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ONE SUMMER'S EVENING

[by Lord Dunsany]

SOMEBODY was saying the other day at the Club that it was a long lane that had no turning. And from that we got to saying that there was a lot of sense in old proverbs. And, as so often happens with any topic, there were a few who argued that the sense in old saws was exaggerated. Well, we were arguing rather pointlessly about the effect of salt on a bird's tail, and would probably have reached no conclusion, when Jorkens joined in, as he rather likes towards the end of an argument , as it places him somewhat in the position of a judge at the end of a trial.

What Jorkens said was: "I have found all those things to be useful guides."

"Useful?" said Terbut.

"Yes." said Jorkens. "I have found a great deal of truth in all of them."

"What about tottie-grass turning to gold if you hold it still?" asked Terbut.

So might a small boy put a bit of stick on a railway-line, hoping to wreck a train, only to see his bit of a stick completely pulverised.

"The very thing," said Jorkens. "I experimented with that very thing."

"And how did you get on?" asked Terbut.

"I did what I set out to do." replied Jorkens.

"You must have made a pretty good thing out of it, then," said Terbut. "An average hay-field should yield at that rate a pretty good tonnage of gold."

"Yes," said Jorkens.

"How much did you make?" asked Terbut.

"I'll tell you," said Jorkens.

NATURALLY we listened. Those who didn't believe Jorkens probably listened to see how Terbut would catch him out; others listened merely urged by that sporting instinct that makes us watch a veteran batsman standing up to a crafty bowler; and others, well, there's always something about gold that can catch the attention of even the most unworldly of us. So Jorkens went on, while we sat silent.

"Yes, I made the experiment once," he said. "My nurse had told me about it as a child. Of course I had tried it at the time, but a child is always too much excited, and I couldn't hold my hand steady enough; no child could. But I always remembered her words, and one day I decided to do the thing scientifically and see what there was in the story.

"Do you mean to say," said Terbut, "that you thought…?"

"I said scientifically," replied Jorkens. "Consequently I had no preconceived thoughts at all, but left everything to experiment. I will tell you about my experiment. Of course I had a good prima facie case for it, for I had found that those old sayings are usually right. But a prima facie case was not enough; I wanted proof."

"And how did you get your proof?" asked Terbut.

"By experiment," said Jorkens, "as I was telling you."

AND after that Terbut must have felt that he had to listen., and he seemed to do so with as good a grace as he could.

"I wasn't as old, of course, as I thought I was," said Jorkens. "But I had come to a time of life at which I thought that the wisdom of the ages wanted testing, and felt that I was the man to test it. And, remembering my old nurse's words, I decided to begin on them. I remembered a lovely summer's day when she first told me about it, and now it was a gorgeous day again in the middle of June,

and it set me thinking about the day that was lost and the golden light of its evening, and the even more resplendent gold of the insects that darted across the rays of that light, and my undisciplined childish efforts to hold a great bunch of tottie-grass still.

"It all came back to me, and my nurse's words, and I made up my mind to find out if there was any truth in them. I had an open mind, Terbut, an open mind, without which no experiment can have any value whatever. Well, I expect we are all agreed about that. So I will get back to my experiment.

"I decided to do it out of doors. Not only was everything more natural there, more in touch with whatever power controlled the tottie-grass; but I could be quiet in the open air, and alone, and would not have to make explanations, which would have been unavoidable in lodgings, in which I was living at that time.

"So I picked a great bunch of tottie-grass from the last field to be still uncut, where it stood thick in the hay among huge white dog-daisies, and I carried my quivering bunch up a wild grass slope that nobody ever mowed, among wild roses and orchids, and milwert and crowsfoot and dark-green moths with scarlet spots, sleepily clinging to flowers, and wild seedlings growing thicker and thicker as I approached the wood at the top.

"And so I came to a great beech at the edge of a wood, a thing that had grown for ages, with a trunk that was thicker than the pillar of any cathedral which would give shelter to me and my bunch of grass from any wind that was blowing. The hill looked right into the sunset.

"With only one field in those parts where they had not yet cut the hay, it must have been getting on for midsummer; so when I say that the hills looked into the sunset, I mean that it must have been facing nearly north-west, and the sun had got very low over a great chalk down that was opposite, for the rays were practically level, right at my face. I knew that my hand was steady enough. You couldn't have filled a glass so full in those days that I could not have drunk it without spilling a drop, standing on my head."

I think that the last four words were added as an afterthought, in order to make the effect that the earlier part of the sentence had somehow failed to make. At least, that was my impression.

"My hand was steady enough," Jorkens went on. "But I chose a part of the trunk against which I could wedge it, so as to make it almost immovable, apart from any steadiness I put into it with my grip. One steady moment would do it, from all I had heard. And, once it had turned to gold, I knew there'd be no difficulty in carrying it steadily home and putting it under a glass case. There used to be glass cases in those days, domes they put over clocks. I knew that nothing but a very big jerk would shake the tottie-grass once it was gold. Provided it did turn to gold; for I was careful, as I told you, to keep a perfectly open mind.

"WELL, the sun went on going down to the fields on the edge of the hill; and now the rays in my face were perfectly level, and all the birds were singing and all the winged insects dancing, and I was standing there with my bunch of tottie-grass wedged against that great beech tree, and my hand gripping it as firmly for I was determined that not fault of mine should prevent that magic from working. Not that I used the word magic, even in my thoughts; for my experiment was scientific, and I was determined to keep it so.

"And the time came when I thought I had got it absolutely still, and that in a moment or less the last little head

would have stopped its dancing quiver. But just then a blackbird sang on a branch above me, and its tune was so piercingly beautiful like horns all of a sudden blowing sheer out of Elfland, that I could not help looking up, expecting to see I don't know what, silver horns perhaps in the hands of something unearthly.

"Well, that of course set the little heads of the grasses all dancing again. And the sun went lower and the birds sang more than ever and th[e] light was even lovelier, and the insects that danced in it were lovelier still, and the lower edge of the sun just touched a field of mustard, and the bunch in my hand went golden. Every head and stalk and little branch (pedicles I believe they call them) turned into solid gold.

"THE old story was true; I had proved it. I wonder what my old nurse would have said. It doesn't follow she knew, though she handed the story on. It might have surprised her. Certainly it surprised me.

"But there was one thing I never had thought of. I wasn't going to jerk the bunch in order to let it go back again. I still had it firmly wedged against the trunk of the beech, and I knew it would take a pretty good jerk to move it, now that it was all solid metal. I was going to carry it carefully enough.

"But one thing I had forgotten. All the swinging and dancing of the heads had been sideways and I was guarding against that. But what I never thought of was the sudden downward pull. I never thought of the weight, and it was now, I suppose, thirty or forty times heavier than what it had been a second before. The jerk on my hand was more than anything for which I had calculated. And it came from the wrong direction; downwards.

"I suppose that just for a moment it was too much for me, and I must have given the bunch a bit of a shake which set even the metal waggling, and it all went back to tottie-grass[.] The sun set just then too, and the light went out of everything."

Jorkens sighed.

"Why didn't you try again?" asked Terbut.

"Do you realise," said Jorkens, "that I had done what there is no record of any man having ever done before[?] I had made a world record. You don't easily do a thing like that twice."

"I suppose not," said Terbut.

"Well, try it yourself," said Jorkens.

[THE END]