

TIME'S EYE

A TIME ODYSSEY: 1

ARTHUR C. CLARKE AND
STEPHEN BAXTER



BALLANTINE BOOKS



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Cities and Thrones and Powers

Stand in Time's eye,

Almost as long as flowers,

Which daily die:

But, as new buds put forth

To glad new men,

Out of the spent and unconsidered Earth

The Cities rise again.

—*Rudyard Kipling*

TIME'S EYE

AUTHORS' NOTE

This book, and the series that it opens, neither follows nor precedes the books of the earlier *Odyssey* but is at right angles to them: not a sequel or prequel, but an “orthoquel,” taking similar premises in a different direction.

The quotation from Rudyard Kipling’s “Cities and Thrones and Powers,” from *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906), is used by kind permission of AP Watt Ltd., on behalf of the National Trust for Places of Historical Interest or Natural Beauty.

DISCONTINUITY

1: SEEKER

For thirty million years the planet had cooled and dried, until, in the north, ice sheets gouged at the continents. The belt of forest that had once stretched across Africa and Eurasia, nearly continuous from the Atlantic coast to the Far East, had broken into dwindling pockets. The creatures who had once inhabited that timeless green had been forced to adapt, or move.

Seeker's kind had done both.

Her infant clinging to her chest, Seeker crouched in the shadows at the fringe of the scrap of forest. Her deep eyes, under their bony hood of brow, peered out into brightness. The land beyond the forest was a plain, drenched in light and heat. It was a place of terrible simplicity, where death came swiftly. But it was a place of opportunity. This place would one day be the border country between Pakistan and Afghanistan, called by some the North–West Frontier.

Today, not far from the ragged fringe of the forest, an antelope carcass lay on the ground. The animal was not long dead—its wounds still oozed sticky blood—but the lions had already eaten their fill, and the other scavengers of the plain, the hyenas and the birds, had yet to discover it.

Seeker stood upright, unfolding her long legs, and peered around.

Seeker was an ape. Her body, thickly covered with dense black hair, was little more than a meter tall. Carrying little fat, her skin was slack. Her face was pulled forward into a muzzle, and her limbs were relics of an arboreal past: she had long arms, short legs. She looked very like a chimpanzee, in fact, but the split of her kind from those cousins of the deeper forest already lay some three million years in the past. Seeker stood comfortably upright, a true biped, her hips and pelvis more human than any chimp's.

Seeker's kind were scavengers, and not particularly effective ones. But they had advantages that no other animal in the world possessed. Cocooned in the unchanging forest, no chimp would ever make a tool as complex as the crude but laboriously crafted axe Seeker held in her fingers. And there was something in her eyes, a spark, beyond any other ape.

There was no sign of immediate danger. She stepped boldly out into the sun, her child clinging to her chest. One by one, timidly, walking upright or knuckle-walking, the rest of the troop followed her.

The infant squealed and pinched her mother's fur painfully. Seeker's kind had no names—their creatures' language was still little more sophisticated than the songs of birds—but since she had been born, this baby, Seeker's second, had been ferociously strong in the way she clung onto her mother, and Seeker thought of her as something like "Grasper."

Burdened by the child, Seeker was among the last of the troop to reach the fallen antelope, and the others were already hacking with their chipped stones at the cartilage and skin that connected the animal's limbs to its body. This butchery was a way to get a fast return of meat; the limbs could be hauled quickly back to the relative safety of the forest, and consumed at leisure. Seeker joined in the work with a will. The harsh sunlight was uncomfortable, though. It would be another million years before Seeker's remote descendants, much more human in form, could stay out in the light, in bodies able to sweat and store moisture in fatty reserves, bodies like spacesuits built to survive the savannah.

The shrinking of the world forest had been a catastrophe for the apes that had once inhabited it. Already the evolutionary zenith of this great family of animals lay deep in the past. But some had adapted. Seeker's kind still needed the forest's shade, still crept into treetop nests each night, but by day they would dart out into the open to exploit easy scavenging opportunities like this. It was a hazardous way to make a living, but it was better than starving. As the forest fragmented further, more *edge* became available, and the living space for fringe-dwellers actually expanded. And as they scuttled perilously between two worlds, the blind scalpels of variation and selection shaped the desperate apes.

Now there was a concerted yapping, a patter of swift paws on the ground. Hyenas had belatedly scented the blood of the antelope, and were approaching in a great cloud of dust.

The upright apes had hacked off only three of the antelope's limbs. But there was no more time. Clutching her child to her chest, Seeker raced after her troop toward the cool ancestral dark of the forest.

That night, as Seeker lay in her treetop nest of folded branches, something woke her. Grasper, curled up beside her mother, snored softly.

There was something in the air, a faint scent in her nostrils, that tasted of change.

Seeker was an animal fully dependent on the ecology in which she was embedded, and she was very sensitive to change. But there was more than an animal's sensibility in her: as she peered at the stars with eyes still adapted for narrow forest spaces, she felt an inchoate curiosity.

If she had needed a name, it might have been Seeker.

It was that spark of curiosity, a kind of dim ancestor of wanderlust, that had guided her kind so far out of Africa. As the Ice Ages bit, the remnant forest pockets dwindled further or vanished. To survive, the forest-fringe apes would rush across the hazard of the open plain to a new forest clump, the imagined safety of a new home. Even those who survived would rarely make more than one such journey in a lifetime, a single odyssey of a kilometer or so. But some did survive, and flourish; and some of their children passed on farther.

In this way, as thousands of generations ticked by, the forest-fringe apes had slowly diffused out of Africa, reaching as far as Central Asia, and crossing the Gibraltar land bridge into Spain. It was a forward echo of more purposeful migrations in the future. But the apes were always sparse, and left few traces; no human paleontologist would ever suspect they had come so far out of Africa as the

place, northwest India, or that they had gone farther still.

And now, as Seeker peered up at the sky, a single star slid across her field of view, slow, steady, purposeful as a cat. It was bright enough to cast a shadow, she saw. Wonder and fear warred in her. She raised a hand, but the sliding star was beyond the reach of her fingers.

This far into the night, India was deep in the shadow of Earth. But where the surface of the turning planet was bathed in sunlight, there was a shimmering—rippling color, brown and blue and green, flickering in patches like tiny doors opening. The tide of subtle changes washed around the planet like a second terminator.

The world shivered around Seeker, and she clutched her child close.

In the morning, the troop was agitated. The air was cooler today, somehow sharper, and laden with a tang a human might have called electric. The light was strange, bright and washed-out. Even here, in the depths of the forest, a breeze stirred, rustling the leaves of the trees. Something was different. Something had changed, and the animals were disturbed.

Boldly Seeker walked into the breeze. Grasper, chattering, knuckle-walked after her.

Seeker reached the edge of the forest. On a plain already bright with morning, nothing stirred. Seeker peered around, a faint spark of puzzlement lodging in her mind. Her forest-adapted mind was poor at analyzing landscapes, but it seemed to her that the land was *different*. Surely there had been more green yesterday; surely there had been forest scraps in the lee of those worn hills, and surely water had run along that arid gully. But it was difficult to be sure. Her memories, always incoherent, were already fading.

But there was an object in the sky.

It was not a bird, for it did not move or fly, and not a cloud, for it was hard and definite and round. And it shone, almost as bright as the sun itself.

Drawn, she walked out of the forest's shadows and into the open.

She walked back and forth, underneath the thing, inspecting it. It was about the size of her head, and it swam with light—or rather the light of the sun rippled from it, as it would flash from the surface of a stream. It had no smell. It was like a piece of fruit, hanging from a branch, and yet there was no tree. Four billion years of adaptation to Earth's unvarying gravity field had instilled in her the instinct that nothing so small and hard could hover unsupported in the air: this was something new, and therefore to be feared. But it did not fall on her or attack her in any way.

She craned up on tiptoes, peering at the sphere. She saw two eyes gazing back at her.

She grunted and dropped to the ground. But the floating sphere did not react, and when she looked up again she understood. The sphere was returning her reflection, though twisted and distorted; the eyes had been her own, just as she had seen them before in the smooth surface of still water. Of a

Earth's animals only her kind could have recognized herself in such a reflection, for only her kind had any true sense of self. But it seemed to her, dimly, that by holding such an image the floating sphere was looking at her just as she looked at it, as if it was a vast Eye itself.

She reached up, but even on tiptoe, with her long tree-climbers' arms extended, she could not reach it. With more time, it might have occurred to her to find something to stand on to reach the sphere, a rock or a heap of branches.

But Grasper screamed.

Seeker fell to all fours and was knuckle-running before she had even realized it. When she saw what was happening to her child she was terrified.

Two creatures stood over Grasper. They were like apes, but they were upright and tall. They had bright red torsos, as if their bodies were soaked in blood, and their faces were flat and hairless. *And they had Grasper.* They had dropped something, like lianas or vines, over the infant. Grasper struggled, yelled and bit, but the two tall creatures easily held down the lianas to trap her.

Seeker leapt, screaming, her teeth bared.

One of the red-breasted creatures saw her. His eyes widened with shock. He brought around a stick and whirled it through the air. Something impossibly hard slammed against the side of her head. Seeker was heavy and fast enough that her momentum brought her crashing into the creature, knocking him to the ground. But her head was full of stars, her mouth full of the taste of blood.

To the east a blanket of black, boiling cloud erupted out of the horizon. There was a remote rumble of thunder, and lightning flared.

2: LITTLE BIRD

At the moment of Discontinuity, Bisesa Dutt was in the air.

From her position in the back of the helicopter cockpit, Bisesa's visibility was limited—which was ironic, since the whole point of the mission was her observation of the ground. But as the Little Bird rose, and her view opened up, she could see the base's neat rows of prefabricated hangars, all lined up with the spurious regularity of the military mind. This UN base had been here for three decades already, and these "temporary" structures had acquired a certain shabby grandeur, and the dirt roads that led away across the plain were hard-packed.

As the Bird swooped higher, the base blurred to a smear of whitewash and camouflage canvas, lost in the huge palm of the land. The ground was desolate, with here and there a splash of gray-green where a stand of trees or scrubby grass struggled for life. But in the distance mountains shouldered over the horizon, white-topped, magnificent.

The Bird lurched sideways, and Bisesa was thrown against the curving wall.

Casey Othic, the prime pilot, hauled on his stick, and soon the flight leveled out again, with the Bird swooping a little lower over the rock-strewn ground. He turned and grinned at Bisesa. "Sorry about that. Gusts like that sure weren't in the forecasts. But what do those double domes know? You okay back there?"

His voice was overloud in Bisesa's headset. "I feel like I'm on the back shelf of a Corvette."

His grin widened, showing perfect teeth. "No need to shout. I can hear you on the radio." He tapped his helmet. "*Ra-di-o*. You have those in the Brit army yet?"

In the seat beside Casey, Abdikadir Omar, the backup pilot, glanced at the American, shaking his head disapprovingly.

The Little Bird was a bubble-front observation chopper. It was derived from an attack helicopter that had been flying since the end of the twentieth century. In this calmer year of 2037, this Bird was dedicated to more peaceful tasks: observation, search and rescue. Its bubble cockpit had been expanded to take a crew of three, the two pilots up front and Bisesa crammed on her bench in the back.

Casey flew his veteran machine casually, one-handed. Casey Othic's rank was chief warrant officer and he had been seconded from the US Air and Space Force to this UN detachment. He was a square-jawed, bulky man. His helmet was UN sky blue, but he had adorned it with a strictly nonregulation Stars and Stripes, an animated flag rippling in a simulated breeze. His HUD, head-up display, was a thick visor

that covered most of his face above the nose, black to Bisesa's view, so that she could only see his broad, chomping jaw.

"I can tell you're checking me out, despite that stupid visor," Bisesa said laconically.

Abdikadir, a handsome Pashtun, glanced back and grinned. "Spend enough time around apes like Casey and you'll get used to it."

Casey said, "I'm the perfect gentleman." He leaned a bit so he could see her name tag. "*Bisesa Dutt*. What's that, a Pakistani name?"

"Indian."

"So you're from India? But your accent is—what, Australian?"

She suppressed a sigh; Americans never recognized regional accents. "I'm a Mancunian. From Manchester, England. I'm British—third generation."

Casey started to talk like Cary Grant. "Welcome aboard, Lady Dutt."

Abdikadir punched Casey's arm. "Man, you're such a cliché, you just go from one stereotype to another. Bisesa, this is your first mission?"

"Second," said Bisesa.

"I've flown with this asshole a dozen times and he's always the same, whoever's in the back. Don't let him bug you."

"He doesn't," she said equably. "He's just bored."

Casey laughed coarsely. "It is kind of dull here at Clavius Base. But you ought to be at home, Lady Dutt, out here on the North–West Frontier. We'll have to see if we can find you some fuzzy-wuzzie to pick off with your elephant gun."

Abdikadir grinned at Bisesa. "What can you expect from a jock Christian?"

"And you're a beak-nosed mujahideen," Casey growled back.

Abdikadir seemed to sense alarm in Bisesa's expression. "Oh, don't worry. I really am a mujahideen, or was, and he really is a jock. We're the best of friends, really. We're both Oikumenists. But don't tell anybody—"

They ran into turbulence, quite suddenly. It was as if the chopper just dropped a few meters through a hole in the air. The pilots became attentive to their instruments, and fell silent.

With the same nominal rank as Casey, Abdikadir, an Afghan citizen, was a Pashtun, a native of the area. Bisesa had got to know him a little, in her short time at the post. He had a strong, open face, a proud nose that might have been called Roman, and he wore a fringe of beard. His eyes were

surprising blue, and his hair a kind of strawberry blond. He said he inherited his coloring from the armies of Alexander the Great, which had once passed this way. A gentle man, approachable and civilized, he accepted his place in the informal pecking order here: although he was prized as one of the few Pashtuns to have come over to the UN's side, as an Afghan he had to defer to the Americans and he spent a lot more time copiloting than piloting. The other British troops called him "Ginger."

The ride continued. It wasn't comfortable. The Bird was elderly: the cabin reeked of engine oil and hydraulic fluid, every metal surface was scuffed with use, and there was actually duct tape holding together splits on the cover of Bisesa's inadequately padded bench. And the noise of the rotors, just meters above her head, was shattering, despite her heavily padded helmet. But then, she thought, it had always been the way that governments spent more on war than peace.

When he heard the chopper approach, Moallim knew what he had to do.

Most of the adult villagers ran to ensure their stashes of weaponry and hemp were hidden. But Moallim had different ideas. He picked up his gear, and ran to the foxhole he had dug weeks ago, in preparation for a day like this.

Within seconds he was lying against the wall of the hole with the RPG tube at his shoulder. The hole had taken hours to dig, before it was deep enough for him to get his body out of the way of the back blast, and to get the elevation he needed with the RPG. But when he was in the hole and had pulled a little dirt and loose vegetation over his body, he was really quite well hidden. The grenade launcher was an antique, actually a relic of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, but, well maintained and cleaned, it still worked, was still lethal. As long as the chopper came close enough to his position, he would surely succeed.

Moallim was fifteen years old.

He had been just four when he had first encountered the helicopters of the west. They had come one night, a pack of them. They flew very low over your head, black on black, like angry black crows. Their noise hammered at your ears while their wind plucked at you and tore at your clothing. Mark stalls were blown over, cattle and goats were terrified, and tin roofs were torn right off the houses. Moallim heard, though he did not see it for himself, that one woman's infant was torn right out of her arms and sent whirling up into the air, never to come down again.

And then the shooting had started.

Later, more choppers had come, dropping leaflets that explained the "purpose" of the raid: there had been an increase in arms smuggling in the area, there was some suspicion of uranium shipments passing through the village, and so on. The "necessary" strike had been "surgical," applying "minimum force." The leaflets had been torn up and used to wipe asses. Everybody hated the helicopters, for their remoteness and arrogance. At four, Moallim did not have a word to describe how he felt.

And still the choppers came. The latest UN helicopters were supposed to be here to enforce peace, but everybody knew that this was somebody else's peace, and these "surveillance" ships carried plenty

of weaponry.

These problems had a single solution, so Moallim had been taught.

The elders had trained Moallim to handle the rocket-propelled grenade launcher. It was always hard to hit a moving target. So the detonators had been replaced with timing devices, so that they would explode in midair. As long as you fired close enough, you didn't even need a hit to bring down an aircraft—especially a chopper, and especially if you aimed for the tail rotor, which was its most vulnerable element.

RPG launchers were big and bulky and obvious. They were difficult to handle, awkward to lift and aim—and you were finished if you showed yourself aiming one from the open or a rooftop. So you hid away, and let the chopper come to you. If they came this way the chopper crew, trained to avoid buildings for fear of traps, would see nothing more than a bit of pipe sticking out of the ground. Perhaps they would assume it was just a broken drain, from one of the many failed “humanitarian” schemes imposed on the area over the decades. Flying over open ground they would think they were safe. Moallim smiled.

The sky ahead looked odd to Bisesa. Clouds, thick and black, were boiling up out of nowhere and gathering into a dense band that striped along the horizon, masking the mountains. Even the sky looked somehow washed-out.

Discreetly she dug her phone out of a pocket of her flight suit. Holding it nestling in her hand, she whispered to it, “I don't recall storm formations in the weather forecasts.”

“Neither do I,” said the phone. It was tuned to the civilian broadcast nets; now its little screen began to cycle through the hundreds of channels washing invisibly over this bit of the Earth, seeking updated forecasts.

The date was June 8, 2037. Or so Bisesa believed. The chopper flew on.

3: EVIL EYE

The first hint Josh White had of the strange events unfolding in the world was a rude awakening: a rough hand on his shoulder, an excitable clamor, a wide face looming over him.

“I say, Josh—wake up, man! You won’t believe it—it’s quite the thing—if it isn’t the Russians, I’ll eat your puttees—”

It was Ruddy, of course. The young journalist’s shirt was unbuttoned and he wore no jacket; he looked as if he had just got out of bed himself. But his broad face, dominated by that great brow, was flecked with sweat, and his eyes, made small by his thick gig-lamp spectacles, danced and gleamed.

Josh, blinking, sat up. Sunlight was streaming into the room through the open window. It was late afternoon; he had been napping for an hour. “Giggers, what on earth can be so vital it deprives me of my shut-eye? Especially after last night . . . Let me wash my face first!”

Ruddy backed off. “All right. But ten minutes, Josh. You won’t forgive yourself if you miss this. Ten minutes!” And he bustled out of the room.

Josh, bowing to the inevitable, pulled himself out of bed and moved sleepily around the room.

Like Ruddy, Josh was a journalist, a special correspondent of the *Boston Globe*, sent to file color reports from the North–West Frontier, this remote corner of the British Empire—remote, yes, but possibly crucial for Europe’s future, and so of interest even in Massachusetts. The room was just a cramped little hole in the corner of the fort, and he had to share it with Ruddy, thanks to whom it was cluttered with clothes, half-emptied trunks, books, papers, and a little foldaway desk on which Ruddy penned his dispatches for the *Civil and Military Gazette and Pioneer*, his newspaper in Lahore. And that, though, Josh knew he was lucky to have a room at all; most of the troops stationed here—Jamrud, European and Indian alike, spent their nights in tents.

Unlike the soldiers Josh had a perfect right to an afternoon nap, if he needed it. But now he couldn’t hear that something unusual was indeed afoot: raised voices, running feet. Not a military action, surely, not another raid by the rebellious Pashtuns, or he would have heard gunfire by now. What then?

Josh found a bowl of clean warm water, with his shaving kit set out beside it. He washed his face and neck, peering at a rather bleary face in the scrap of mirror fixed to the wall. He was small featured, with what he thought of as a pug nose, and this afternoon the bags under his eyes weren’t doing his looks any good at all. Actually Josh’s head hadn’t been too sore this morning, but then to survive the long nights in the Mess he’d learned to stick to beer. Ruddy, on the other hand, had

indulged his occasional passion for opium—but the hours Ruddy had spent sucking on the hook seemed to leave no after-effects on his nineteen-year-old constitution. Josh, feeling like a war veteran at the age of twenty-three, envied him.

The shaving water had been set out unobtrusively by Noor Ali, Ruddy's bearer. It was a level of service Bostonian Josh found uncomfortable: when Ruddy was sleeping off his worst binges, Noor Ali was expected to shave him in bed, even asleep! And Josh found it hard to stomach the whipping Ruddy found it necessary to administer from time to time. But Ruddy was an "Anglo-Indian," born in Bombay. This was Ruddy's country, Josh reminded himself; Josh was here to report, not to judge. And anyhow, he admitted guiltily, it was good to wake up to warm water and a mug or two of hot tea.

He dried himself off and dressed quickly. He took one last glance in the mirror, and finger-combed his mop of unruly black hair. As an afterthought he slipped his revolver into his belt. Then he made for the door.

It was the afternoon of March 24, 1885. Or so Josh still believed.

Inside the fort there was a great deal of excitement. Across the deeply shadowed square, soldiers rushed to the gate. Josh joined the cheerful crowd.

Many of the British stationed here at Jamrud were of the 72nd Highlanders, and though some were dressed informally in loose, knee-length native trousers, others wore their khaki jackets and red trousers. But white faces were rare; Gurkhas and Sikhs outnumbered British by three to one. Anyhow, throughout the afternoon Europeans and *sepoys* alike pushed and hustled to get out of the fort. These men, stationed in this desolate place far from their families for months on end, would give anything for a "do," a bit of novelty to break up the monotony. But on the way to the gate Josh noticed Captain Grove, the fort's commander, making his way across the square, with a very worried expression on his face.

As he emerged into the low afternoon sunlight outside the fort Josh was briefly dazzled. The air had a dry chill, and he found himself shivering. The sky was eggshell blue and empty of cloud, but close to the western horizon, he saw, there was a band of darkness, like a storm front. Such turbulent weather was unusual for this time of year.

This was the North–West Frontier, the place where India met Asia. For the imperial British, the great corridor, running from northeast to southwest between the mountain ranges to the north and the Indus to the south, was the natural boundary of their Indian dominion—but it was a raw and bleeding edge, and on its stability depended the security of the most precious province of the British Empire. And the fort of Jamrud was stuck smack in the middle of it.

The fort itself was a sprawling place, with a curtain of heavy stone walls and broad corners and watchtowers. Outside the walls, conical tents had been set up in rows, military neat. Jamrud had originally been built by the Sikhs, who had long governed here and mounted their own wars against the Afghans; by now it was thoroughly British.

Today it wasn't the destiny of empires that was on anybody's mind. The soldiers streamed out over the heavily trampled patch of earth that served as the fort's parade ground, heading for a spot perhaps

a hundred yards from the gate. There, Josh could see what looked like a pawnbroker's ball hovering in the air. It was silvered, and glistened brightly in the sunlight. A crowd of perhaps fifty trooper orderlies and noncombatants had gathered under that mysterious sphere, a mob in various states of informal dress.

In the middle of it all, of course, was Ruddy. Even now he was taking command of the situation, stalking back and forth beneath the hovering ball, peering up at it through his gig-lamp spectacles and scratching his chin as if he were as sage as Newton. Ruddy was short, no more than five feet six, and somewhat squat, perhaps a little pudgy. He had a broad face, a defiant mustache and over-arching eyebrows a wide slab of a forehead already exposed by a receding tide of hair. *Bristling*—yes, though Josh with a kind of exasperated fondness, *bristling* was the word for Ruddy. With his stiff, if vigorous bearing, he looked thirty-nine, not nineteen. He had an unsightly red blemish on his cheek, his “Lahore sore,” that he thought had come from an ant bite, which would respond to no treatment.

The soldiers sometimes mocked Ruddy for his self-importance and pomposity—no fighting man had much time for noncombatants anyhow. But at the same time they were fond of him; in his dispatches to the *CMG*, and in his barrack-room tales, Ruddy loaned these “Tommies,” far from home, a rough eloquence they lacked themselves.

Josh pushed his way through the crowd to Ruddy. “I can't see what's so strange about this floating fellow—a conjuring trick?”

Ruddy grunted. “More likely some trickery by the Tsar. A new type of heliograph, perhaps.”

They were joined by Cecil de Morgan, the factor. “If it's *jadoo*, I'd like to know the secret of the magic. Here—you.” He approached one of the *sepoys*. “Your cricket bat—may I borrow it? . . .” He got hold of the bat and waved it through the air. He passed it under and around the floating ball. “You see? There's really no possibility of anything holding it up, no invisible wire or glass rod, however contorted.”

The *sepoys* were less amused. “*Asli nahin! Fareib!*”

Ruddy muttered, “Some are saying this is an Eye, an Evil Eye. Perhaps we need a *nuzzoo-watto* to avert its baleful gaze.”

Josh placed a hand on his shoulder. “My friend, I think you've imbibed more of India than you care to admit. It's probably a balloon, filled with hot air. Nothing more exciting than that.”

But Ruddy was distracted by a worried-looking junior officer who came shoving through the crowd, evidently searching for somebody. Ruddy hurried over to speak with him.

“A balloon, you say?” de Morgan said to Josh. “Then how does it hold so still in the breeze? And—watch this!” He swung the cricket bat over his head like an axe, and slammed it against the floating sphere. There was a resounding smash, and to Josh's astonishment the bat just bounced off the sphere, which remained as immovable as if it was set in rock. De Morgan held up the bat, and Josh saw it had splintered. “Hurt my blooming fingers! Now tell me, sir, have you ever seen such a thing?”

“Not I,” Josh admitted. “But if there’s a way to make a profit out of it, Morgan, I’m sure you’re the man.”

“*De Morgan, Joshua.*” De Morgan was a factor, who made a handsome living from supplying Jamrud and other forts of the Frontier. Aged about thirty, he was a tall, oleaginous sort of man. Even here, miles from the nearest town, he wore a new khaki suit dyed a delicate olive green, a sky-blue tie and a pith helmet as white as snow. He was a type, Josh was learning, who was attracted to the fringe of civilization, where there were fat profits to be made and a certain slackness to the enforcement of the law. The officers disapproved of him and his like, but de Morgan kept himself popular enough with his supplies of beer and tobacco for the men, even prostitutes when possible, and occasional bags of hashish for the officers—and for Ruddy too.

Despite de Morgan’s stunt, the show seemed to be over. As the sphere didn’t move or spin, or open up, or fire bullets, the audience appeared to be getting bored. Besides, some of them were shivering in this unseasonably cold afternoon, as that wind from the north continued to blow. One or two drifted back to the fort, and the party began to break up.

But now there was shouting from the edge of the group: something else unusual had turned up. De Morgan, his nostrils flaring, once more on the scent of opportunity, ran off that way.

Ruddy plucked at Josh’s shoulder. “Enough of these magic tricks,” he said. “We should get back. We’re soon going to have a lot of work, I fear!”

“What do you mean?”

“I just had a word with Brown, who spoke to Townshend, who overheard something Harley was saying . . .” Captain Harley was the fort’s Political Officer, reporting to the Political Agency of the Khyber, the arm of the province’s administration intended to deal diplomatically with the chiefs and khans of the Pashtun and Afghan tribes. Not for the first time Josh envied Ruddy his links among Jamrud’s junior officers. “Our communications have gone down,” said Ruddy breathlessly.

Josh frowned. “What do you mean—has the telegraph wire been cut again?” When the link to Peshawar was broken it was tricky to file copy; Josh’s editor in faraway Boston was unsympathetic to the delays caused by horseback delivery to the town.

But Ruddy said, “Not just that. The heliographs too. We haven’t seen so much as a flicker of light from the stations to the north and west since dawn. According to Brown, Captain Grove is sending out patrols. Whatever has happened must be widespread and coordinated.”

The heliographs were simple portable signaling devices, just mirrors on foldaway tripods. A series of heliograph communication posts had been set up all around the hills between Jamrud and the Khyber, as well as back toward Peshawar. So that was why Captain Grove had been looking so concerned, back in the fort.

Ruddy said, “Out there in the field, perhaps a hundred British throats have been slit in the night by Pashtun savages—or the Amir’s assassins—or, worse yet, by the Russian puppet masters themselves. But even as he described this gruesome possibility, Ruddy’s eyes, behind their thick panes of glass

were alive.

“You relish the coming of war as only a noncombatant would,” Josh said.

Ruddy said defensively, “If the time came I would stand my corner. But in the meantime words are my bullets—as they are for you, Joshua, so don’t you lecture me.” His vital good humor broke through again. “It’s exciting, eh? You can’t deny that. At least something is happening! Come on, let’s get to work!” And he turned and ran back toward the fort.

Josh made to follow. He thought he heard a flapping sound, like the wings of some great bird. He looked back. But then the wind shifted a little and the strange sound dissipated.

Some of the troopers were still playing with the Eye. One man clambered on the shoulders of another, grabbed onto the Eye with both hands, and hung there, all his weight suspended by the Eye. Laughing, the trooper let himself drop to the ground.

Back in their shared room, Ruddy made immediately for his desk, dragged a pile of paper toward him, took the top off a bottle of ink and began to write.

Josh watched him. “What are you going to say?”

“I’ll know in a moment.” He wrote even as he spoke. He was an untidy worker, a Turkish cigarette lodged in his mouth as was his habit, and droplets of ink sprayed around him; Josh had learned when to store his own stuff out of his way. But he couldn’t help but admire Ruddy’s fluency.

Listlessly Josh lay on his bed, his hands locked behind his neck. Unlike Ruddy, *he* had to get his thoughts in order before he could write a word.

The Frontier was strategically vital for the British, as it had been for previous conquerors. To the north and west of this place lay Afghanistan, centered on the Hindu Kush. Through the passes of the Hindu Kush had once marched the armies of Alexander and the hordes of Genghis Khan and Tamburlaine, all drawn by the mystery and wealth of India to the south. Jamrud itself occupied a key position, lying on the line of the Khyber Pass, between Kabul and Peshawar.

But the province itself was more than a mere corridor for foreign soldiery. It had its own people who regarded this land as their own: the Pashtuns, a warrior race, fierce, proud and cunning. The Pashtuns—whom Ruddy called Pathans—were devout Muslims, and bound by their own code of honor, called the *pakhtunwali*. The Pashtuns were splintered into tribes and clans, but that very splintering gave them a robust kind of fluidity. No matter how heavy a defeat was inflicted on one tribe or another, still more would melt out of the mountains with their old-fashioned long-barreled rifles, their *jezails*. Josh had met a few Pashtuns, prisoners taken by the British. Josh had thought them the most alien people he had ever encountered. Among the British soldiers there was a certain wariness and respect for them, though. Some of the Highlanders even said the *pakhtunwali* wasn’t so different from their own clannish code of honor.

Over the centuries many invading armies had come to grief on the Frontier, which one imperi-

administrator had called that “prickly and untrimmed hedge.” Even now, the authority of the mighty British Empire extended not much further than the roads; elsewhere the law derived only from the tribe and the gun.

And today the Frontier was again a cockpit of international intrigue. Once more an envious empire had its hungry eyes on India: this time the Tsar’s Russia. Britain’s interests were very clear. On no account must Russia, or a Russian-backed Persia, be allowed to establish itself in Afghanistan. To the end, for decades the British had been trying to ensure that Afghanistan was ruled by an Amir well disposed to British interests—or, failing that, it had been prepared to wage war on Afghanistan itself. The slow-burning confrontation seemed to be coming to a boil, at last. This very month the Russians had been steadily inching forward through Turkistan, and were now approaching Pandjeh, the last oasis before the Afghan frontier, an obscure caravansery that was suddenly the subject of the world’s attention.

Josh found this international chess game rather dismaying. Because of simple geographic logic there was a place where great empires brushed against each other, and, for all the Pashtuns’ defiance, the terrible friction crushed the people unlucky enough to be born here. He sometimes wondered if it would be this way in the future, if this blighted place was destined forever to be an arena of war—and what unimaginable treasures men might fight over here.

“Or perhaps one day,” he had said once to Ruddy, “men will put aside war as a growing child sets aside the toys of his nursery.”

But Ruddy snorted through his mustache. “Pah! And do what—play cricket all day? Josh, men will always go to war, because men will always be men, and war will always be *fun*.” Josh was naive, a blinkered American far from home, who needed to have “the youth burned out of him,” said nineteenth-year-old Ruddy.

After less than half an hour Ruddy had finished his vignette. He sat back, gazing out of the window at the reddening light, near-sighted eyes locked on vistas Josh couldn’t share.

“Ruddy—if it is serious trouble—do you think we’ll be sent back to Peshawar?”

Ruddy snorted. “I should hope not! This is what we’re here for.” He read from his manuscript. “Think of it! Far away, beyond the Hindu Kush, they are on the move—in their green coats or gray marching beneath the double eagle of the Tsar. Soon they will come striding down the Khyber Pass. But to the south more columns will mass, men from Dublin and Delhi, Calcutta and Colchester, drawn together in common discipline and purpose, ready to give their lives for the Widow of Windsor . . . The batsmen are on the pavilion steps, the umpires are ready, the bails are set on the stumps. And here we are right on the boundary rope! What do you think of that—eh, Josh? . . .”

“You really can be annoying, Ruddy.”

But before Ruddy could respond, Cecil de Morgan burst in. The factor was red-faced, panting and his clothes were dusty. “You must come, you chaps—oh, come and see what they’ve found!”

With a sigh Josh clambered off his bed. Would there be no end to the strangeness of this day?

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