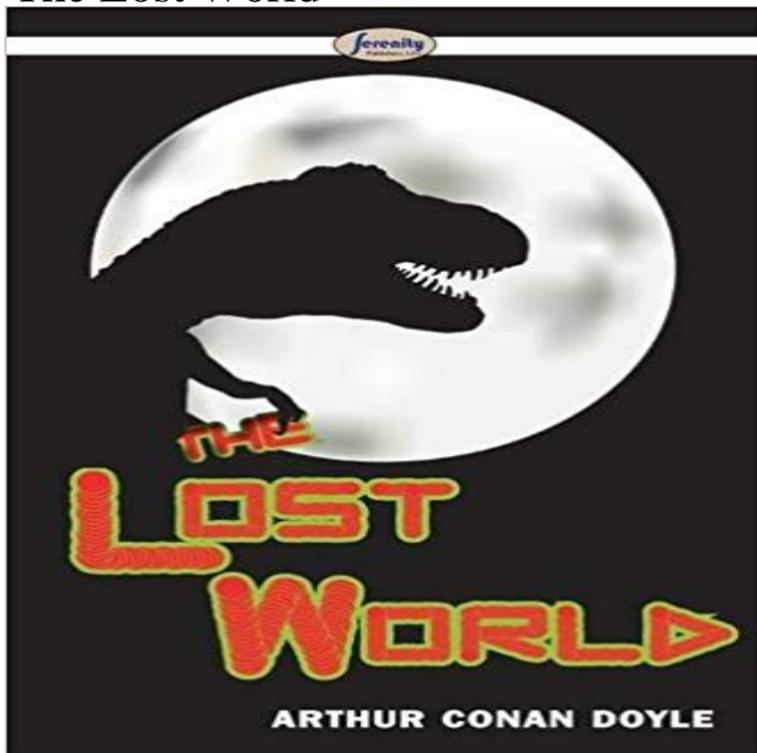


The Lost World



Mr. Hungerton, her father, really was the most tactless person upon earth, -a fluffy, feathery, untidy cockatoo of a man, perfectly good-natured, but absolutely centered upon his own silly self. If anything could have driven me from Gladys, it would have been the thought of such a father-in-law. I am convinced that he really believed in his heart that I came round to the Chestnuts three days a week for the pleasure of his company, and very especially to hear his views upon bimetallism, a subject upon which he was by way of being an authority. For an hour or more that evening I listened to his monotonous chirrup about bad money driving out good, the token value of silver, the depreciation of the rupee, and the true standards of exchange. Suppose, he cried with feeble violence, that all the debts in the world were called up simultaneously, and immediate payment insisted upon, -what under our present conditions would happen then? I gave the self-evident answer that I should be a ruined man, upon which he jumped from his chair, reproved me for my habitual levity, which made it impossible for him to discuss any reasonable subject in my presence, and bounced off out of the room to dress for a Masonic meeting. At last I was alone with Gladys, and the moment of Fate had come! All that evening I had felt like the soldier who awaits the signal which will send him on a forlorn hope; hope of victory and fear of repulse alternating in his mind. She sat with that proud, delicate profile of hers outlined against the red curtain. How beautiful she was! And yet how aloof! We had been friends, quite good friends; but never could I get beyond the same comradeship which I might have established with one of my fellow-reporters upon the Gazette, -perfectly frank, perfectly kindly, and perfectly unsexual. My instincts are all against a woman being too frank and at her ease with me. It is no

compliment to a man. Where the real sex feeling begins, timidity and distrust are its companions, heritage from old wicked days when love and violence went often hand in hand. The bent head, the averted eye, the faltering voice, the wincing figure-these, and not the unshrinking gaze and frank reply, are the true signals of passion. Even in my short life I had learned as much as that-or had inherited it in that race memory which we call instinct. Gladys was full of every womanly quality. Some judged her to be cold and hard; but such a thought was treason. That delicately bronzed skin, almost oriental in its coloring, that raven hair, the large liquid eyes, the full but exquisite lips, -all the stigmata of passion were there. But I was sadly conscious that up to now I had never found the secret of drawing it forth. However, come what might, I should have done with suspense and bring matters to a head to-night. She could but refuse me, and better be a repulsed lover than an accepted brother. So far my thoughts had carried me, and I was about to break the long and uneasy silence, when two critical, dark eyes looked round at me, and the proud head was shaken in smiling reproof. I have a presentiment that you are going to propose, Ned. I do wish you wouldnt; for things are so much nicer as they are. I drew my chair a little nearer. Now, how did you know that I was going to propose? I asked in genuine wonder. Dont women always know? Do you suppose any woman in the world was ever taken unawares? But-oh, Ned, our friendship has been so good and so pleasant! What a pity to spoil it! Dont you feel how splendid it is that a young man and a young woman should be able to talk face to face as we have talked? I dont know, Gladys. You see, I can talk face to face with-with the station-master. I cant imagine how that official came into the matter; but in he trotted, and set us both laughing. That does not satisfy me in the least. I want my arms round you, and your head on my breast, and-oh, Gladys, I want--

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