The Cage

By J. D. Beresford

I was not asleep. I have watched passengers who kept their eyes shut between the stations, but as yet I have not seen an indisputable case of anyone sound asleep on the Hampstead and Charing Cross Tube. Of the other passages that make up London's greater intestine I have less experience, and it may be that some tubes are more conducive to slumber than the one most familiar to me. I have no ambition to make a dogmatic generalisation concerning either the stimulative or soporific action of the Underground. I merely wish it to be understood that I was not asleep, and that it was hardly possible that I could have been, with a small portmanteau permanently on one foot, and the owner of it—a little man who must have wished that the straps were rather longer—intermittently on the other. Against this, however, I have to put the fact that I could not say at which station the little man removed from mc the burden of himself and his portmanteau. Nor could I give particulars of the appearance of such of my innumerable fellow-passengers as were most nearly presented to me, although I do know that most of them were reading—even the strap-hangers. It was, indeed, this observation that started my vision or train of thought or preoccupation—call it anything you like except a dream.

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The eyes in his otherwise repulsive face held a wistfulness, a hint of vague speculation that attracted me. He sat, hunched on the summit of the steeply rising ground overlooking the sea, the place where the forest comes so abruptly to an end that from a little distance it looks as if it had been gigantically planed to a hard edge.

He was alone and ruminatively quiescent after food. He had fed well and carelessly. Some of the bones that lay near him had been very indifferently picked. He leaned forward clasping his hairy legs with his equally hairy arms, and stared out with that hint of speculation and wistfulness in his eyes over the placid magnificence of the Western Sea—just disturbed enough to reflect a gorgeous road of fire that laid a vanishing track across the waters up to the open goal of the low sun. A faint breeze blew up the hill, and it seemed as if be leant his face forward to drink the first refreshment of that sweet, cool air.

I approached him more nearly, trying to read his thought, rejoicing in the knowledge that he could neither see nor apprehend me. For though a man may know something of the past, the future is hidden from him, and I represented to him a future that could only be reckoned in a vast procession of centuries. Yet as I came nearer, so near that I could rest my hands on his knees and gaze up closely into his eyes, he shrank a little and leaned slightly away from me, as if he were uncertainly aware of an unfamiliar, distasteful presence. I fancied that the mat of hair on his chest just perceptibly bristled.

I could read his thought, now, and I was thrilled to discover that the expression of his eyes had not misled me. He had attained to a form of conciousness. He, alone, of all the beasts had received the gift of constructive imagination. He could look forward, make plans to meet a possible emergency. He knew already something of tomorrow. Even then he was deep in speculation. That day he had hunted a slow but cunning little beast which found a refuge among the great boulders that lay piled in gigantic profusion along the foreshore. And he had failed.

Another quarry had been his, but that particular little beast had outwitted him. And now, longing for it, he ruminated clumsy lethargic plans for its capture.

It may have been that the unusual effort tired him, for presently he slept, still hunched into the same compact heap, crouching with an effect of swift alertness as if he were ready at the least alarm to leap up and vanish into the cover of the forest.

Then, a plan came to me, also. I would bring a vision to this primitive ancestor of mankind. I would merge myself with his being and he should dream a dream of the immensely distant future. Blessed and privileged above all the human race, he should know for an instant to what inconceivable developments, to what towering heights of intellectual and manipulative glory his descendants should one day be heir. I had no definite idea of the precise illustration I should choose to set forth the magnificence of man's latest attainment. Nor did I pause to consider what I myself might suffer in the process of this infamous liaison between the ages. I acted on an impulse that I found irresistible. I have myself longed so often to read the distant future of mankind, that I felt as a god bestowing an inestimable gift. But I should have known that in the mystical union it is the god and not the man who suffers.

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I was wrapped in an awful darkness as we fell stupendously through time, but presently I knew that we were rising again, weighted with the burden of primitive flesh. Then in an instant came a strange yellow unnatural light, the roaring of a terrible sound—and the fearful vision. The horror of it was unendurable; the shock of it so great that spirit and flesh were rent asunder. I remained. He fell back to the sweetness of the cool air blowing up from the tranquil sea.

Did he rush frantically into the forest or sit with dripping mouth and wide alarmed eyes, rigidly staring at the scarlet rim of the setting sun? Yet what could he have understood of the future in that moment of detestable revelation? Could he have recognised men and women in their strange disguise of modern dress, as being even of the same species as himself? And if he had, what could he have known of them, seeing them packed so closely together, immoveably wedged into the terror of that rocking roaring cage of unknown material; seeing them occupied in staring so intently and incomprehensibly at those amazing little black-dotted white sheets? Impossible for him to guess that those speckled sheets held a magic that transported his descendants from the misery of their cage into imaginations so extensive and so various that some of them might, however dimly and allusively, include himself, hunched and ruminant, regarding the vast tranquillity of the sea.

The tunnel suddenly broke, the roaring gave place to a rattle that by contrast was gentle and soothing. I opened my eyes. We were under the sky again, slipping, with intermittent flashes of light, into the harbour of Golder's Green Station.

For a moment, I seemed to see the clumsy and violent shape of a beast that strove in panic to escape; and then I came back to my own world of the patient readers, with their white, controlled faces, forming now in solemn procession down the aisle of the carriage.

But it was his dream, not mine. And I have been wondering whether, if I dreamed also, the distant future might not seem equally unendurable to me?