

PARK

IV

THE SERVICE was in no way in excess of the meal : bird broth ; candied and pickled fruit and vegetables ; and the expected goslings, tasting of lemon ; There was great variety of biscuits ; the wines were sweet and not strong ; and there were delicate morsels of cheese looking like wooden matches, taken at any time during the meal. At the end there were fine peaches ; and sweets which no one took.

When, as has been said in certain times and places, the cloth was withdrawn, for there was never any sign of any cloth, Koti said :

There are several reasons why we cannot address questions to the most honoured present, and doubtless his wisdom has divined what they are. But nothing prevents his asking questions of us. Talk at table is sacred talk.

So Park began :

There is the surface population of this island. Is it denser in other parts than in this part ?

Its density varies exactly with the productivity of the soil.

The soil feeds the whole population ?

Yes, and it is the greatest thing done in Ia.

The moors and hills are uninhabited, said another speaker ; except by wild creatures.

What ?

Different kinds with antlers, including the great kinds.

Wild swine and bears.

Hunting forests ?

Yes.

Who use them ?

The nobles.

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How are they hunted?

Mostly with dogs.

What's the name of that long-legged feline?

Svillig looked pleased and said : N'ti. Have you seen it?

Yes, in captivity.

In captivity?

Yes, and often in pictures. I saw it in a picture the first day I was here, on the eve of the Assumption.

Did you though?

So this surface population consists of nobles, cultivators, and noblemen's servants?

You can express it still more simply ; as the noblemen are the cultivators.

Have I exhausted your patience?

Not at all.

The subterranean population.

What about them?

Are they numerous?

They looked at one another in bewilderment, but one said :

Yes.

What's their origin, race? Is it all one?

Oh, you know, that is a terribly hard question.

There are scholars who bother about it.

Who will certainly come pestering you whenever they get the chance.

I approve of that sort of investigation, said Park. But I am only seeking the most general description.

That would be, said Koti Ra, that their race, or races, and origins are not ours.

Conquered, you know, said Svillig sadly. Poor people. They must have had a bitter handling at some time : eh, Koti?

Oh, yes.

Have you seen any? he asked Park.

No. Do they ever come up?

Practically, no.

What prevents them?

No force of law or prohibition. They are obliged to come up, for example, on professional business; sometimes by medical order; for certain journeys

Military exercises, Park put in. At once he experienced the odd feeling of twenty-to or twenty-past of his former life. The four men pretended not to have heard the remark.

I think Drak means, said Koti, voluntary ascents.

Yes, that was my idea.

They are very rare, but not impossible.

Why, in one word, do they stay down?

In one word, said Svillig, because they like it.

Subject to the law of God and the Church there is complete freedom for all.

Park fetched his breath, and said :

The natural law, the positive law, the ecclesiastical law

Is the law of the empire.

Before which there can be no inequality.

What is the form of government?

Representative.

Koti Ra saw that the conversation would become interminable, and rose.

He led the way to Drak's rooms, looked round, touched this and that, adjusted a light shade with a host's magnificent servility, and went away in silence. After a time someone came through the door and passed round the screen; it was Svillig. When he saw how Drak was engaged he himself knelt down and remained so until he had finished.

Koti hopes you will be comfortable. All your personal belongings have been brought to this room, said he, walking towards it.

Drak stared.

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Yes, he said, you will be here for some time. Here's the speaking room. If you are called it will be the night secretary. Ah, there he goes.

Ha, said Drak, meaning 'attentive.'

Svillig could hear that it was an enquiry from a stranger, an embarrassing enquiry, and he perceived that in fact Drak was embarrassed.

I should tell him, he said, to deal with all correspondence till morning.

Drak gave this direction; and Svillig, speaking at the resonant pitch, added: discretion, infinite discretion.

Ng'on n'tha, said the secretary.

To-morrow, said Svillig, you will be provided with a chancery; we are putting a lawyer in charge of it.

Are you on the commission?

Rather. I am the canonist.

Park became unutterably sad; and felt as though he would never speak again. Two men came in with a loaded tray. When they had gone Svillig poured out a sip of some cordial and Park drank it.

There's a lighter side to everything, said Svillig. I am going to bring you a fellow called Dlar. I cannot say much about him; for he is in a peculiar legal position; he has been under more than one cloud. He is a charming companion, and he knows many things. He is inclined to be saucy. But, whatever he says or does, he is always a black man; and as true as the almanac.

Don't go away.

Drak, remember every human being is unique; and the duration of time is best regarded as one second.

You mean: Cheer up and go to bed?

Something like that.

DLAR walked in alone. He said bluntly, as he handed a folded note: I am never announced or accompanied (he meant by a servant).

Drak made a conventional reply and unfolded the note carefully. In contrast with its intricate creasing it contained only one word, the size of a gnat : Dlar.

We have a friend in common, he said.

Svillig is so much to me that any friend of his is my friend. Dlar was a beautiful man. He bore a strong resemblance to Svillig, apart from the colour of their hair. This against black skin looked almost coral. In Dlar it was browner but, if possible, more extraordinary; for his skin was no darker than swarthy. The type, however, was pure enough. He wore a small beard.

He rattled on, to promote acquaintance rapidly. Then, fixing Drak with his great white eyes, he said :

Speak always to me as plainly as you like ; otherwise, he added with a smile, I shall have an unfair advantage of you.

It is like that, is it ?

No one, said he, is allowed to speak ill of me ; the law protects me. I see, he said, that I puzzle you. I am one of the dead. It is a fiction ; I am reckoned to be dead. Drak had it on his tongue to make a whimsical remark, but refrained. Dlar spoke in great earnest :

I have been condemned to death and reprieved.

Drak leaned forward.

I am in consequence regarded in many ways as though I had suffered the penalty I deserved. I am deprived of most of my civil and ecclesiastical rights ; and also of many conveniences. I may not hunt, or have men-servants, or publish books. I cannot be a witness or a judge, or bring an action, or exercise a profession. But, on the other hand, no one may touch me either physically or morally : no one may sue me or send me samples or prospectuses, or ask of me alms or other favours ; or, as I said, speak ill of me.

There must be some strange psychological consequences.

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But I may do as much good as I like; not, however, adopt anyone; and say what I like about myself, with moderation.

Dlar, Drak exclaimed.

I am expected not to boast, however judiciously; and, in general, recommended by my confessor, my relations and friends, indeed by the whole spirit of our nation, to try to behave in all ways as though I were dead, only awaiting the judgment. Can I do anything for you?

Yes, you can, said Drak, with sudden resolution.

Hear my confidences, if I can ever get them uttered, and comment on them as ruthlessly as you threaten in fun.

There is no fun in me that I know of. But let me make a start.

Willingly.

Stop that nonsense about being only 60.

How do you mean?

Let others estimate your age, Koti Ra, or me, or anybody.

What good would it do?

Say you are 300.

How can I?

You have been asleep; you have used some horrible drug. Say Yes.

No.

You have been in the empire of Belial.

I cannot understand.

You are a priest.

I am; but how do you know?

We are all recognizable.

So I understand.

You were a missionary.

No, I am a professor.

What of?

Moral.

Have you seen the vicar-general?

On the blue plate, yes.

He is a relative of Svillig. He also has been very good to me.

What relation is he to Svillig?

Let me see. You know what a great grandfather is?

Yes.

Well, he's the great grandfather of Svillig's great grandfather. Dlar laughed cruelly. I told you you have been asleep. You're not awake yet, I must be going.

When are you coming back?

Soon and often.

Koti Ra came in.

Dlar, said he, if you saw anyone who could trot along to the Dominican convent and introduce Drak to the prior, would you do your best?

I was going in that direction.

Good, said the Ra. Perhaps Drak would ask his reverence to expect me about noon.

THE BUILDING with its cloisters covered ten acres. A vast old convent, the prior said, proudly and apologetically. It has a subterranean church, but we have been cut off from it; and it is now a vicariate. We have a surface church for the office. He led the way to it. It was entirely stone-built, very heavy, severe and vaulted. In style it was clearly linked with the churches of 'antiquity' thought Drak, using the word in his mind for the first time. The cloister was older, vast, spacious. By way of ornamentation it was designed so that there were no longitudinal lines but those of the plan, while the vertical lines were as numerous as could be, producing an uncommon effect in the perspective. He dreaded to mention the chapterhouse and did not see it. The solid walls of the cloister had been built true enough to be a surface for painting, and had

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in fact been painted in some past time ; but now only vestiges remained.

There were wooden seats in the windows and they sat down. You have known Dominicans?

Many and well.

Distinguished?

Yes.

Any named Thomas?

Drak thought and answered :

Yes, I think only one.

Not

Drak caught an expression so wistful on the prior's face that it saddened him.

Alas, Father, he said, I was born far too late : but I know well what he looked like.

From portraits? Was he not very stout?

Yes.

Did you ever know a master-general?

Yes ; two.

What were their names?

Andreas Fruehwirth and Hyacinth Cormier. Drak saw that the surnames were Chinese to the prior.

Dlar approached and said :

We must not forget the message with which Koti has honoured us. He hopes to be with your reverence about noon.

The prior excused himself and walked away.

That is a most peculiar thing, said Drak, chiefly to himself.

What ?

The habit.

Is it changed?

No, said he, except for the bare feet.

This lay-brother, Dlar whispered, wishes to hear you speak your own language. Dlar introduced him to the brother.

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He smiled and addressed him slowly and cautiously :
Is it Inglis?

Yes.

You say.

Drak said with the utmost distinctness .

Good morning, brother, I am glad to see you. I hope you are well.

Brother Mark struggled with his vocal organs; and then, with a comical gesture of discouragement, said in Bapama :

Say a few words to me in the classical tongue.

Drak thought and said :

My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.

Calamus velociter scribentis, brother Mark almost shouted with joy, irradiating the countenances of the other two men with his happiness.

IT WAS a day off for Drak. The two friends left their horses and walked in the direction of Koti Ra's house by way of the river. The contrast between the scene and his companion was so poignant that Park had again and again to renew his resolution to abandon himself to his present experiences without reflection. He would have liked to make a confidence of this; but by no means could he find any way to express his thought. As they walked for the third time through the water of a shallow, well-built ford he said :

No bridges?

No, said Dlar, we only use them on the fast traffic roads. I sometimes think, said he, that it is one example of a sort of harmless hostility we have towards the subject race. You never see them walk in water.

Then how do they get about?

They don't. And that is not all they dislike; in the same way they hate the upper air; and they cannot endure the natural light of the sun.

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Whatever took them underground? Were they forced?

In a way it must have been that : and yet not entirely. Let's get some food here.

They had entered a paved yard as though to cross it, when Dlar made this suggestion.

Who's the proprietor?

I forget his name if ever I knew it. He's a fanciful kind of chap, often underground. Mixed blood ; artist ; there's something odd about him.

The host was black enough and a gentleman, but he could not conceal his uneasiness quite.

The greetings and hospitality were chiefly in facial expression and disconnected syllables.

They were taking the simple meal, an egg thing, something like an omelette, some dried figs and raisins ; beer, and the invariable cheese.

The children, said Dlar. The man said :

The elder is not quite well : and the little one is shy. I told you, said Dlar, that there is something wanting. No black man behaves like that. You know what the truth is : fear of our beards.

Drak made no answer and Dlar seemed to relent.

I do many bad things, said he ; I must make it up to him. Just help. Put on all your villainy and hypocrisy. Drak was jolted by this, but decided to laugh too.

You're not dead, you know ; though he thinks you are.

There is a sad want, said he, when the man re-appeared, in this delicious repast ; that our host is not seated with us in conversation. I, Dlar, have the honour to present Drak, Koti Ra's guest ; a stranger among us.

Ini'in, said the man, greets you, sir, and desires to welcome you often.

Drak, said Dlar, wishes to know why, he means the profound reason, why underground folk are where they are. If you cannot satisfy him, nobody can.

May I fetch a cool drink?

When Ini'in came with the wine, he had the host look and manner which beautifies all men. He stood still. Dlar with his natural clairvoyance said :

What if we took the wine out of doors?

They passed into an enclosed quadrangle as beautiful as a bowling green, though the elements of its beauty were simpler : a sheet of peerless grass, with an enormous stone astronomical object in the middle; the grey wall, a triumph of proportion. A table was ready set under an awning; on it were three cups, a bowl of peaches, an empty bowl for refuse and an earthenware cradle for the wine-bottle. The sky, blue and white.

I admire that jar, said Drak.

Well he might. For it was spherical with a short small neck.

It has a name, said In'in; showing, in barbaric incision made when the clay was soft the word : Esperu.

When the wine had been tasted Ini'in said :

It is certain that the underground tunnels and caverns are in part more ancient than our coming to this island. They are excavated and strengthened with consummate engineering art; and are still the wonder of our greatest men. It is even supposed by some that these works were carried out by people of whom no other record has remained.

People almost mythical.

Yes. For if, it is said, you place them anywhere in history as we teach it, you are faced by an intolerable paradox : mechanical construction and genius we cannot overpraise, with moral degeneration the most complete. The palace of Vulcan inhabited by rats; Vulcan and the rats contemporary, if not identical.

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Well?

Why, to make a short ending of a long story, when their troubles came upon them, they took refuge underground and are there to this day.

Contented? asked Drak.

I think so, said Dlar and Ini'in at once.

The two children came and had a look at the visitors.

(To be continued.)

JOHN GRAY.