

The Sacred City of Krakovlitz

There was always something a bit wild about the odd hill of which this story tells; there were myrtle bushes dotted about it, which gave it a wild air, and shrubs of other kinds and a few large lonely rocks, and all the little things by which hills so often proclaim that, unlike the fields and gardens, they owe no allegiance to Man. It was a bit wild in any case, without the mirage; so that when the mirage came, shining down on the top of it, and putting over the myrtles, azaleas and junipers a little eastern city, such as could not have possibly stood within a hundred miles, then it was no wonder that a young impressionable peasant of that far end of Europe that we call the Near East considered the hill sacred.

He was watching a herd of nine or ten goats amongst the herbage that straggled about the base of the hill, when the mirage shone there, a mass of white domes gleaming above white walls, with thin towers among them, and tiny gold spires on the tops of some of the domes; very compact and small, a little city exactly fitting the top of the hill. It did not shine there for more than twenty minutes, but while it was there it was very clear indeed. It is rather a desolate district, that of Krakovlitz, and no living creature was in sight of Srebzt besides his herd of goats. It is doubtful if any saw the mirage but he, though several said they did afterwards. All the time it was there, Srebzt stood and gazed at it with enormous wonder. He had never seen an oriental city. I do not know by what means light picks up such visions from where they are real and puts them down again somewhere where they are not. It very rarely

happens. Everything that ever occurs among the simple people dwelling round Krakovlitz drifts into legend, to be handed down through the ages; and there is no record of anything of the sort having occurred there before for nearly two hundred years. The previous event is exactly dated, because legend tells how it occurred on the eve of a battle, and the battle has its place and its date in history.

As Srebzt gazed at the very vivid mirage, the whole city was deeply impressed upon his mind; and it was so new to him, and so strangely beautiful, that for twenty minutes his eye roved over its details, going from house to house, and from walled garden to walled garden, where palm trees put their heads here and there above the tops of the walls. It was quite obviously a city of people following no religion of Srebzt's; but, after all, his faith had come from the East, and the city was obviously eastern. And all at once it appeared to him holy. He ran up the hill towards it as far as he could, but that was not far, for very soon he came to the royal wall, which enclosed the greater part of the hill within the Demesne of the Palace, a wild park in which goats were forbidden.

The first impression of the city, seen in a flash, the beauty and wonder of it, and then the examination of every building, and the feeling that it was holy coming on top of that, combined to give Srebzt a vision of that city, clear and exact in its details, which never faded. Perhaps no missionary has ever treasured a clearer picture of Heaven than was the picture of the mirage on the top of the hill of Krakovlitz, stamped upon Srebzt's memory. In fact the picture made Srebzt into a missionary: he went through all the villages, and even as far as towns, telling them of the city upon the hill and swearing that it was sacred and that it was more beautiful than any city of earth, as it certainly was prettier than any town that he can ever have had opportunities of beholding. And, though it had faded after twenty minutes, he always spoke of it to the people of all the

villages as though it were still there and would never leave the hill. He became a familiar figure in all the country round, in market-places at evening, or in whatever little spaces in the middle of villages were empty when work was over, where men could gather and talk.

A hundred miles from Krakovlitz in many directions they knew his flapping cloak, his outstretched arm and his vehement declamations; for he walked great distances, and would cover a hundred miles in three or four days. And everywhere he said the same thing, that the earth was corrupt and its governments were corrupt, but that on the top of the hill of Krakovlitz shone the serene beauty of the utterly perfect city, and that the laws that ran in its streets were the laws of Heaven. Some believed him, some went to Krakovlitz to see for themselves, and of course saw nothing; but such fiery oratory soon came to have more weight with them than their eyesight, till they too believed. The simple people of the country round Krakovlitz are easily excited, and the torrent of words in the twilight, poured out at them, often, till all the stars were lit, and the unquestioned sincerity of Srebzt, carried them all away, and they believed that on the top of Krakovlitz hill all the highest ideals of men blossomed incorruptibly in a city of unimaginable beauty, seen by one man. But all but the fields at the very base of the hill were in the Demesne of the Palace, and the domes and the golden spires could not be seen from the fields below, being, as Srebzt taught, too lofty for human eye, and the Government would not permit the people to go up the slopes of Krakovlitz.

And so things were for a long time; a fierce religious revival, or heresy if you will, among tens of thousands of peasantry, and, on the side of the government, law, routine and materialism. This could not last for ever. There were arrests, imprisonments and one execution, and after the execution the whole revival flared up and lengths of the royal wall were battered down and Srebzt led all the people up the slope of the hill; but not all

the way: he halted them soon and went up to the top alone, and came back and told them that he had seen the city, but that it was not yet material, not yet gross enough for their eyes. It was a strangely mystical speech, the speech in which he told them that the city that he had just seen, and in which he had just walked, was truly there for good men, and yet not so completely there for others.

I cannot explain this exact theory; nor, I think, could he have done so in broad daylight, but the long shadows of evening had died from the rock and the bushes, and twilight, in spite of the multitude, had become strangely hushed and the sky was full of some very glorious colours; and Srebzt called to them in the stillness, almost chanting, telling them of the wonders of the city that he had seen, and which they too should see, if they were just and pure and patriotic and, above all, obedient. And they did see it. For the government fled that night, and Srebzt assumed power next morning. And the first thing he did was to collect all the builders in the country and, cleverly enough, to get architects from abroad, even though he taught that foreigners were all perfectly useless; and, with his intense vision burning as clearly as ever in his fanatical memory, he really did succeed in a very few months in having the city of the mirage duplicated exactly. And he moved into the city with his ministers and made it the seat of government, as everyone knows.

Not everyone knew what the workmen had done; not everyone even knew that there had been workmen at all, for they were a very simple people, and the sight of the city gleaming upon the hill, and exactly as Srebzt had described it, clinched once for all in their minds the divine vision of Srebzt. If there was a single doubter upon this point in the whole of the country, he was invariably silent.

The power of Srebzt was now absolute, and from this point onward is merely a matter of history. To go further with this story would be to attempt to stir with

one's pen the turbulent waters of European diplomacy, and would be to repeat unnecessarily events well known to the world, a world so troubled that it already forgets those early stages of Srebzt's assumption of power.

And yet I know that the story is true, for my friend Jorkens told it to me one day at the Billiards Club, and he has travelled everywhere and knows many a thing which the hurried world forgets. And I have not only Jorkens' bare word for it; for no sooner had he ceased telling the tale after lunch, when from the other side of the table came immediate corroboration. Sillet, one of our members, had been a subadministrator in the East; the real East, not the Near East, many hundreds of miles beyond Krakovlitz. And there had been a town in his subadministration, called Loom-bah; and Sillet, who was a man of very few words, told his story in very few words. He had been dissatisfied with Loom-bah. Odd though it may seem to us, there were the most appalling vices, and even some kinds of murder, which Sillet put up with; but there were certain kinds of murder he never would tolerate, and several of these were taking place in Loom-bah. He decided to stop it; decided, in his own words, "to tidy up the town"; and found that he could not do it. Sillet persisted and, again to use his own words, "I decided rightly or wrongly that the best thing would be to burn it." So he called out the military, for which there was ample provocation at any time, and did burn Loom-bah.

And then for many years the thing had been on his conscience, although he could see no other way of stopping these foul murders that used to go on in Loom-bah, and of which, as he said, there were a great deal too many. As an official he approved of what he had done, but then there was some unofficial part of him that, in spite of the crimes of Loom-bah, was unreasonably yearning to see that quaint small city again. And the knowledge that he had acted rightly could not keep him from feeling sorry. He had done it quite thoroughly, and nothing at all was left of Loom-bah. And then one

day he came home from the East by motor, and of course he passed through the Near East; and, as it happened, he went right by Krakovlitz, where the ruins of the royal wall were being used for mending the road, which the old regime used never to mend at all. And on the top of the hill he saw Loom-bah, with Srebzt's flag flying from the dome of a mosque.

"It was perfectly exact," he said, "a view of Loom-bah from the south. I knew every house in it. I had arrested somebody in every street, and I had been myself into every house to get evidence about some murder or other, and I couldn't have been mistaken."

Then we talked awhile about mirages, all giving our own theories. We pulled out an atlas and found where Loom-bah was, though the actual name was not marked, and we drew a line from it to Krakovlitz, which was marked under its old name, and we measured the line and worked out the angle that it made with another line that we drew from Loom-bah to the magnetic pole, thinking that that might have something to do with it. And Sillet had seen mirages himself, on several occasions, though he did not know how they worked. And he had no more to say, and Jorkens was now asleep, and we could think of no more theories.

"But it was Loom-bah, all right," said Sillet, "however it got there."