

THE GREAT WORM.



affected beast that he was, the great worm lived in quite the sort of place where one would have gone to look for him,

somewhere in the belly of one of those mountain ranges in Central Asia, with a name as ragged as its silhouette. When taking exercise, his manner was to climb, rather than walk, along the ground, in undisguised worm fashion, when to a distant observer it seemed that not only was his skin loose from his muscles, but that his four short crooked legs and his two little wings were stuck about his body quite promiscuously. He was perfectly satisfied with his natural colours—white and gold—nor did the vain ambition to be painted green like other worms even so much as enter his head. He did not snort lightning, and none but honeyed words ever left his gentle lips.

He came into the city one day, choosing his steps most carefully, so as not to derange public edifices, and threading himself through triumphal arches with marvellous dexterity. He inquired his way to the palace; and, when he reached it, he found, as will readily be believed, that the entrance was too small to admit him. Not being pressed for time, he stretched himself out the full length of the terrace, with a part of his tail hanging over the battlements.

Meanwhile, the traffic of the city had adroitly diverted itself into the suburbs.

When the worm had lain some time without any special manifestation, one of the doorkeepers of the palace, acting under orders which he obeyed implicitly out of deference to the military spirit of his age, galloped up to his ear and asked, What does my lord require? The worm took no notice of the doorkeeper, but continued to smile because of the warmth of the sun's rays. What do you want here? the horseman repeated in his other ear. He replied, without impatience, that he had called to see the prince, but as the doorway was not large enough for him to enter, he was going home again presently when he had warmed himself.

Whereupon, the horseman wheeled about and trotted into the palace, his lance, twenty feet long, quivering erect in the air.

Soon there was great din of brass and wailing of reeds; piercing screams, which were words of command, rang within the wall, to which noise was added the clatter of many hoofs. This demonstration, intended to impress the worm, was misjudged, for it might have been performed on his chest without disturbing him. At a distance from which one could get a general view of the visitor, layers of carpets were thrown down and unrolled one upon another until a comfortable surface was attained. Sunshades were then arranged to throw a deep shade upon a black velvet cushion streaked with gold, on which the prince was deposited, after the Chamberlain, with customary politeness, had scattered a few priceless diamonds upon it. The worm cast an occasional glance on these preparations from over his eyebrows, for he was lying on his back with the crown of his head towards them.

— Speak, worm! shouted an officer, thou gold worm!

— He isn't gold, remarked a philosopher.

— I come, he answered, my lord, to enlist in your royal armies.

— Yes, he is, only he's out of repair.

— Ah! Ha! is that so, you long animal, said the distinguished prince, as his vizier held his lorgnon in position. Ha! let me see—yes! he went on, as he was raised and supported over to the recruit. The worm still remained lying on his back, for he had an exceedingly long tongue, which enabled him to kiss the royal hand without altering position. The regulation suit of armour and supply of weapons for a private of the militia had meanwhile been brought; this blunder greatly incensed the prince, who had mentally appointed the worm commander-in-chief. In accordance with this decision he directed the supply of a silk-lined suit of armour, tested weapons, and a body of attendants to look after them. When the senior officers of the staff heard this order, their hair curled behind where their master could not observe it.

— Stay, though; would you prefer a horse or a camel, general? The worm hesitated to reply, for apart from the perplexity of the question, two rival recruiting sergeants on the far side of him were trying to elicit his age and whether he was married. Seeing his embarrassment, the prince explained that a horse wore the plume above his head, while a

camel wore it under his chin. Of course, the worm at once decided to have the former.

— Cough, said the surgeon-major.

— Ugh! Ugh!

— Ever had

— The medical officer, interrupted a philosopher, ought to know that the general could not have attained his present rank

— Ugh! Ugh!

— Ever had measles?

— Ugh! Ugh!

. . . . if he had not already answered these questions satisfactorily.

— Will the philosopher mind his own business?

— Is the carpenter in attendance? asked the prince, while the vizier obtruded the lorgnon for his master to scan the court.

— Ugh! Ugh! The horse was now led up, its shiny coat purple in the sun. The worm admired the strings of beads with which it was decorated, and the bridle straps crusted with gold. But oh, the plume! That was the best of all! So pleased indeed was he with it, that he begged one for his own wear.

— No, he ain't, whispered a philosopher.

— No, he isn't, I suppose you mean, answered the surgeon-major, in the tone of voice habitual to him when he thought of the gallows.

The medical officer was examining his ankle with a vexed countenance, as a scribe wrote out for the worm a coupon for the annual Grand-cross lottery by way of a quarter's salary in advance. This would have ended the formalities, had not the court poet found an opportunity to commence reciting the worm's military antecedents.

— Is that that man again? asked the prince; I abolish the office. The laureate ceased.

At this time, most of the tribes on the outskirts of the principality had already forgotten their allegiance, or but faintly remembered it. The prince thought, therefore, that he would send his new general marching round his dominions with an expedition, to freshen the memories of these subjects.

The worm found that he had scarcely to show himself to the first rebel he came across. The news of his march spread like overflowing water.

— An army of worms, said the panting messenger, is approaching!

— What colour?

— White, I think, with pink banners. And the news fled past, leaving the municipality to hurry home and prepare with all haste flattering memorials and presentation caskets of odious workmanship.

Then, when he arrived, a few days afterwards, the worm would find a head citizen shivering at the extremity of a strip of red carpet leading from the city gate beckoning to others within the walls, to come out and support him.

Thus the army left everywhere peace and order with its hoof-prints, daily growing deeper with the weight of presents the dromedaries had to bear.

— What is the name of the green city yonder? was a question that ran round the camp one morning. No one could tell. In fact, it had scarcely been sighted when white curtains dropped before it and obscured it from view. As the day advanced, the curtains were found to be composed of graceful white beings, for the vanguard saw them swing in the air, stand upright, stretching their arms and craning their necks to the sky, then sink again in repose. Where the white host parted its ranks, glimpses were caught of the superb details of the city, its columns of silver, domes of emerald, and minarets.

At length, when these white folk rose up and departed in sheets, like morning mist, went as he was to see living things fly at his approach, their disappearance caused the worm no surprise. He still preserved his steady oscillations, regular as the wheeze and thud of a steamer's engines, and so manipulated that his train could follow him without difficulty.

The soldiers thought to have reached their destination in a few hours; but at noon, when they threw themselves down on the ground for a halt, overcome with the fierce heat, the splendid city had faded to a milky blue, so like the colour of the sky that its contour could scarcely be traced.

The weary animals and men trudged on, scarcely hoping to reach the city that day, always watching the changing blue. It is a city of gold, said some. Its minarets are topped with amber. No, it is all of amber. But at evening no one doubted any longer; all saw plainly that the city was upheld by silver columns, trunks of the birch; its battlements, daring minarets in the shape of palms, towers like the cypress, domes like masses of foliage, golden all in the setting sun. Within, its streets were streams, and lilies grew along the roadside.

But, curious to say, not a soul was to be seen about. The worm began to fear he had pushed his conquering way too far; and that at last he was before a city whose inhabitants were not even interested in worms, far less afraid of them.

However, he drew his army up in line and banged all his cymbals, at which clouds of birds arose, screeching as they crossed and circled. Presently he saw come gliding out from the colonnade, a figure of silent whiteness. She passed over the rippled gold around the city, smoothly as her chariot upon the highways of the city. Her body had the undulations of a pod, ripe swollen to bursting; her breasts were like mounds under moonlit snow. Her hair, gold as corn at noon, was prodigal as a waterfall; and her eyes were like pansies. Her tiara, wrought of blue lichens and down of the night-moth, was crowned with dainty fronds. Straight she came to the general, gliding ever, gave him the flower she bore in her hands; then turned about and passed

away as she had appeared. The worm stuck the lily in one of the scales upon his breast, and briefly gave order for a camp to be pitched.

Strange sounds that night made the frightened soldiers start from sleep, and the pale sentinels saw their leader writhing round and round the city, ploughing deep furrows as he went; and heard him moaning in the cold moonlight—Why am I a worm?

Ah! it was too horrible; he remembered that he had been human.

Next day the march was resumed, but not many mornings from his departure from the city of the white child, the worm sank down, a corpse. And the lily upon his breast?—it had taken root there; and beads of his heart's blood smiled on every petal.

EPILOGUE.

A poet lay in a white garden of lilies, shaping the images of his fancy, as the river ran through his trailing hair.

But in his garden a long worm shook himself after sleep; forgotten his face like a pearl, his beautiful eyes like a snake's, his breathing hair—all. He had complete reminiscences of a worm, and sought the deserts and ravines the dragon loves.

JOHN GRAY.

