

German Short Stories of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932)

The Violet Death

(From: *Der heiße Soldat und andere Geschichten* ['The Hot Soldier and other Stories.'] München: Albert Langen, 1903.)

The Tibetan fell silent.

The lean figure stood erect and motionless for a while, then it disappeared into the jungle.

Sir Roger Thornton stared into the fire: If he had not been a Sannyasin – a penitent –, the Tibetan, who was moreover on a pilgrimage to Benares,¹ then he would not of course have believed a word – but a Sannyasin never lies, nor can he be lied to.

And then that malicious, cruel twitching in the Asiatic's face!? Or did the firelight deceive him, as it reflected so strangely in the Mongoloid eyes? The Tibetans hate Europeans and jealously guard their magical secrets, with which they hope to annihilate the haughty foreigners sometime in the future, when the Great Day comes.

No matter – he, Sir Hannibal Roger Thornton, must see with his own eyes if occult powers really do reside in the hands of this remarkable people. But he needs companions, courageous men whose will is not broken, even when the terrors of another world are behind them. The Englishman surveyed his companions: - The Afghan there was the only one of the Asiatics who could be considered – as fearless as a beast of prey, yet superstitious!

¹ A sacred city on the Ganges.

That left only his European servant.

Sir Roger touched him with his stick. – Pompejus Jaburek had been completely deaf since his tenth year, but he was able to read every word, be it ever so strange, from people's lips.

Sir Roger Thornton told him with clear gestures what he had learnt from the Tibetan: Roughly twenty days' journey from here, in a specific side valley in the Himavat mountains, there was an extremely strange piece of earth. – Vertical rock faces on three sides; - the only access blocked by poisonous gases which continuously came out of the ground and instantaneously killed every living thing which tried to pass through. In the ravine itself, which covered approximately fifty square English miles, a small tribe was said to live – amidst the most luxuriant vegetation – which belonged to the Tibetan race, wore red, pointed caps, and worshipped a malevolent satanic being in the form of a peacock. – This devilish being had taught the inhabitants Black Magic in the course of the centuries and revealed to them secrets which would reshape the whole globe one day: among which it had taught them a melody which could instantaneously annihilate even the strongest man.

Pompejus smiled mockingly.

Sir Roger told him that he proposed to pass through the poisonous places with the help of diving helmets and diving backpacks containing compressed air, to penetrate into the interior of the mysterious ravine.

Pompejus Jaburek nodded in agreement and rubbed his dirty hands with glee.

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The Tibetan had not been lying: down below, in glorious greenery, lay the strange ravine; a yellowish-brown desert-like belt of loose, weather-beaten soil – its width, a half-hour’s walk – shut the entire area off from the outside world.

The gas which issued out of the ground was pure carbon dioxide.

Sir Roger Thornton, who had gauged the width of this belt from a hill, decided to begin the expedition on the very next morning. – The diving helmets, which he had ordered from Bombay, worked perfectly.

Pompejus carried both repeating rifles and various instruments which his master considered indispensable.

The Afghan had obstinately refused to go along, saying that he was ready to climb into a tiger’s den at any time, but he would think very carefully before he dared to do something that could bring harm upon his immortal soul. – So the two Europeans were left as the only daring spirits.

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The copper diving-helmets sparkled in the sun and cast curious shadows on the spongy ground, from which the poisonous gases rose up in countless tiny bubbles. – Sir Roger was stepping out very briskly so the compressed air would suffice to pass through the gaseous zone. – He saw everything before him in fluctuating forms as through a thin layer of water. – The sunlight seemed ghostly green to him and coloured the distant glaciers – the “Roof of the World” with its gigantic profiles – like a wondrous landscape of the dead.

Suddenly he was on fresh grass with Pompejus, and he lit a match to satisfy himself that atmospheric air was present at all levels. – Then they

both took off their diving helmets and backpacks.

Behind them lay the wall of gas like a quivering mass of water. – In the air was a stupefying scent, as of Amberia blossoms. Iridescent hand-sized butterflies with strange markings sat on still flowers with their wings spread out, like open books of magic.

The two men walked, with a considerable space between them, towards the forest-island which obstructed their view.

Sir Roger gave his deaf servant a sign – he appeared to have heard a sound. – Pompejus cocked his rifle.

They walked around the tip of the forest, and before them lay a meadow. – Barely a quarter of an English mile ahead of them, around a hundred men, clearly Tibetans, wearing red, pointed caps, had formed a semi-circle: - the intruders were already expected. – Fearlessly, Sir Roger advanced – Pompejus several paces ahead of him to his side – towards the crowd.

The Tibetans were dressed in their customary sheepskins, but notwithstanding this they scarcely looked like human beings, so repellently ugly and deformed were their faces, in which there lay an expression of terrifying and superhuman malevolence. – They let the two men come up close, then with lightning speed, they raised their hands as one man at their leader's command and pressed them forcibly against their ears. – At the same time, they shouted something at the top of their lungs.

Pompejus Jaburek looked questioningly at his master and raised his rifle to his shoulder, for the strange movement of the crowd seemed to him to be the signal for some kind of attack. – What he now saw made his blood run cold.

A trembling, swirling layer of gas had formed around his master, resembling that which the two men had recently walked through. Sir Roger's form lost its contours, as if the whirlwind were grinding them away, - his head became pointed – his entire mass seemed to melt as it caved in, and on the spot where the sinewy Englishman had stood but a moment before, there was now a bright-violet cone of the size and shape of a sugarloaf.

Deaf Pompejus shook with a wild fury. – The Tibetans were still shouting, and he closely watched their lips to read what they were actually saying. It was always one and the same word. – Suddenly the leader leapt forward, and they all fell silent and lowered their arms from their ears. – They sprang at Pompejus like panthers. – He fired his repeating rifle like a madman into the crowd, which stopped short for a moment. Instinctively he cried at them the word which he had earlier read from their lips: “Ämälän – Äm-äl-än” he roared, making the ravine resound as from a force of nature. A fit of dizziness overcame him, he saw everything as through strong spectacles, and the ground turned round under his feet. – It lasted only a moment; now he could see clearly again.

The Tibetans had disappeared – as his master had previously –; there were only countless violet sugarloaves before him.

The leader was still alive. His legs had already been turned into a bluish mush, and his upper body had begun to shrink – it was as if the whole man were being digested by a totally transparent being. – He did not wear a red cap, but a structure resembling a mitre in which yellow, living yellow eyes were moving.

Jaburek smashed his rifle butt against the leader's skull, but he could not prevent the dying man from hurling a sickle at the last moment and wounding his foot.

Then he looked around. – Not a living being far and wide. The scent of the Amberia blossoms had intensified and almost become pungent. – It seemed to come from the violet cones, which Pompejus now inspected. – They were identical and they all consisted of the same bright-violet gelatinous slime. Finding the remains of Sir Roger Thornton from among these violet pyramids was impossible.

Gnashing his teeth, Pompejus kicked the dead Tibetan in the face and then ran back the way he had come. – Even from afar he could see the copper helmets, in the grass, flashing in the sun. – He pumped his diving backpack full of air and stepped into the gas zone. – The way seemed never-ending. Tears ran down the poor man's face. – Oh God, oh God, his master was dead. – Had died, here, in faraway India! – The ice-giants of the Himalayas yawned towards the sky – what did they care for the sorrow of a tiny beating human heart?

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Pompejus Jaburek had faithfully put down everything that had happened in writing, word for word, as he had experienced and seen it – for understand it he still could not – and addressed it to his master's secretary in Bombay, 17 Adheritollah Street, – The Afghan had taken charge of delivery. – Then Pompejus died, because the Tibetan's sickle had been poisoned. "Allah is the One and Mohammed is his Prophet," the Afghan prayed, and he touched his forehead to the ground. – The Hindu hunters had strewn the

corpse with flowers and cremated it on a pile of wood to the sound of pious hymns. - - - -

Ali Murrad Bey, the secretary, turned pale when he read the terrible news, and he immediately sent the paper to the editorial office of the “Indian Gazette.”

The new deluge struck.

The “Indian Gazette,” which published the “Case of Sir Roger Thornton,” appeared on the following day a full three hours later than usual. – A strange and horrifying incident was to blame for the delay:

Mr. Birendranath Naorodjee, the editor of the paper, along with two subordinates, who usually examined the proofs thoroughly with him even at midnight before publication, had disappeared without a trace from the locked workroom. Instead of them, there were three bluish, gelatinous cylinders on the ground, and between them, in the middle, lay the freshly printed newspaper pages. – No sooner had the police taken down the first statements with their well-known pompousness than countless similar cases were reported.

Newspaper-reading and gesticulating people disappeared in their dozens before the eyes of the horrified crowd which made its agitated way through the streets. – Countless little violet pyramids stood around, on the steps, in the marketplaces and alleys – wherever the eye turned.

Before evening came, Bombay was half depopulated. An official sanitary measure had decreed the immediate closure of the harbour as well as the prohibition of every kind of traffic with the outside world, to check the spread of the novel epidemic, that undoubtedly being what was happening

here, as much as possible. – Telegraphs and cables were busy day and night sending the dreadful report, as well as the whole case of “Sir Roger Thornton,” syllable for syllable over the ocean into the wide world. On the very next day the quarantine was lifted, it being already too late.

From every country, terrible news announced that the “violet death” had broken out everywhere almost simultaneously and threatened to depopulate the Earth. Everybody lost their heads, and the civilised world resembled a giant anthill into which a country lad had thrust his tobacco-pipe.

In Germany, the epidemic broke out in Hamburg first; Austria, in which, as everybody knows, people read only local news, was spared for weeks. The first case in Hamburg was quite especially shocking. Pastor Stuhlken, a man whom venerable age had rendered practically deaf, was sitting at the coffee-table one morning in the circle of his loved ones: Theobald, his eldest child, with his long student’s pipe; Rita, his faithful wife; Mina, Tina, in short, all of them, all of them. The aged father had just opened the newly-arrived English newspaper and begun to read out the report on the “Case of Sir Roger Thornton” to his family. He had barely got beyond the word *Ämälän* and was about to fortify himself with a drink of coffee when he perceived, to his horror, that only cones of violet slime were sitting around him. From one of them stuck out the long student’s pipe.

The Lord had taken all fourteen souls.

The pious old man fell to the floor unconscious.

A week later, more than half of mankind was already dead.

It was left to a German scholar to shed at least some light on the events. –

The circumstance that the deaf and the deaf-dumb were spared had led him to the perfectly correct idea that this epidemic was a purely acoustic phenomenon.

He had put a long scientific lecture down on paper in his solitary study and announced, with a few catchwords, that he would read it out in public.

His explanation consisted more or less of references to several almost unknown Indian religious texts – which treated the creation of astral and fluid whirlwinds through the utterance of certain secret words and formulas – and to the most recent discoveries in the field of vibration- and radiation-theory which supported these accounts.

He delivered his lecture in Berlin and had to use a megaphone while reading out the long sentences of his manuscript, so enormous was the concourse of listeners.

The memorable speech concluded with the lapidary words: “Go to the ear doctor, tell him to make you deaf, and take care not to utter the word – Ämälän.”

A second later, the scholar and his audience were nothing more than lifeless cones of slime; the manuscript, however, remained, and over time it became widely known, it was acted upon, and in this way it saved mankind from total extinction.

A few decades later – the year is 1950 – a new deaf-dumb generation inhabits the globe.

Customs and morals, different; class and property, displaced. – An ear-doctor rules the world. – Musical scores, cast in with the alchemical recipes of the Middle Ages. – Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, become

laughing-stocks, as Albertus Magnus and Bombastus Paracelsus had formerly.

Every once in a while, in the torture-chambers of museums, a dust-covered piano bares its old teeth.

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Author's Postscript: The esteemed reader is warned not to say the word "Ämälän" out loud.