

ONE

Dare I say it? Dare I say that I, a plain, prosaic lieutenant in the Republican service have done the incredible things here set out for the love of a woman—for a chimera in female shape; for a pale, vapid ghost of woman-loveliness? At times I tell myself I dare not: that you will laugh, and cast me aside as a fabricator; and then again I pick up my pen and collect the scattered pages, for I *must* write it—the pallid splendour of that thing I loved, and won, and lost is ever before me, and will not be forgotten. The tumult of the struggle into which that vision led me still throbs in my mind, the soft, lispings voices of the planet I ransacked for its sake and the roar of the destruction which followed me back from the quest drowns all other sounds in my ears! I must and will write—it relieves me; read and believe as you list.

At the moment this story commences I was thinking of grilled steak and tomatoes—steak crisp and brown on both sides, and tomatoes red as a setting sun!

Much else though I have forgotten, *that* fact remains as clear as the last sight of a well-remembered shore in the mind of some wave-tossed traveller. And the occasion which produced that prosaic thought was a night well calculated to make one think of supper and fireside, though the one might be frugal and the other lonely, and as I, Gullivar Jones, the poor foresaid Navy lieutenant, with the honoured stars of our Republic on my collar, and an undeserved snub from those in authority rankling in my heart, picked my way homeward by a short cut through the

dismalness of a New York slum I longed for steak and stout, slippers and a pipe, with all the pathetic keenness of a troubled soul.

It was a wild, black kind of night, and the weirdness of it showed up as I passed from light to light or crossed the mouths of dim alleys leading Heaven knows to what infernal dens of mystery and crime even in this latter-day city of ours. The moon was up as far as the church steeples; large vapoury clouds scudding across the sky between us and her, and a strong, gusty wind, laden with big raindrops snarled angrily round corners and sighed in the parapets like strange voices talking about things not of human interest.

It made no difference to me, of course. New York in this year of grace is not the place for the supernatural be the time never so fit for witch-riding and the night wind in the chimney-stacks sound never so much like the last gurgling cries of throttled men. No! the world was very matter-of-fact, and particularly so to me, a poor younger son with five dollars in my purse by way of fortune, a packet of unpaid bills in my breastpocket, and round my neck a locket with a portrait therein of that dear buxom, freckled, stub-nosed girl away in a little southern seaport town whom I thought I loved with a magnificent affection. Gods! I had not even touched the fringe of that affliction.

Thus sauntering along moodily, my chin on my chest and much too absorbed in reflection to have any nice appreciation of what was happening about me, I was crossing in front of a dilapidated block of houses, dating back nearly to the time of the Pilgrim Fathers, when I had a vague consciousness of something dark suddenly sweeping by me—a thing like a huge bat, or a solid shadow, if such a thing could be, and the next instant there was a thud and a bump, a bump again, a half-stifled cry, and then a hurried vision of some black carpeting that flapped and shook as though all the winds of Eblis were in its folds, and then apparently disgorged from its inmost recesses a little man.

Before my first start of half-amused surprise was over I saw him by the flickering lamp-light clutch at space as he tried to steady himself, stumble on the slippery kerb, and the next moment go down on the back of his head with a most ugly thud.

Now I was not destitute of feeling, though it had been my lot to see men die in many ways, and I ran over to that motionless form without

an idea that anything but an ordinary accident had occurred. There he lay, silent and, as it turned out afterwards, dead as a door-nail, the strangest old fellow ever eyes looked upon, dressed in shabby sorrel-coloured clothes of antique cut, with a long grey beard upon his chin, pent-roof eyebrows, and a wizened complexion so puckered and tanned by exposure to Heaven only knew what weathers that it was impossible to guess his nationality.

I lifted him up out of the puddle of black blood in which he was lying, and his head dropped back over my arm as though it had been fixed to his body with string alone. There was neither heart-beat nor breath in him, and the last flicker of life faded out of that gaunt face even as I watched. It was not altogether a pleasant situation, and the only thing to do appeared to be to get the dead man into proper care (though little good it could do him now!) as speedily as possible. So, sending a chance passer-by into the main street for a cab, I placed him into it as soon as it came, and there being nobody else to go, got in with him myself, telling the driver at the same time to take us to the nearest hospital.

“Is this your rug, captain?” asked a bystander just as we were driving off.

“Not mine,” I answered somewhat roughly. “You don’t suppose I go about at this time of night with Turkey carpets under my arm, do you? It belongs to this old chap here who has just dropped out of the skies on to his head; chuck it on top and shut the door!” And that rug, the very mainspring of the startling things which followed, was thus carelessly thrown on to the carriage, and off we went.

Well, to be brief, I handed in that stark old traveller from nowhere at the hospital, and as a matter of curiosity sat in the waiting-room while they examined him. In five minutes the house-surgeon on duty came in to see me, and with a shake of his head said briefly—

“Gone, sir—clean gone! Broke his neck like a pipe-stem. Most strange-looking man, and none of us can even guess at his age. Not a friend of yours, I suppose?”

“Nothing whatever to do with me, sir. He slipped on the pavement and fell in front of me just now, and as a matter of common charity I brought him in here. Were there any means of identification on him?”

“None whatever,” answered the doctor, taking out his notebook and,

as a matter of form, writing down my name and address and a few brief particulars, “nothing whatever except this curious-looking bead hung round his neck by a blackened thong of leather,” and he handed me a thing about as big as a filbert nut with a loop for suspension and apparently of rock crystal, though so begrimed and dull its nature was difficult to speak of with certainty. The bead was of no seeming value and slipped unintentionally into my waistcoat pocket as I chatted for a few minutes more with the doctor, and then, shaking hands, I said goodbye, and went back to the cab which was still waiting outside.

It was only on reaching home I noticed the hospital porters had omitted to take the dead man’s carpet from the roof of the cab when they carried him in, and as the cabman did not care about driving back to the hospital with it, and it could not well be left in the street, I somewhat reluctantly carried it indoors with me.

Once in the shine of my own lamp and a cigar in my mouth I had a closer look at that ancient piece of art work from heaven, or the other place, only knows what ancient loom.

A big, strong run of faded Oriental colouring, it covered half the floor of my sitting-room, the substance being of a material more like camel’s hair than anything else, and running across, when examined closely, were some dark fibres so long and fine that surely they must have come from the tail of Solomon’s favourite black stallion itself. But the strangest thing about that carpet was its pattern. It was threadbare enough to all conscience in places, yet the design still lived in solemn, age-wasted hues, and, as I dragged it to my stove-front and spread it out, it seemed to me that it was as much like a star map done by a scribe who had lately recovered from *delirium tremens* as anything else. In the centre appeared a round such as might be taken from the sun, while here and there, “in the field,” as heralds say, were lesser orbs which from their size and position could represent smaller worlds circling about it. Between these orbs were dotted lines and arrow-heads of the oldest form pointing in all directions, while all the intervening spaces were filled up with woven characters half-way in appearance between Runes and Cryptic-Sanskrit. Round the borders these characters ran into a wild maze, a perfect jungle of an alphabet through which none but a wizard could have forced a way in search of meaning.

Altogether, I thought as I kicked it out straight upon my floor, it was a strange and not unhandsome article of furniture—it would do nicely for the mess-room on the *Carolina*, and if any representatives of yonder poor old fellow turned up to-morrow, why, I would give them a couple of dollars for it. Little did I guess how dear it would be at any price!

Meanwhile that steak was late, and now that the temporary excitement of the evening was wearing off I fell dull again. What a dark, sodden world it was that frowned in on me as I moved over to the window and opened it for the benefit of the cool air, and how the wind howled about the roof tops. How lonely I was! What a fool I had been to ask for long leave and come ashore like this, to curry favour with a set of stubborn dunderheads who cared nothing for me—or Polly, and could not or would not understand how important it was to the best interests of the Service that I should get that promotion which alone would send me back to her an eligible wooer! What a fool I was not to have volunteered for some desperate service instead of wasting time like this! Then at least life would have been interesting; now it was dull as ditch-water, with wretched vistas of stagnant waiting between now and that joyful day when I could claim that dear, rosy-cheeked girl for my own. What a fool I had been!

“I wish, I wish,” I exclaimed, walking round the little room—“I wish I were——”

While these unfinished exclamations were actually passing my lips I chanced to cross that infernal mat, and it is no more startling than true, but at my word a quiver of expectation ran through that gaunt web—a rustle of anticipation filled its ancient fabric, and one frayed corner surged up, and as I passed off its surface in my stride, the sentence still unfinished on my lips, wrapped itself about my left leg with extraordinary swiftness and so effectively that I nearly fell into the arms of my landlady, who opened the door at the moment and came in with a tray and the steak and tomatoes mentioned more than once already.

It was the draught caused by the opening door, of course, that had made the dead man’s rug lift so strangely—what else could it have been? I made this apology to the good woman, and when she had set the table and closed the door took another turn or two about my den, continuing as I did so my angry thoughts.

“Yes, yes,” I said at last, returning to the stove and taking my stand, hands in pockets, in front of it, “anything were better than this, any enterprise however wild, any adventure however desperate. Oh, I wish I were anywhere but here, anywhere out of this red-tape-ridden world of ours! *I wish I were in the planet Mars!*”

How can I describe what followed those luckless words? Even as I spoke the magic carpet quivered responsively under my feet, and an undulation went all round the fringe as though a sudden wind were shaking it. It humped up in the middle so abruptly that I came down sitting with a shock that numbed me for the moment. It threw me on my back and billowed up round me as though I were in the trough of a stormy sea. Quicker than I can write it lapped a corner over and rolled me in its folds like a chrysalis in a cocoon. I gave a wild yell and made one frantic struggle, but it was too late. With the leathery strength of a giant and the swiftness of an accomplished cigar-roller covering a “core” with leaf, it swamped my efforts, straightened my limbs, rolled me over, lapped me in fold after fold till head and feet and everything were gone—crushed life and breath back into my innermost being, and then, with the last particle of consciousness, I felt myself lifted from the floor, pass once round the room, and finally shoot out, point foremost, into space through the open window, and go up and up and up with a sound of rending atmospheres that seemed to tear like riven silk in one prolonged shriek under my head, and to close up in thunder astern until my reeling senses could stand it no longer, and time and space and circumstances all lost their meaning to me.

TWO

How long that wild rush lasted I have no means of judging. It may have been an hour, a day, or many days, for I was throughout in a state of suspended animation, but presently my senses began to return and with them a sensation of lessening speed, a grateful relief to a heavy pressure which had held my life crushed in its grasp, without destroying it completely. It was just that sort of sensation though more keen which, drowsy in his bunk, a traveller feels when he is aware, without special perception, harbour is reached and a voyage comes to an end. But in my case the slowing down was for a long time comparative. Yet the sensation served to revive my scattered senses, and just as I was awakening to a lively sense of amazement, an incredible doubt of my own emotions, and an eager desire to know what had happened, my strange conveyance oscillated once or twice, undulated lightly up and down, like a woodpecker flying from tree to tree, and then grounded, bows first, rolled over several times, then steadied again, and, coming at last to rest, the next minute the infernal rug opened, quivering along all its borders in its peculiar way, and humping up in the middle shot me five feet into the air like a cat tossed from a schoolboy's blanket.

As I turned over I had a dim vision of a clear light like the shine of dawn, and solid ground sloping away below me. Upon that slope was ranged a crowd of squatting people, and a staid-looking individual with his back turned stood nearer by. Afterwards I found he was lecturing all those sitters on the ethics of gravity and the inherent properties of falling bodies; at the moment I only knew he was directly in my line as

I descended, and him round the waist I seized, giddy with the light and fresh air, waltzed him down the slope with the force of my impetus, and, tripping at the bottom, rolled over and over recklessly with him sheer into the arms of the gaping crowd below. Over and over we went into the thickest mass of bodies, making a way through the people, until at last we came to a stop in a perfect mound of writhing forms and waving legs and arms. When we had done the mass disentangled itself and I was able to raise my head from the shoulder of some one on whom I had fallen, lifting him, or her—which was it?—into a sitting posture alongside of me at the same time, while the others rose about us like wheat-stalks after a storm, and edged shyly off, as well as they might.

Such a sleek, slim youth it was who sat up facing me, with a flush of gentle surprise on his face, and dapper hands that felt cautiously about his anatomy for injured places. He looked so quaintly rueful yet withal so good-tempered that I could not help bursting into laughter in spite of my own amazement. Then he laughed too, a sedate, musical chuckle, and said something incomprehensible, pointing at the same time to a cut upon my finger that was bleeding a little. I shook my head, meaning thereby that it was nothing, but the stranger with graceful solicitude took my hand, and, after examining the hurt, deliberately tore a strip of cloth from a bright yellow toga-like garment he was wearing and bound the place up with a woman's tenderness.

Meanwhile, as he ministered, there was time to look about me. Where was I? It was not the Broadway; it was not Staten Island on a Saturday afternoon. The night was just over, and the sun on the point of rising. Yet it was still shadowy all about, the air being marvellously tepid and pleasant to the senses. Quaint, soft aromas like the breath of a new world—the fragrance of unknown flowers, and the dewy scent of never-trodden fields drifted to my nostrils; and to my ears came a sound of laughter scarcely more human than the murmur of the wind in the trees, and a pretty undulating whisper as though a great concourse of people were talking softly in their sleep. I gazed about scarcely knowing how much of my senses or surroundings were real and how much fanciful, until I presently became aware the rosy twilight was broadening into day, and under the increasing shine a strange scene was fashioning itself.

At first it was an opal sea I looked on of mist, shot along its upper

surface with the rosy gold and pinks of dawn. Then, as that soft, translucent lake ebbed, jutting hills came through it, black and crimson, and as they seemed to mount into the air other lower hills showed through the veil with rounded forest knobs till at last the brightening day dispelled the mist, and as the rosy-coloured gauzy fragments went slowly floating away a wonderfully fair country lay at my feet, with a broad sea glimmering in many arms and bays in the distance beyond. It was all dim and unreal at first, the mountains shadowy, the ocean unreal, the flowery fields between it and me vacant and shadowy.

Yet were they vacant? As my eyes cleared and day brightened still more, and I turned my head this way and that, it presently dawned upon me all the meadow coppices and terraces northwards of where I lay, all that blue and spacious ground I had thought to be bare and vacant, were alive with a teeming city of booths and tents; now I came to look more closely there was a whole town upon the slope, built as might be in a night of boughs and branches still unwithered, the streets and ways of that city in the shadows thronged with expectant people moving in groups and shifting to and fro in lively streams—chatting at the stalls and clustering round the tent doors in soft, gauzy, parti-coloured crowds in a way both fascinating and perplexing.

I stared about me like a child at its first pantomime, dimly understanding all I saw was novel, but more allured to the colour and life of the picture than concerned with its exact meaning; and while I stared and turned my finger was bandaged, and my new friend had been lisping away to me without getting anything in turn but a shake of the head. This made him thoughtful, and thereon followed a curious incident which I cannot explain. I doubt even whether you will believe it; but what am I to do in that case? You have already accepted the episode of my coming, or you would have shut the covers before arriving at this page of my modest narrative, and this emboldens me. I may strengthen my claim on your credulity by pointing out the extraordinary marvels which science is teaching you even on our own little world. To quote a single instance: If any one had declared ten years ago that it would shortly be practicable and easy for two persons to converse from shore to shore across the Atlantic without any intervening medium, he would have been laughed at as a possibly amusing but certainly