

# REFLECTIONS

## REREADING SHIEL

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The dark, strange stories of the nearly forgotten twentieth-century fantasist Matthew Phipps Shiel have haunted me for many years. Some of them turn up occasionally in anthologies—“Xelucha,” “Dark Lot of One Saul,” “The House of Sounds,” and a handful of others. I have anthologized several of them myself. Shiel, who lived from 1863 to 1947 and did most of his best writing around the turn of the last century, also wrote a good many novels—*The Lord of the Sea*, *How the Old Woman Got Home*, *Dr. Krasinki's Secret*, and two dozen more. In my enthusiasm over his short stories I acquired a number of the novels, but somehow never have managed to get around to reading any of them. A few months ago, after reading Shiel's *Here Comes the Lady* (a collection of eleven superb short stories loosely strung together to masquerade as a novel) I decided it was time to look at Shiel's longer works. As it happened, the one I picked, his most famous book, was the only one I had read before—*The Purple Cloud*, which dates from 1901.

It was close to seventy years since I had read it—I first encountered it when it was reprinted in a pulp magazine, the June 1949 issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*—and after that great span of time I remembered very little of it except that it belonged to the genre of post-apocalyptic novels: the first-person narrative of the lone survivor of an environmental disaster that destroys all mammalian life on Earth. So I came to it virtually as though for the first time when I read it again last month, recalling only the merest fragments of it as I went along. I did remember, though, how it had gripped me when I read it as a barely adolescent boy seven decades ago; and it held me in just as tight a grip this time around.

*The Purple Cloud* is a classic post-apocalyptic novel—part of a genre that goes back some forty-five hundred years, to the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh and its tale of a world-destroying deluge, a story that the Bible echoes in its account of Noah. The nineteenth century gave us Jean-Baptiste de Grainville's *The Last Man* (1805); Mary Shelley's 1826 novel of the same title, which was written under the shadow of a worldwide epidemic of cholera; and the French astronomer Camille Flammarion's novel of 1893, known as *Omega* in its English translation, telling of a giant comet that threatens to destroy the world. More recently came Garrett P. Serviss's 1912 *The Second Deluge, When Worlds Collide* by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer in 1933, Robert A. Heinlein's 1952 story “The Year of the Jackpot,” Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* in 1954, and so on and so on. We never seem to tire of hearing of the world's impending doom.

*The Purple Cloud* was one of Shiel's earliest novels, and has long been regarded as one of the towering masterpieces of its kind. It is the first-person story of one Adam Jeffson, a young English doctor—yes, Jeffson himself thinks it incongruous that the last man alive should be named Adam, and says so in the book—who through a series of improbable events finds himself taking part in an expedition to the North Pole, which at that time had never been reached by explorers. Along the way, Jeffson's companions on the voyage perish in one way or another, and Jeffson alone survives to reach the Pole. While he is there a huge volcano in the Pacific erupts, releasing an immense toxic cloud that circles the globe, wiping out all animal life and leaving Jeffson, all unknown to him, as the sole remaining man, for the cloud is unable to penetrate the frigid air of the polar region.

The book is built on a series of further coincidences and wild improbabilities, but somehow one does not object, because Jeffson tells his story in such a quiet, matter-of-fact tone that one is drawn from one unlikely event to the next in willing suspension of disbelief, and Shiel's elegant, incantatory prose carries us smoothly along. This final Adam makes his way down from the Pole, observing dead polar bears scattered here and there as he goes, and miraculously locates the expedition's ship—everyone aboard is dead—and, though so far as we know his only technical training is a medical education, he succeeds in getting the ship under way by himself and in navigating out of the Arctic region to the coast of Norway, and thence onward toward England. Wherever he goes he encounters death; and gradually the terrible truth comes home to him that he is apparently the only survivor of a colossal worldwide calamity. Through my mind, constantly, ran the famous couplet from Alexander Pope's "The Dunciad":

*Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall  
And universal darkness buries all.*

Universal darkness, yes. It is a stupendous nightmare: bodies strewn everywhere, a monstrous stillness encompassing all the world. But Jeffson tells his story in such a way that shows the enormous loneliness of his condition without descending into hysteria. Calmly, capably, he comes ashore in England, makes his way by train and motorcar to London, and moves steadily through the dead city—how this young doctor is able to master the skill of operating trains is one of the book's many glossed-over unlikelihoods, and so is the convenience with which fuel and lubricants are available to him everywhere, and a perpetual supply of preserved foodstuffs that never seem to decay—and, adjusting surprisingly well to his strange fate, he traverses the great capital and continues on toward England's interior, looking without success for some other survivor of the disaster hidden in some deep mine. It is one of the artistic triumphs of the book that as Jeffson, in the third or fourth year of his wanderings, begins to slide downward into madness and megalomania, he describes the transition so subtly that we only gradually realize what is happening to him. He rigs an elaborate series of fuses by which he sets all of London on fire, without his seeing anything remarkable about that gigantic act of vandalism, and then journeys from one end of Europe to another, destroying this city and that one, and pausing in Constantinople to outfit himself in a sultan's robe, for he has come to see himself as the absolute monarch of the empty world. Then, choosing one of the Greek islands as his home, he proceeds to spend the next sixteen years designing and constructing—where did he learn the skills?—a palace of gold and crystal that for beauty puts the Taj Mahal to shame. Shiel's description of that implausible palace is one of the great purple patches of this aptly named novel: "It is . . . the sole great human work in the making of which no restraining thought of cost has played a part: one of its steps alone being of more cost than all the temples, mosques, and besestins, the palaces, pagodas, and cathedrals, built between the ages of the Nimrods and the Napoleons. . . ."

Ultimately Adam Jeffson, now quite loony but still telling his story in that same quiet, lucid prose, meets his Eve—that should come as no surprise, for novels on this theme call out for such a plot resolution—but he doesn't want to call her Eve, both because he sees the absurdity of the Adam-and-Eve cliché and for another, darker reason that gives profundity to the entire fantastic story. Eventually she takes the name of Leda. What does come as a surprise is his reaction, after twenty years of solitude, to the discovery of a beautiful young naked woman. It is, I assure you, not the obvious reaction that comes to mind. The woman—it is another of the book's vast improbabilities—was born in a sealed chamber on the very day of the catastrophe, was brought through her infancy there by her mother, and succeeded in surviving on her own in

there for many years after her mother's death until liberated by Jeffson. Whereupon she quickly learns to speak, to read, to fashion her own clothing, all this after twenty years locked away in solitary confinement underground. The strange, tortured relationship that develops between Jeffson and the young woman is utterly unexpected and completely in keeping with the dark philosophy, misanthropic rather than misogynistic, that is expressed in so many of Shiel's other works. So is the culmination of the story, abetted by improbable telephone conversations between Jeffson (in England) and Leda, in France. I do wonder how much of this part of the story the adolescent me, so lacking in adult human experience, was able to make sense of in 1949. But I was deeply moved by it this time around.

Though most of Shiel's books are available now only from print-on-demand publishers, this one has held its own all these years and is in print now as a Penguin Classics edition, from the introduction of which I learned some startling things about Shiel himself. I had thought of him as one of those late-Victorian club-going English gentlemen of independent means so often found in the ghost stories of Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen, living pleasant solitary lives in foggy London and dabbling in interesting hobbies. I could not have been more wrong. Shiel was born on the West Indian island of Montserrat; he was partly of black ancestry, a fact that he went to some trouble to conceal, and some of his grandparents may have been slaves. He came to England when he was twenty-one, patched together a considerable education largely through his own efforts, earned a scruffy living as a freelance writer, and devoted himself, among other activities, to pedophilia, siring an assortment of illegitimate children by various very young women. (After seducing the twelve-and-a-half-year-old daughter of one of his mistresses, he served a sixteen-month sentence for "carnal knowledge" of a child, another bit of his biography that he worked hard to hide.) During all this time he published a great deal of remarkable fiction, never earning enough from it to keep very far from poverty, but winning for him the friendship of such people as Oscar Wilde and Arthur Machen (who figures, in a very odd way, in *The Purple Cloud*).

A strange man. A great writer. And in *The Purple Cloud* he produced one of the classics of fantasy. What I was able to understand of it on my first reading long ago will forever be a mystery to me, but on this rereading late in life I found this dream-like portrait of a post-apocalyptic world profoundly moving indeed.