

THE YEARS OF THE SHADOW



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BY

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CHAPTER VIII

DUNSANY

ON a day when we were sitting in the library at Shankill A. E. told us, among other things, about a picture of Lord Dunsany's of a great snowy waste, with the print of footsteps going across it, just the footsteps. I was rather fascinated by the idea—very Dunsanyesque—and I wrote some verses to accompany the picture, and sent them to Lord Dunsany. A little later I had this letter.

s.s. *Adolf Woermann,*
OFF PORT SAID, Dec. 29th.

DEAR MRS. HINKSON,—Of course I remember meeting you: one does not meet a poet every day. I remember that you told me you had just read a tale of mine in the *Celtic Christmas*, and I was glad you liked it. I've been away lion-hunting, but I'll send you the picture as soon as I get home, which should be in a few days after you get this. I'd be delighted if it's any use to you, but I'm afraid the presence of a somewhat gruesome beast that is nosing along after the footsteps may spoil it for you. I think the poem is charming.

The picture is very roughly something like this:

(He drew a very weird pen-and-ink sketch. A bit of snowy land bounded by mountain peaks. All around space and the stars. The footsteps, and the beast following, and at the edge of Space is written, 'The End.')

It all happened on a very thin world. You can see the stars above it and stars underneath. The beast was supposed to be Remorse, following some one all his life. But this sketch is rather a mess. I'll send you the other soon. I'm afraid it will be no good to you. It was a great pleasure to see your poem.

I don't know what became of that poem. Probably I shall find it some day in a book.

A little later we, my Pamela and I, went down to the Dunsanys. With Lady Dunsany one fell in love at once. Nothing could be sweeter, gentler, more charming. Lord Dunsany was, I soon found, of the intemperate talkers, of which I was very glad, because he paralysed me with shyness. He was well worth listening to. He is a big, boyish man, who gives one the impression of always having had his own way ; but though he seemed overbearing in argument at first, and reduced my opposition, such as it was, to pulp, he was really very simple and in a sense gentle. He was like Stevenson's Henley, who would roar you down in an argument and finally, after a deal of sound and fury, would discover that you had points of agreement all the time.

Dunsany kept a glorious tea-table in those pre-war days. That first time I was too shy of Lord Dunsany to enjoy my tea, but I watched him enjoying his, surrounded by battalions of little glass pots containing all sorts of jams and honey, quite delicious to look at, to say nothing of lavish supplies of cream, hot cakes, all manner of sandwiches and tea-table delicacies. I am sure I could have made a tremendous tea, but I did not : instead I ate delicately and listened to Lord Dunsany demolishing the work of the Christian era, especially in Rome, where he said Christianity had destroyed the magnificent Pagan Art. At last I said in a small and trembling voice : 'Will no one say a word for Christianity ?' But no one did, though Lady Dunsany said, laughing, that Dunsany was saying more than he meant, and that Christianity had plenty to be said for it.

That evening I was rejoiced when Lord Dunsany brought out his pictures to show me—extraordinary pictures, as strange and fascinating as his stories. Afterwards he read the stories, rolling out the magnificent names and the sonorous procession of the words with great enjoyment to himself and me. Usually I become sleepy while being read to, but I did not feel at all sleepy. I knew he was enjoying himself, as I

‘ Oh, you know about that, do you ? It’s extraordinary how few people know ! You are the first person I’ve met, in fact . . . ’

It was a charming house to stay at. Lady Dunsany would have made any house charming, and Lord Dunsany was, of course, extraordinarily interesting and very kind, with the simplicity which was lovable and provocative.

(I am afraid I speak of him as though he, as well as those happy visits, were in the past tense, which, very happily for many things and people, he is not.)

The hall at Dunsany was full of the heads of his big-game shooting—terrible heads. Sidney Sime, that cynical person, whom we met there—he was already an old friend of my husband—in the early summer of the fateful year, professed to regard them as no more than common trophies of slaughter—like legs of mutton, for example. This point of view puzzled and somewhat depressed Lord Dunsany.

He talked literature to me usually, but one day he discussed rabbit stalking as a substitute for big-game stalking, and waxed enthusiastic about it.

‘ Oh, by Jove ! ’ he said, ‘ it is grand sport. They have such fine ears and they are off like the wind.’ One had a mental picture of bison or antelope, but it was really rabbits. ‘ If the sun is behind you it throws your shadow ; then it is difficult and exciting, you have to hide behind every grass blade as you get nearer and nearer . . . ’

Lord Dunsany is six-foot-four of height.

The atmosphere of the house was very literary. Lady Dunsany had grown up to literature. Her father and mother, when Lord Jersey was Governor of Australia, made a pilgrimage to Samoa to see Robert Louis Stevenson. I have said that A. E. said of Lady Lytton that she was more like a flower than any woman he ever saw. Lady Dunsany was—is—very flower-like, a pansy perhaps, or a wild anemone, something delicate and shy, kind and gentle. I think all the talk was about literary people and things. To be literary was to have

After all we were fortunate in our meeting with H. G. Wells. My thirteen-year-old Pam had just finished *Mr. Polly*. She had all the gags of it by heart. He could not but be pleased: these are the kind of things which please an author. He made a sketch in her autograph-book of Mr. Polly, sitting on the stile, murmuring 'Rotten, beastly stinkin' 'ole!' after Mrs. Polly had given him that nice meal of cold pork and pickled onions and cheese. Pam also instructed him on the Irish question, a fact to which he has referred in *Mr. Britling sees it Through*.

One of those days Lord Dunsany talked to Pam about his big-game-hunting in something of these terms:

'While we breakfasted I said carelessly: "Well, what are we going to do to-day?" "Oh," said my hunter, "I have my own little game on to-day. I will tell you later." So, afterwards, when we had mounted our horses he disclosed his plan to me. We were just inside the border of the lion country, and he told me that about 4 o'clock that morning two lions had come down to the river beside which we camped, to drink, and had roared lustily for about five minutes, through which I had slept soundly: so he proposed hunting for the day's work. I agreed, and we set off; but luck seemed to have deserted us that day. All the morning we hunted, but it was midday before we sighted game, and it was not a lion.

'I was going a little ahead of my hunter when I perceived an enormous rhinoceros standing about thirty yards away, and beyond him another, and beyond that one yet another, and another. It so happened that my hunter did not see the three beyond the first one, but only the leader; however, I did not know this at the time. When he said "Shoot," pointing at the leader, I raised my gun and fired. The rhinoceros swung round and dashed blindly past us, the herd clattering behind. I fired again and missed: I fired again and again, only wounding him, until, just as he was charging, and it was death for either of us, I fired and killed him. The

herd, furious when they saw him fall, charged in a body, but they went past us, and stopped with their heads up, sniffing the air. Then they wheeled about and galloped off into the forest.

‘We dragged the dead rhinoceros down to the river, and that night we camped near him. When darkness fell we went out and sat near him, with our loaded rifles across our knees, waiting for the lions which we knew would come to devour the remains. The frogs all started barking with the coming of night, and kept up a regular concert, barking against each other. And then, quite suddenly, every sound ceased. There was not a movement on the water nor on the land except the stealthy pad-pad of the lions.

‘Sitting there in the darkness one realised how trivial all the things of the civilised world were beside this great thing, and how far away seemed that other world of peaceful towns and villages and farms from this wilderness where we sat clutching our rifles and waiting for the king of beasts.

‘Then a most extraordinary thing happened. We were suddenly enveloped in a thick mist, which wrapped us round as in a cloak so that we could see nothing, but we knew by the growling and roaring of the lions that they had found their meat. All that night we sat there, while the lions roared close beside us ; but, just before dawn, they became quiet, and when the mist cleared there was nothing to be seen but a single hyæna who stood out for a moment from the forest, and fled at the sight of two men sitting with rifles across their knees.’

I have not seen Lord Dunsany since that June of 1914. Lady Dunsany came to lunch at Shankill a little later to meet the two poets, Joseph and Nancy Campbell. Nancy Campbell she knew already as Nancy Maude, who had made a very romantic marriage.

We were to have gone to Dunsany very soon afterwards, but all those plans went down before the events of August 1914. Black Monday had come and gone when Pamela and my husband met Lord Dunsany in that

wonderful room at the top of Plunkett House, where the *Irish Homestead* is edited under the eyes of Angels and Archangels, Powers, Principalities, Dominions. Sidney Sime said, visiting that room : 'So this is where turnips are made ! Good Lord, it 's a mad world !' Lord Dunsany was saying : 'I shall never come back. None of the officers will come back, certainly not a man of my height.' And again he was denouncing the local politicians, with characteristic whirlwind energy, and listening with a certain unexpected sweet reasonableness to my husband's defence of them.

I asked Lady Dunsany once if she was not alarmed when he was absent on his lion-hunting expeditions, with no news coming through from him. She said, 'I know he is a very good shot.'

Here in the West of Ireland where literature is held in little honour, except by an occasional priest, I sigh for such a house as Dunsany. How different life would be if our lot had placed us in Meath rather than in Mayo !