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Opening extract from
Shardik

Written by
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Introduction

AFTER THE SUCCESS OF *WATERSHIP DOWN*, the field lay wide open before me; in all honesty I could write about anything I liked. The idea came to me spontaneously to write about a character like the tragic heroes of Ancient Greece, who secured great blessings for their society but paid heavily for their accomplishments in terms of personal suffering. This led me to consider a huge and tragic background for my story, enormous and violent. This was the kernel that gave rise to the concept of the great jungle, blazing with destructive fire, its inhabitants in desperate flight before it. It became clear that this was to be the basis of my story, and as I lay awake one night visualizing the animals flying from the terrible, uncontrollable fire, I suddenly saw the solitary figure of a huge bear, itself burning, and the plunge into the river, the only thing that could save it.

And then, how did it get out of the river? For it could not stay there, half-drowned. In my mind's eye it clambered out onto an island downstream, and on the island it came to rest in a valley from which it was unable to get out because of its injuries. It was lying there, terribly wounded and probably dying until, by chance, it was discovered by the hunter Kelderek.

Kelderek was something of an odd figure, a singular person. Although a member of a recognised tribe, he had grown up lonely and disinclined to join in the communal pursuits of the tribe. He became isolated, and made his living by a solitary pursuit, that of a hunter dependent on his skills in the jungle to bring back his

quarries, the animals whose coats and bodies he could sell.

And here my thoughts digressed. I had a kind of vision of the society from which this hunter came. Long ago, a religion had grown up around the figure of a gigantic and terrible bear, to be both feared and worshipped, and part of this religion had always been that this divine bear would die but would reappear at some unknown time in the future. The children were taught to pray for the 'Good Night' when the bear would come.

It was during one of his solitary journeys in the jungle that Kelderek came upon the bear – the real bear – lying horribly burned and wounded in a gully where it had fled from the fire. It was in a bad way and seemed to be dying. It suddenly came to Kelderek with awe and fear that this must be the promised resurrection of the divine bear, Shardik. He did everything he could to save its life, in which he was successful. The bear began to recover and Kelderek remained with it at a safe distance while it slowly made its way down the island.

At this point my imagination led me to believe that there must be a group or tribe of human beings on the island who were afraid of the approach of the bear. At the far end of the island there was a shallow part of the river, a kind of ford by which people could wade across to the main land on the far side of the river. The bear made this crossing and Kelderek followed it. This was the extent of my thoughts as I began the story, and when I reached this point I had to stop and let my imagination tell me more in this pause.

Shardik is about the religious impulse and the nature of worship. Its themes are as relevant today as they have ever been – power, politics, corruption, and the nature of religious faith. The ideas for *Shardik* did not come regularly or easily. I had to search for them diligently. My sources were my dreams, my imagination, and my own voracious reading. It took almost three years to write as I was still in the Civil Service, and often had to write after a full day's work and supper. I would sometimes write until midnight.

It was as though *Shardik* had to be discovered. It was there to be found, or rather to be dug up, bit by bit, but only with hard work and suffering. Sometimes a week would go by without a word being

written as I became preoccupied with the considerable demands of my job. In addition, our family had been joined by a ward of court, a troubled thirteen-year-old girl whom we had to tend to as well as our own children.

The hardest part to write was the agony of Kelderek in his wanderings alone, and his intense loneliness before he met Melathys. For a man violence is easy to depict – that is no doubt why there is so much violence in popular fiction. However, lest any should suppose that I set my wits to work to invent the cruelties of Genshed, the slave trader, I say here that all lie within my knowledge and some – would they did not – within my experience. What is more difficult to convey in writing are the moral choices. Kelderek at this point didn't know what his values were or what he was trying to do. My writings express my principles, and it was anything but an easy process to put these down on paper. But at last a point came when the story was complete and only needed polishing. I knew then that writing was to become my full-time occupation, and I was able to leave the Civil Service for good.

The book that is now about to be published tells this story for the second time. I can only say that I have seen no need to alter the original story in any particular, and I hope that many readers will now be able to discover *Shardik* for themselves. To me he will always be the great anthropomorphic hero of Ortelga.

A novel must have certain characteristics. To start with it has to tell a story with a beginning, a middle and an end; it must have a hero or heroine. It must also have, possibly, a villain, but this need not be a human villain; rather a villainous situation calling for redress. *Shardik* fulfils all these requirements. To me it is my best work, because by this definition it is my best novel.

Richard Adams
June 2014

BOOK I

Ortelga

1 *The Fire*

EVEN IN THE DRY HEAT of summer's end, the great forest was never silent. Along the ground—soft, bare soil, twigs and fallen branches, decaying leaves black as ashes—there ran a continuous flow of sound. As a fire burns with a murmur of flames, with the intermittent crack of exploding knots in the logs and the falling and settling of coal, so on the forest floor the hours of dusky light consumed away with rustlings, patterings, sighing and dying of breeze, scuttlings of rodents, snakes, lizards and now and then the padding of some larger animal on the move. Above, the green dusk of creepers and branches formed another realm, inhabited by the monkeys and sloths, by hunting spiders and birds innumerable—creatures passing all their lives high above the ground. Here the noises were louder and harsher—chatterings, sudden cacklings and screams, hollow knockings, bell-like calls and the swish of disturbed leaves and branches. Higher still, in the topmost tiers, where the sunlight fell upon the outer surface of the forest as upon the upper side of an expanse of green clouds, the raucous gloom gave place to a silent brightness, the province of great butterflies flitting across the sprays in a solitude where no eye admired nor any ear caught the minute sounds made by those marvelous wings.

The creatures of the forest floor—like the blind, grotesque fish that dwell in the ocean depths—inhabited, all unaware, the lowest tier of a world extending vertically from shadowless twilight to shadeless, dazzling brilliance. Creeping or scampering upon their furtive ways, they seldom went far and saw little of sun and moon. A thicket of thorn, a maze of burrows among tree trunks, a slope littered with rocks and stones—such places were almost all that their inhabitants ever knew of the earth where they lived and died. Born there, they survived for a while, coming to know every inch within their narrow bounds. From time to time a few might stray farther—when prey or forage failed, or more rarely, through the irruption of some uncomprehended force from beyond their daily lives.

Between the trees the air seemed scarcely to move. The heat had

thickened it, so that the winged insects sat torpid on the very leaves beneath which crouched the mantis and spider, too drowsy to strike. Along the foot of a tilted red rock a porcupine came nosing and grubbing. It broke open a tiny shelter of sticks and some meagre, round-eared little creature, all eyes and bony limbs, fled across the stones. The porcupine, ignoring it, was about to devour the beetles scurrying among the sticks when suddenly it paused, raised its head and listened. As it remained motionless a brown, mongoose-like creature broke quickly through the bushes and disappeared down its hole. From farther away came a sound of scolding birds.

A moment later the porcupine too had vanished. It had felt not only the fear of other creatures nearby, but also something of the cause—a disturbance, a vibration along the forest floor. A little distance away, something unimaginably heavy was moving, and this movement was beating the ground like a drum. The vibration grew until even a human ear could have heard the irregular sounds of ponderous movement in the gloom. A stone rolled downhill through fallen leaves and was followed by a crashing of undergrowth. Then, at the top of the slope beyond the red rock, the thick mass of branches and creepers began to shake. A young tree tilted outward, snapped, splintered and pitched its length to the ground, springing up and down in diminishing bounds on its pliant branches, as though not only the sound but also the movement of the fall had set up echoes in the solitude.

In the gap, half-concealed by a confused tangle of creepers, leaves and broken flowers, appeared a figure of terror, monstrous beyond the nature even of that dark, savage place. Huge it was—gigantic—standing on its hind legs more than twice as high as a man. Its shaggy feet carried great, curved claws as thick as a man's fingers, from which were hanging fragments of torn fern and strips of bark. The mouth gaped open, a steaming pit set with white stakes. The muzzle was thrust forward, sniffing, while the bloodshot eyes peered shortsightedly over the unfamiliar ground below. For long moments it remained erect, breathing heavily and growling. Then it sank clumsily upon all fours, pushed into the undergrowth, the round claws scraping against the stones—for they could not be retracted—and smashed its way down the slope towards the red

rock. It was a bear—such a bear as is not seen in a thousand years—more powerful than a rhinoceros and heavy as eight strong men. It reached the open ground by the rock and paused, throwing its head uneasily to one side and the other. Then once more it reared up on its hind legs, sniffed the air and on the instant gave a deep, coughing bark. It was afraid.

Afraid—this breaker of trees, whose tread shook the ground—of what could it be afraid? The porcupine, cowering in its shallow burrow beneath the rock, sensed its fear with bewilderment. What had driven it wandering through strange country, through deep forest not its own? Behind it there followed a strange smell—an acrid, powdery smell, a drifting fear.

A band of yellow gibbons swung overhead, hand over hand, whooping and ululating as they disappeared down their tree-roads. Then a pair of genets came trotting down from the undergrowth, passed close to the bear without a glance and were gone as quickly as they had come. A strange, unnatural wind was moving, stirring the dense mass of foliage at the top of the slope, and out of it the birds came flying—parrots, barbets and coloured finches, brilliant blue and green honeycreepers and purple jackdaws, gentuas, and forest kingfishers—all screaming and chattering down the wind. The forest began to be filled with the sounds of hasty, pattering movement. An armadillo, apparently injured, dragged itself past; a peccary and the flash of a long, green snake. The porcupine broke from its hole, almost under the bear's feet, and vanished. Still the bear stood upright, towering over the flat rock, sniffing and hesitating. Then the wind strengthened, bringing a sound that seemed to stretch across the forest from end to end—a sound like a dry waterfall or the breathing of a giant—the sound of the smell of the fear. The bear turned and shambled away between the tree trunks.

The sound grew to a roaring and the creatures flying before it became innumerable. Many were almost spent, yet still stumbled forward with open mouths set in snarls and staring eyes that saw nothing. Some tripped and were trampled down. Drifts of green smoke appeared through gaps in the undergrowth. Soon the glaucous leaves, big as human hands, began to shine here and there with the reflection of an intermittent, leaping light, brighter than

any that had penetrated that forest twilight. The heat increased until no living thing—not a lizard, not a fly—remained in the glade about the rock. And then at last appeared a visitant yet more terrible than the giant bear. A single flame darted through the curtain of creepers, disappeared, returned and flickered in and out like a snake's tongue. A spray of dry, sharp-toothed leaves on a *zeltazla* bush caught fire and flared brightly, throwing a dismal shine on the smoke that was now filling the glade like fog. Immediately after, the whole wall of foliage at the top of the slope was ripped from the bottom as though by a knife of flame and at once the fire ran forward down the length of the tree that the bear had felled. Within moments the place, with all its features, all that had made a locality of smell, touch and sight, was destroyed forever. A dead tree, which had leaned supported by the undergrowth for half a year, fell burning across the red rock, splintering its cusps and outcrops, barring it with black like a tiger's skin. The glade burned in its turn, as miles of forest had burned to bring the fire so far. And when it had done burning, the foremost flames were already a mile downwind as the fire pursued its way.

2 *The River*

THE ENORMOUS BEAR wandered irresolutely on through the forest, now stopping to glare about at its unknown surroundings, now breaking once more into a shambling trot as it found itself still pursued by the hiss and stench of burning creepers and the approach of the fire. It was sullen with fear and bewilderment. Since nightfall of the previous day it had been driven, always reluctant yet always unable to find any escape from danger. Never before had it been forced to flight. For years past no living creature had stood against it. Now, with a kind of angry shame, it slunk on and on, stumbling over half-seen roots, tormented with thirst and desperate for a chance to turn and fight against this flickering enemy that nothing could dismay. Once it stood its ground at the far end of a patch of marsh, deceived by what seemed a faltering at last in the enemy's advance, and fled just in time to save itself from being encircled as the fire ran