

The Pale-Green Image

So heavy was the gloom one afternoon in the Billiards Club, that I wondered why the waiters did not turn on the lights. The darkness clung in cornices and seemed to beat down from the ceiling, and it was only low near the floor that we had any light at all. Some were for putting on the lights at once, but others felt that that would be to surrender the day, before it was yet three, to the forces of fog and night. Luckily it is this very thing that so often encourages Jorkens to turn his memories eastwards into the sunlight; and though merely turning them that way does not inspire him to talk, a whiskey-and-soda always will, and it was at this juncture that I offered him one.

“When I was in Tunis,” Jorkens said, “I had an experience that may be of interest to some of you. Well, it was in London that the thing all came to a head; so I had better begin there. It was at the Ecclesiastical Club, and I was a member in those days. The members are not all bishops by any means; there are plenty of laity there, plenty of men who never sung a hymn in their lives; but, at the same time, pretty nearly every bishop belongs to it. Well, there was a fellow called Purry, a nasty sort of fellow, and he did a nasty sort of thing; a thing that nobody had ever done in the Ecclesiastical Club before, or in any other club, I should think. He brought up a bishop before the committee, for them to enquire into his conduct. Yes, that is what he did. Naturally the committee of the Ecclesiastical Club saw what a disgraceful thing it was that Purry was doing, and tried to explain it to him; but Purry wouldn’t see it. He was one of those devilish ferreting fellows that know

more about the rules of a club than the committee do. And in the end he got them to do it; got them to haul up the bishop before them, I mean."

"But how on earth could he do that?" said most of us.

"Well," said Jorkens when our exclamations subsided, "he had ferreted out that the bishop, who had gone for a holiday to Tunis, had been driving a small car and there had been a fatal accident. An Arab, you know. Well, the committee made one last effort to make Purry see what a blackguard he was, and then they hauled up the bishop just as he told them. The defence was hardly left in the hands of the bishop: the president of the committee practically did that for himself. He said everybody knew the bishop, and everybody knew what Arabs were. And both those statements went down with the committee so tremendously, that they almost decided the case without any more talk. A further point that was made in the bishop's favour was that the judiciary of the country concerned had acquitted him; and another point was that he had paid a hundred pounds compensation to the Arab's family, which in Tunis goes a very long way. Then the committee apologized to the bishop, very much as though they had murdered his mother; and nothing then remained to be done but to get rid of Purry, which was no easy thing to do, and it took us a year to do it. But we couldn't have a man like that in the Club. Finally we caught him under a by-law; and a difficult job it was, as I said. How on earth he got hold of the story I never knew, and I don't know to this day, and I never shall; but he was one of those ferreting fellows that grub things up."

"Read it in the papers, I should imagine," said Terbut, "if it came before the courts. No great difficulty in getting hold of a paper from Tunis."

"Oh, he needn't have got it from Tunis," said Jorkens. "It was copied at the time into all the English papers. But he must have known more than that. That damned fellow Purry must have found out what really happened. And I thought I was the only living man who knew, not

counting the bishop. How Purry got hold of it is an eternal mystery."

"And what did really happen?" asked Terbut.

"What really happened," said Jorkens, "was that I was taking a walk one day in the souks, a queer covered lane with shops on both sides of it all the way along. So far as I can remember, the shops have no windows or doors: they all look out on the lane, and you pass through hundreds of yards of merchandise. In one of these shops was an Arab called Amool ben Ibrahim, who had all kinds of things to sell; carpets mostly; and a queer little image of duck's-egg green, which he was too eager to sell me. I don't know what it was made of; enamelled copper perhaps, six inches high and less than an inch thick. When I saw that he was too eager to sell it to me, I rather sheered off from it.

"We got to know each other quite well and drank a great deal of coffee together, as one does in that land if one has any business to do; and if one has no business, and time hangs heavy, one drinks coffee just the same; black coffee with the ground berry filling a third of the little cup. I never taste it here. If I could get one cup of that coffee, it would bring back the East to me like a vision; Tunis, the Roman ruins and the date-palms, and beyond them the boundless desert."

"You were saying, Jorkens . . . ?" I interposed.

"Ah yes, the souks," said Jorkens. "Well one day I said I would buy that pale-green image after all, and then the Arab wouldn't sell it. Well, I increased my price, as one does; but still he wouldn't sell. Of course I saw there was some queer story there, and we had some more coffee and he told it to me. And this was the story: a curse went with the image. Well, that wasn't so new to me as it might be to you. I knew the East a bit. I just asked Amool what kind of curse it was. And Amool told me. It worked like this: when you came by that pale-green image of some old god of the Nile; an image of the days of ignorance Amool called it, by which he meant the ages before Mahomet; when you

bought this thing, it dominated your life, gripped your ideas, and never let go of them. That meant you had no rest, no leisure, no peace of mind; and the only thing to do was to sell it, as he had once tried to sell it to me, and as now he would not; or else shake off its power in the other way; which he was not able to do. That was the curse, and the methods of shaking it off were very easy. They were lightly cut into the sides of the image in all manner of languages. It was simply this: that the man who bought the image had to kill the man that he bought it from; at least, he was very strongly impelled to do so; and, when he did so, all his troubles ceased. That was the situation, and he had bought the accursed thing from a Touareg, who had ridden in from the desert to sell it, and might now be with his camel a thousand miles away, besides being a bad fellow to follow in any case. So he had to sell it, and what was he to do? I asked him for another lump of sugar, and I drank my coffee down to the lovely dregs; and then the idea came to me. 'Our people,' I said to Amool, 'are not like the Touaregs, and some are not even like the Arabs. We have men among us who kill nobody.'

"'Nobody?'" said Amool.

"'Under no circumstances,'" I said.

"'And if one of them had but two wives,'" said Amool, 'and a man came and took both away from him on the one day, such a man as you tell of would not smite even then?'

"'Not even then,'" I said, passing over the detail of the two wives, for a lesson upon monogamy would only have puzzled Amool.

"'And such a one of your people is here in Tunis?'" asked he.

"'The very man,'" I said.

"'It was the Bishop of Britchester: he was in the same hotel as I was, and I had met him.'

"'I will bring such a man to you,'" I said to Amool, 'and you shall sell him the image, and under no circumstances will he kill you.'

“Of that I felt certain, and I felt almost equally sure that no heathen spells could affect an English bishop. Well, of course I was wrong. I didn’t know the strength of the spell, or perhaps the strength of the bishop. I don’t suppose I was wrong about the bishop: I imagine he had the strength to resist any temptation that could come to a man in England. It was the spell I was wrong about.

“There is not much more to tell. I brought the bishop around to Amool’s shop: everybody goes to the souks to see the carpets, so there was no difficulty in getting him there. I had got Amool to agree to any price whatever that I thought best; and having headed the bishop towards the image, I cast the price at him like a fly.

“Well, I made one man happy.

“But he wasn’t happy for long: the accident, as of course one must always call it, in which the Bishop’s car was concerned, occurred in under a week; and that was the end of poor Amool ben Ibrahim. But how that blackguard Purry got to hear of it is one of those secrets that perhaps make life more interesting, but which we shall never know.”