds of thousands per cent. profit on that one miserable million; and not a single one of them would touch it. It was enough to make me tell them what I thought of them. I did tell one of them: and then I gave it up.

"Waiter," he called, "bring me a very small whisky, with just a dash of soda in it."

There are no very small whiskies in our club. There are small whiskies, of course; but all the waiters know that they must never bring a small one to Jorkens.