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THE LORD OF LANGUAGE

Matthew Phipps Shiel (1865–1947)

One day in the early 20th century a man turns his back on the North Pole and travels south again, well-satisfied with his conquest of the most alluring geographical spot on earth. Facing the dreary and hostile regions of the far north, Adam Jeffson leaves behind the stiffened bodies of his two comrades who were crushed to death by moving ice blocks. On his way across the barren deserts, the lone traveller is shocked by a disturbing scenery of dead walruses, polar bears and seagulls swarming on the face of the water. Even worse, his first encounter with a whaler confronts him with dozens of suffocated sailors and a purple powder spread all over the ship. When Jeffson reaches Europe in a state of despondency, he realizes that a terrible catastrophe has wiped humanity off the face of the earth leaving him as the sole survivor. Half mad, the last man arrives in England and explores a country full of decomposing bodies and ominous silence.

As newspaper reports reveal to him, a poisonous purple cloud, due to colossal eruptions in the South Sea, has circulated around the globe and eradicated humanity together with most animal species – only the poles have been spared. For 18 long years, Jeffson roams the continents and witnesses a fast changing environment with Sicily sunken into the sea, Turkey broken up by an earthquake and all cultivated spaces overgrown with unbound, primeval vegetation. Finally, he meets a Turkish princess in Constantinople who has also survived the cataclysmic disaster, and now humanity faces an uncertain future ...

Doubtlessly, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) counts as one of the masterpieces of Victorian science fiction. When the novel was published, it was soon recognized to be of the same literary qual-

ity as H. G. Wells's then fashionable and widely acclaimed 'scientific romances'. The late 19th century was indeed a favourable time for non-realistic fiction. The collapse of the traditional literary market with its policy of three-decker novels after 1890 had stimulated the emergence of a new middlebrow literature and thereby provided a seedbed for previously neglected or non-existent subgenres of speculative writing such as the future war story, lost race novels, the creation of alternative worlds or supernatural fiction. Science fiction and fantasy also became a testing ground for writers with a broad range of subjects. For example, William D. Hay drafted a euphoric technological utopia alongside travel accounts of New Zealand or books on mushrooms. Often inspired by Jules Verne's immensely popular *voyages extraordinaires*, Victorian science fiction was flourishing by the end of the 19th century, and M. P. Shiel was surely one of its most promising literary talents.

Shiel's life itself approaches epic dimensions. He was a prolific author of fantasy and science fiction, a flamboyant eccentric, a hack writer, a brilliant linguist and – yes, monarch of a Caribbean island. Shiel was born on 21 July 1865, on Montserrat in the West Indies, as the tenth child and first son to Matthew Dowdy Shiell, a ship owner and Methodist lay-preacher with Irish ancestry, and Priscilla Ann Blake, who was probably a mulatto. Allegedly, his father claimed descent from the ancient kings of Ireland. Fifteen years later, on 20 July 1880, probably the last coronation in the Western hemisphere took place when Shiell brought his son to Redonda, a small, uninhabited island near Antigua. As that rock with a few grassy patches had hitherto not been claimed by any power, he crowned his son Matthew Phipps as King Felipe I of Redonda, ruler over a few fishermen, guano collectors and masses of seagulls. A few years later the island was annexed by Britain to exploit its extensive phosphate and guano resources but Shiel remained tacitly acknowledged as the formal monarch by the British Colonial Office until his death. After receiving his education on Barbados, the king went abroad in 1885, entered King's College in London and never returned to the West Indies. He taught mathematics for a period, briefly considered becoming a doctor at Bart's Hospital and finally embarked on a career

as a professional writer. Sailing into the seas of literature, the young Shiel dropped the final 'l' from his name.

Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's tales of mystery, he published his first books with exotic detective and horror stories, *Prince Zaleski* (1895) and *Shapes in the Fire* (1896), which were reportedly appreciated by Mrs. Gladstone. In addition to his own writings, he was also employed as a hack writer and did some ghostwriting for popular science fiction authors, Louis Tracy among them. During the 1890s, Shiel flirted with the Aesthetic Movement and was influenced by fin-de-siècle currents. His exploration of mystic encounters was followed by his novel *The Yellow Danger* (1898), which drew on the literary tradition of the future war story by narrating a fictitious account of a near-future confrontation between China and the West. *The Yellow Danger* depicts the ultimate struggle over the dominion of the world. After the strategy of the Chinese leader How to involve the European nations in wars with each other has effectively weakened the West's military power, hundreds of millions of Chinese warriors head westward until finally England remains the only opponent. The hero of the novel, a stout, honest fellow called John Hardy, finally succeeds in crushing the Chinese fleet and thus crowning England the 'Empress of the World'.

A bloody spectacle of wild adventures, naval battles and biological warfare, the novel cleverly exploited the contemporary crisis between China and European nations such as Russia, France and Germany. Furthermore, it also reflected considerable anxieties of late 19th century Britain over a possible attack from a unified Chinese and Japanese army. Between 1898 and 1901, the novel went through at least ten editions. Actually, when the Boxer rebellion broke out in China in 1900, the text was again serialized as *The Yellow Peril*.

Shiel was attracted to the idea of global conflict and the clash of antagonistic forces. Apart from *The Yellow Danger*, he also crafted *Contrabands of War* (1899) and *The Yellow Wave* (1905), which were inspired by the Spanish-American and the Russo-Japanese wars. Not all his military scenarios end in orgies of bloodshed. For example, *The Yellow Wave* delineates a future where all nations and races are united under a socialist world government, a vision artic-

ulated again and again by Shiel's more famous contemporary H. G. Wells.

Critics have repeatedly pointed out that Shiel was a writer who was fascinated by sensational plots and controversial concepts and that, therefore, modern readers should be warned to take some of his ideas too seriously. Detesting conventional stories or morally immaculate ideas, he liked to provoke and confuse his readers, especially during the first years of his long literary career.

The year 1901 saw the publication of the novel which has been introduced already and still keeps the memory of Shiel alive: *The Purple Cloud*. Many scholars consider the book the best 'last man story' in science fiction literature. Beginning with Mary Shelley's now largely forgotten novel *The Last Man* (1826), the theme of mankind's eradication by plague or wars sparked a number of literary works in the late 19th century. However, apart from delineating eschatological destruction, Shiel's novel also offered polar adventure. He effectively used the public interest in the North Pole since his compelling account of its conquest mirrored the excitement of the people who greedily devoured media reports on expeditions and their heroic endeavours to push farther into the unknown. Furthermore, in *The Purple Cloud* Shiel leads the reader through a disturbing voyage into the gigantic labyrinth of London when Adam Jeffson inspects its hidden parts, steps into huge subterranean vaults, roams the mansions and gardens of the well-to-do and is stunned by the unimaginable vastness of the metropolis. By turning the noisy, bursting city of the late 19th century into a huge graveyard with grass-grown streets and millions of corpses, Shiel powerfully evokes the unalterable temporality of all existence – a distressing scenario to Victorian and modern readers alike.

Shiel's novel has even been judged to be a gloomy forecast of the first half of the 20th century. Brian Aldiss, an eminent British writer of science fiction, hinted at the predictive quality of *The Purple Cloud*, which, with its poisonous gas clouds, its ravaged, depopulated landscapes and the protagonist's craze of burning cities to ashes, secretly foreshadowed the terrible results of 20th century warfare. The motion picture *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil,* which

entered the cinemas in 1958, presented a heavily distorted version of *The Purple Cloud*.

His novel *The Lord of the Sea* was also published in 1901 and is widely regarded as Shiel's second most important work. It depicts the influx of Jews into England as a result of continental pogroms. After the hero of the novel, Richard Hogarth, had a quarrel with his new Jewish master, he escapes from prison, gains possession of a huge diamond-bearing meteorite and drafts a daring plan. He constructs gigantic floating sea-forts, seizes major trading routes and declares himself the 'Lord of the Sea'. Following initial victory and a number of battles, Hogarth is eventually defeated. It finally turns out that he is also of Jewish origin and thus Hogarth settles in Palestine where he becomes a Jewish leader. *The Lord of the Sea* has been both wildly praised and strongly condemned by readers and critics. Whereas Shiel's powerful imagination and his questioning of turning spaces into private property reveal his shrewd mind, the allegedly anti-Semitic undertones of the novel remain disturbing. Defenders of the book have hinted at the fact that the novel's admirable hero is also Jewish and that stereotypical versions of Jewish people abound in late Victorian fiction. With its portrayal of Hogarth's matchless military power, *The Lord of the Sea* has also been regarded as a prophetic work predicting the emergence of nuclear weapons.

Living in London, Paris and frequently journeying to Italy, Shiel was doubtlessly at the cutting edge of political and social currents in early 20th century Europe. His works encompass numerous concepts and ideas popular at the turn of the century, such as socialism, evolution, the Nietzschean superman, eugenics, spiritualism, the progress of science, and demonstrate that Shiel was acutely aware of the intellectual climate of his age.

As an extraordinarily talented linguist, he spoke at least seven languages. Furthermore, Shiel was acquainted with Oscar Wilde and Robert Louis Stevenson, and he also counted the writer Arthur Machen and the poet Ernest Dowson among his friends. The novels written in the first decade of the new century, *The Weird o'It* (1902) and *The Isle of Lies* (1909) among them, reveal Shiel's increasing fascination with the concept of the 'superman' that the author

borrowed from Nietzsche. Until the war broke out, he published an annual volume with regularity. During World War I Shiel was employed by the British censorship office where he examined German letters. After ten years of silence, Shiel resumed his writings and published *Children of the Wind* in 1923. His non-fantastic novel *How the Old Woman Got Home* (1927) went through several printings and established his literary reputation in the United States.

Apart from his prophetic imagination, Shiel was held in high esteem by some of his colleagues for his extravagant use of language. His poetic play with sounds in his writings, his use of compelling metaphors and floating associations display the stylistic virtuosity of a brilliant writer. In actual fact, the wild prose style in many of his books seemed far too complex and difficult to attract a mass audience. Some modern critics have even labelled Shiel a 'writer's writer' who was acclaimed by fellow artists for his technique and wordplay but failed to capture the common reader. Reading his texts is, in most cases, a pleasurable but challenging experience. Although he was not a commercially successful author, colleagues and friends showered him with praise. His early horror stories such as the much anthologized "The House of Sounds" or "Xélucha" were admired by H. P. Lovecraft. Jules Claretie stated that Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* should live as long as Homer's *Odyssey*. Rebecca West called him a writer of 'imperial imagination' and H. G. Wells, although lecturing Shiel by saying that the ordinary man of intelligence could hardly understand him, praised parts of his works as "colossal". His first biographer, the American A. Reynold Morse, even referred to Shiel as perhaps the greatest author in the English language.

Shiel himself described writing as another way of playing instruments or painting pictures, similar to mosaic-work which has to be done stone by stone. Expanding the metaphor further, he saw the English language as an inexhaustible collection of colourful mosaic-stones that can only be skilfully put together by a few outstanding literary masterminds. Needless to say that he considered himself to be one of them. Shiel criticised George Eliot for not being able to express herself in fewer words and hailed Carlyle for his masterful use of language. His contempt for reviewers and critics was notori-

ous. When he was once accused that his portrayal of the French king François I bore no resemblance to the historical figure, Shiel's dismissive answer was: "They are both dreams" – a truly postmodern reply.

His works portray extravagant adventures and astonishing events. Battles, burglary, murder, treachery, plots and counterplots, invasions, superhuman heroism, struggles for world domination, strange prophesies, spiritualism and kidnappings take the reader on a breathtaking ride. However, far from being light entertainment and sensational melodrama, many of Shiel's novels and stories are interspersed with his ideas on philosophy, religion or society's future. It is not unusual for Shiel's writing to have his characters discuss the shortcomings of Einstein's theories or compare Aristotle's mediocre mind to the genius of Niels Bohr before rushing off to a violent tour of captures and escapes through the jungle of London. He showed himself to be an ardent supporter of the land nationalization theories of Henry George (1839–1897) and branded the concept of private property of land as the ultimate reason for the evils of social inequality in various of his books. Nature cannot be owned, Shiel argued, and the absurdity of claiming possession over land is illustrated in *The Purple Cloud* where the last man on earth wanders across a depopulated countryside and scornfully laughs at the board "Trespassers will be Prosecuted". Shiel styled himself not as an entertainer producing stories for distraction or amusement but as a writer of ideas. At the heart of much of Shiel's work lies his fervent belief in science and his conviction that a new religiousness on the basis of scientific discovery had to be established for the universal benefit of mankind.

Nothing much is known about Shiel's two marriages, and his children, both legitimate and illegitimate, seem to have died before him. He was placed on the Civil List in 1934 and awarded a small pension for his literary merits. In the 1940s, the author's days of flamboyant self-fashioning and Bohemian attitudes were long gone. On the contrary, nearly forgotten by the public and ignored by literary critics, Shiel spent the final years of his life in poverty. His last work, a new translation of the *Book of Luke* from the original

Greek remained unfinished. He died in 1947 at St. Richard's Hospital, Chichester, at the age of 81. On his death, he bequeathed his 'kingship' to the British poet John Gawsworth who was crowned King Juan I. and appointed many friends as members of the 'Redondan aristocracy', amongst them Dorothy Sayers, Henry Miller, Dylan Thomas and J. B. Priestley. Later in his career, Gawsworth neglected his 'monarchial duties' over his severe alcohol addiction, and his reign ended in chaos. When the contemporary Spanish author Javier Marías bought a collection of papers by Shiel and Gawsworth at an auction at Sotheby's in 1995, he, as Marías insisted, also took possession of the title. Since then, Marías, King Xavier of Redonda, has also conferred dukedoms on authors and other public figures. Nowadays, the island of Redonda still seems to be only known to admirers of Shiel and stamp collectors.

As a prolific writer, Shiel published more than 30 books ranging from science fiction, historical novels, fantasy, adventure stories, detective fiction to five collections of short stories and one volume of verse. Unfortunately, much of Shiel's literary output is out of print, and serious efforts to revitalize interest in his works remain yet sparse. However, his finest work, *The Purple Cloud*, is still in print, and a German edition with some of his short prose was published in 2006, edited by J. Marías. And, with the ongoing debate on the restrictions of a monolithic literary canon and an increasing acceptance of fantasy and science fiction in the halls of academia, the future might rediscover an outstanding writer who was and still is adored by a small group of devoted disciples as 'The Lord of Language'.