

THE city lies in a plain, ornamented with mountains. These appear as a fringe of crystals to the heavenly north. One minute bronze cone has a black plume of smoke. Beyond the oasis-plain is the desert. The sand-devils perform up to its northern and southern borders. The alluvial bench has recently gained, in the celestial region, upon the wall of the dunes. The 'pulse of Asia' never ceases beating. But the outer Aeolian element has been worsted locally by the element of the oasis.

The approach to the so-called Yang Gate is over a ridge of nummulitic limestone. From its red crest the city and its walls are seen as though in an isometric plan. Two miles across, a tract of mist and dust separates this ridge from the river. It is here that in a shimmering obscurity the emigrant mass is collected within sight of the walls of the magnetic city. To the accompaniment of innumerable lowing horns along the banks of the river, a chorus of mournful messages, the day breaks. At the dully sparkling margin, their feet in the hot waves, stand the watermen, signalling from shore to shore. An exhausted movement disturbs the night-camp stretching on either side of the highway – which when it reaches the abrupt sides of the ridge turns at right angles northward. Mules and oxen are being driven out on to the road: like the tiny scratches of a needle upon this drum, having the horizon as its perimeter, cries are carried to the neighbourhood of the river.

The western horizon behind the ridge, where the camp ends inland, but southward from the highroad, is a mist that seems to thunder. A heavy murmur resembling the rolling of ritualistic drums shakes the atmosphere. It is the outposts or investing belt of Beelzebub, threatening Heaven from that direction, but at a distance of a hundred leagues, composed of his resonant subjects. Occasionally upon a long-winded blast the frittered corpse of a mosquito may be borne. As it strikes the heavenly soil a small sanguine flame bursts up, and is consumed or rescued. A dark ganglion of the bodies of anopheles, mayflies, locusts, ephemerids, will sometimes be hurled

down upon the road; a whiff of plague and splenic fever, the diabolic flame, and the nodal obscenity is gone.

With the gait of *Cartophilus* some homing solitary shadow is continually arriving in the restless dust of the turnpike, challenged at the tollgate thrown across it at the first milestone from the water-front. Like black drops falling into a cistern these slow but incessant forms feed the camp to overflowing. Where the highway terminates at the riverside is a ferry-station. Facing this on the metropolitan shore is, to the right, the citadel, rising plumb from the water, a crown of silver rock, as florets towers arranged around its summit.

At the ferry-station there is a frail figure planted on the discoloured stones facing the stream. Hatless, feet thrust into old leather slippers, the brown vamp prolonged up the instep by a japanned tongue of black, it might be a morning in the breezy popular summer, a visitor halted on the quay of the holiday-port, to watch the early-morning catch. Sandy-grey hair in dejected spandrels strays in rusty wisps: a thin rank moustache is pressed by the wind, bearing first from one direction then another, back against the small self-possessed mouth. Shoulders high and studious, the right arm hugs, as a paradoxical ally, a humble limb of nature, an oaken sapling Wicklow-bred. The suit of nondescript dark grey for ordinary day-wear, well-cut and a little shabby, is coquettishly tight and small, on the trunk and limbs of a child. Reaching up with a girlish hand to the stick cuddled under the miniature oxtail, with the other hand the glasses are shaded against the light, as the eyes follow the flight of a wild duck along the city walls northward, the knee slightly flexed to allow the body to move gracefully from the slender hips.

Speculations as to the habitat and sport-status of the celestial water-fowl. – Food (fish-fry, frogs?). Speculations as to fish-life in these waters, lifeless they seem: more speculations involving chemistry of waters. – A crowded punt is making inshore, at a spot fifty yards above the ferry. A band of swarthy peons disembark, carrying picks and spades. They enter a box-shaped skip, their backs forming a top-heavy wall above its sides. It begins moving inland upon its toy track.

A longshoreman fidgets at the movements of the small observer, finally thrusting first one long-booted leg and then another into his bark, a giant clog whose peaked toe wavers as he enters its shell, he

walks off wagging his buttocks as he churns the rudder-paddle upon the rusty tide, an offended aquatic creature. A stone's-throw out he stops, faces the shore, studying sombrely in perspective the man-sparrow, who multiplies precise movements, an organism which in place of speech has evolved a peripatetic system of response to a dead environment. It has wandered beside this Styx, a lost automaton rather than a lost soul. It has taken the measure of its universe: man is the measure: it rears itself up, steadily confronts and moves along these shadows.

A new voice hails him of an old friend, spanking noisily the opaque air, at his back. The maternal warmth of early life gushes unexpectedly from a mouth opened somewhere near him in the atmosphere.

'Pullman? I thought so! Well I'm damned!'

The guttural cheery reports stop. A pink young mask flushed in welcome, the blue eyes engagingly dilated, comes smiling round, working from the rear uncertainly, not certain of Pullman, yet claiming him as a pink fragment of its past. Pullman reddens. The wellmedammd falls like a refreshing rain: his tongue, suddenly galvanic, raps out its response:

'I hope not!' The nondescript brevity of clattering morse hammers out on his palate message and counter-message, in harsh English. Eye in eye they dart and scent each other's minds, like nozzling dogs.

'Where did you spring from?'

'I thought I'd take a turn. I couldn't sleep.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm damned if I know!'

They laugh. Damned if he knows if he's damned, and damned if he cares! So this is Heaven?

Here we are and that's that!

And let the devil take the hindmost!

And be damned to him for God's Ape!

God's in his Heaven – all's well with us! – Lullabys.

Pullman from the old days, dear old Pulley, Satters is sentimental: he contorts himself, smiling, into a hundred shapes of restless shyness, wriggling back into familiarity.

'From behind I recognized you at once.'

He lurches and cranes his neck, calling the behind to witness.

'The moment you spoke I knew you,' says Pullman. 'Before I saw you I said "Satters"! It's like knowing who's speaking on the telephone - not one of my accomplishments - or I should say wasn't. Thank Heaven for small mercies they've no telephones here!' His mouth continues to work abstractedly, back amongst the telephones. 'I never know who I'm talking to till they say who they are.'

'Nor do I.' (Nordouai, like deep Greek vocabables.)

Satterthwaite is in knee-cords, football stogies, tasselled golf stockings, a Fair Isle jumper, a frogged mess jacket, a Mons Star pinned upon the left breast, and a Rugby cap, the tinsel rusted, of out-size, canted forward.

'Where the devil did you get that outlandish kit from?'

'I know - I' He looks down without seeing. 'I'm damned if I know!'

Satters takes the laugh imposed by Humour with orthodox boyish eagerness. The ridiculous but charming self sacrificed by all gentlemen with hasty grace to the god of fun corkscrews in a painful bashfulness. Grin gripped in grin, they avoid each other's gaze, swaying.

'Is it too preposterous?' Loftily ill-at-ease, Satters makes a detached inventory.

'No more preposterous than everything else here.'

'No we're all in the same boat - that's comforting, at least.' Satters seeks comfort in a veiled examination of his friend, prosecuted in discreet instalments, between blows delivered upon the dusty surface of his garments. As his hand falls upon his chest the medal dances, while a loud hollow sound is thumped up.

'One would say one was hollow!' he says. He delivers a blow in the neighbourhood of the Star. 'Sounds somehow empty doesn't it?' Again he strikes, and listens.

Pullman smiles with condescension.

Satters passes his hand over either bulging jacket-breast.

'The beastly things fit! That's the really shattering part! If only they hadn't I might have.'

'A tree is known by its fruit they say!' Pullman flashes a moment the Chinese grimace, the accepted civilized grotesque of malice, and they laugh together, they are unkind.

'I've got used to them. I raised Hell to start with! I refused to keep them on; I told them I thought it was most unfair.'

'As indeed it is!'

'Most! I told the old Bailiff off. He must have thought - He didn't seem to mind though as a matter of fact. It seemed rather to amuse him.'

At the word Bailiff Pullman withdraws into a hypnotic fixity of expression, as if something precise for him alone had been mentioned under an unexpected enigma.

'Well, there it is!' These details are dismissed. Satters sighs a *that's-that* sigh. 'I've got used to this along with the rest: haven't you?'

Pullman is now included more directly. For a moment his friend's eyes rest upon his person with meaning. Pullman stands fast, shoulders high and squared, small calves in inflexible arcs, eyes still hypnotic.

'Quite.'

'I suppose in the end we shall get more suitable. I'm afraid -'

Hiding behind the joke-self Satters peeps out laughing. 'He's afraid; he stops, gracefully timid; the object of his fear is immaterial. Taking off his cap he begins striking it against his leg, dust puffing from it in magical abundance, a cornucopia of reddish powder.

'Yes. At all events we can hope. You can't be at the same time in the oven and in the mill.'

'What?'

'You can't be in two places at once.'

'Rather not.'

Under his eyelashes Satters doubtfully surveys his friend, a respectful strangeness superseding the first familiarity. The ice is broken fresh bearings have to be taken. New worlds for old - all is in the melting-pot.

[Temporarily at least I have decided to forget. And forgive.]

Pullman laughs a quick bark of icy hysteria; they both laugh for a moment. Pullman stamps his right foot softly. He works his toes up and down in the slipper. His head twists sharply towards the river as though in pain; turning back in act to speak he comes to a halt in his former attitude, and is silent.

Satters grown redder, with the bashfulness of a tongue-tied junior, *autres temps autres mœurs*, holds his cap with both hands awkwardly in front of him, schoolboy fashion, swinging his body with an arch girlish oscillation. More forward with truth, Pullman continues

to gaze at the clothes. Satters looks up obliquely, blushing – it is Pullman's turn; he asks:

'Isn't that the stick you always used to have, Pulley? Why, you're going a bit on top?' He points to the crown of his own head, florid with fat yellow curls. 'I thought you were – let's see, what was it? eighteen months about wasn't it? – senior to me. Or was it as much as that? I've got a pretty good thatch still.'

'You have indeed. Yes, they've done you well in that matter.' He carries his hand gingerly to his occiput, fingering himself. 'I don't know why they've given me a bald head. I suppose – It's got much worse since I've been here. I shall be a patriarch if I don't soon get passed in.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Weeks. A month nearly – not quite.' Both pairs of eyes withdrawn into the respective shells, faces towards the ground, with one movement they now wheel and begin walking in step away from the quay slowly, Satters with a long-legged slouch, Pullman with a slowing-down of his light-limbed machine, hugging, high-shouldered, his stick. Their feet sink into the exuviae and migrating sand, dust and gypsum, of the riverside, kicking, first one and then the other, a stone or fragment of jetsam of the camp or flood, Pullman outwards towards the shore, Satters inland campwards. Their minds continue to work in silent rhythm, according to the system of habit set in motion by their meeting.

'This is rather beastly, isn't it?' Satters uses the rapid half-voice of confidence, of the social equal and confederate. Pullman, with the same half-voice, without touching his friend with his eyes, jerks his chin up quickly towards the city.

'Beastly!'

The little word snaps out of its trap as fresh as paint. He snatches his mouth away as he discharges it, crossly fixing the lateral horizon. Beastly – the judgement of the gentleman. Satter's face is 'grave as a judge'. He dawdles along moodily, throwing out large mailed thonged and studded feet, for which there is no plump buoyant ball – all dressed up and nothing to kick. Pullman bends down and plucks a small panicked flower, of the Egyptian privet. He puts it to his nose, exquisite with pinched-in nostrils, half-closing his eyes to sniff. Offering it to Satters between his thumb and index finger he says:

'This is camphire; have you seen it before here? That's its book-name. It has some other. Bible camphire, you know. It has rather a jolly smell. They use it in the camp, ground in hot water, to dye their beards and moustaches.'

'No, really? How sweet! Is it effective?' They laugh a little: Satters, half-closing his eyes, and stumbling in consequence, dabs at his nostrils with the flower. With a voluptuous arrogance he affects to absorb himself in extracting perfume from the camphire.

Pullman comes to a stop, his feet firmly set side by side in the worn slippers, pushing down, shovelling into the hot sandy nap, the small legs braced and arched, knotted in little business-like muscles, shoulders high, hands pressed into jacket-pockets, and gazes across the river. Satters makes a collapsed zigzag at his side, in silence.

Stretching into the distance away from the citadel, to the celestial north, are a double belt of battlements. As they recede they withdraw from the shore of the river. They are strengthened with numerous buttresses, a process at their tops finned like the biretta of a Roman priest. Their surface shines damply as though with some sebaceous moisture.

The sheer profile of the city is intricate and uneven. Above the walls appears, naissant, armorial, and unreal, a high-hatched outcropping of huddled balconies, black rufous brown vermilion and white; the upper stages of wicker towers; helmet-like hoods of tinted stucco; tamarisks; the snaragdine and olive of tropical vegetations; tinselled banners; gigantic grey sea-green and speckled cones, rising like truncated eggs from a system of profuse nests; and a florid zoologic symbolism – reptilian heads of painted wood, filled-out tinfoil or alloy, that strike round beneath the gusts of wind, and pigs made of inflated skins, in flight, bumped and tossed by serpents, among the pennants and embossed banners. The severe crests of bulky ziggurats rise here and there above this charivari of roof-life, perceived beyond and between the protecting walls. [It is without human life, like a city after a tragic exodus.]

Rising at the side of a wide cone is the dark needle of a gothic spire, surmounted by an emblematic cock, a gold point that glitters in the sky. There is a faint pulsation of a bell. Pullman sketches a cross upon his breast, bowing his head and then raising it.