

**JAMES  
MONTAGUE  
RHODES**

THE FIVE JARS

Montague James

**The Five Jars**

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**James M.**

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# Montague Rhodes James

## The Five Jars

### I

### THE DISCOVERY

MY DEAR JANE,

You remember that you were puzzled when I told you I had heard something from the owls—or if not puzzled (for I know you have some experience of these things), you were at any rate anxious to know exactly how it happened. Perhaps the time has now come for you to be told.

It was really luck, and not any skill of mine, that put me in the way of it; luck, and also being ready to believe more than I could see. I have promised not to put down on paper the name of the wood where it happened: that can keep till we meet; but all the rest I can tell exactly as it came about.

It is a wood with a stream at the edge of it; the water is brown and clear. On the other side of it are flat meadows, and beyond these a hillside quite covered with an oak wood. The stream has alder-trees along it, and is pretty well shaded over; the sun hits it in places and makes flecks of light through the leaves.

The day I am thinking of was a very hot one in early September. I had come across the meadows with some idea of sitting by the stream and reading. The only change in my plans that I made was that instead of sitting down I lay down, and instead of reading I went to sleep.

You know how sometimes—but very, very seldom—you see something in a dream which you are quite sure is real. So it was with me this time. I did not dream any story or see any people; I only dreamt of a plant. In the dream no one told me anything about it: I just saw it growing under a tree: a small bit of the tree root came into the picture, an old gnarled root covered with moss, and with three sorts of eyes in it, round holes trimmed with moss—you know the kind. The plant was not one I should have thought much about, though certainly it was not one that I knew: it had no flowers or berries, and grew quite squat in the ground; more like a yellow aconite without the flower than anything else. It seemed to consist of a ring of six leaves spread out pretty flat with nine points on each leaf. As I say, I saw this quite clearly, and remembered it because six times nine makes fifty-four, which happens to be a number which I had a particular reason for remembering at that moment.

Well, there was no more in the dream than that: but, such as it was, it fixed itself in my mind like a photograph, and I was sure that if ever I saw that tree root and that plant, I should know them again. And, though I neither saw nor heard anything more of them than I have told you, it was borne in upon my mind that the plant *was* worth finding.

When I woke up I still lay, feeling very lazy, on the grass with my head within a foot or two of the edge of the stream and listened to its noise, until in five or six minutes—whether I began to doze off again or not does not much matter—the water-sound became like words, and said, “*Trickle-up, trickle-up,*” an immense number of times. It pleased me, for though in poetry we hear a deal about babbling brooks, and though I am particularly fond of the noise they make, I never was able before to pretend that I could hear any words. And when I did finally get up and shake myself awake I thought I would anyhow pay so much attention to what the water said as to stroll up the stream instead of down. So I did: it took me through the flat meadows, but still along the edge of the wood, and still every now and then I heard the same peculiar noise which sounded like *Trickle-up*.

Not so very long after, I came to a place where another stream ran out of the wood into the one I had been following, and just below the place where the two joined there was—not a bridge, but a pole across, and another pole to serve as a rail, by which you could cross, without trouble. I did cross,

not thinking much about it, but with some idea of looking at this new little stream, which went at a very quick pace and seemed to promise small rapids and waterfalls a little higher up. Now when I got to the edge of it, there was no mistake: it was saying “*Trickle-up*,” or even “*Track-up*,” much plainer than the old one. I stepped across it and went a few yards up the old stream. Before the new one joined it, it was saying nothing of the kind. I went back to the new one: it was talking as plain as print. Of course there were no two words about what must be done now. Here was something quite new, and even if I missed my tea, it had got to be looked into. So I went up the new stream into the wood.

Though I was well on the look-out for unusual things—in particular the plant, which I could not help thinking about—I cannot say there was anything peculiar about the stream or the plants or the insects or the trees (except the words which the water kept saying) so long as I was in the flat part of the wood. But soon I came to a steepish bank—the land began to slope up suddenly and the rapids and waterfalls of the brook were very gay and interesting. Then, besides *Track-up*, which was now its word always instead of *Trickle*, I heard every now and then *All right*, which was encouraging and exciting. Still, there was nothing out of the way to be seen, look as I might.

The climb up the slope or bank was fairly long. At the top was a kind of terrace, pretty level and with large old trees growing upon it, mainly oaks. Behind there was a further slope up and still more woodland: but that does not matter now. For the present I was at the end of my wanderings. There was no more stream, and I had found what of all natural things I think pleases me best, a real spring of water quite untouched.

Five or six oaks grew in something like a semicircle, and in the middle of the flat ground in front of them was an almost perfectly round pool, not more than four or five feet across. The bottom of it in the middle was pale sand which was continually rising up in little egg-shaped mounds and falling down again. It was the clearest and strongest spring of the kind I had ever seen, and I could have watched it for hours. I did sit down by it and watch it for some time without thinking of anything but the luck I had had to find it. But then I began to wonder if it would say anything. Naturally I could not expect it to say “*Track-up*” any more, for here I was at the end of it. So I listened with some curiosity. It hardly made so much noise as the stream: the pool was deeper. But I thought it must say something, and I put my head down as close as I could to the surface of the water. If I am not mistaken (and as things turned out I am sure I was right) the words were: *Gather gather, pick pick, or quick quick*.

Now I had not been thinking about the plant for a little time; but, as you may suppose, this brought it back to my mind and I got up and began to look about at the roots of the old oaks which grew just round the spring. No, none of the roots on this side which faced towards the water were like that which I had seen—still, the feeling was strong upon me that this, if any, was the kind of place, and even the very place, where the plant must be. So I walked to the back of the trees, being careful to go from right to left, according to the course of the sun.

Well, I was not mistaken. At the back of the middlemost oak-tree there were the roots I had dreamt of with the moss and the holes like eyes, and between them was the plant. I think the only thing which was new to me in the look of it was that it was so extraordinarily *green*. It seemed to have in it all the greenness that was possible or that would be wanted for a whole field of grass.

I had some scruples about touching it. In fact, I actually went back to the spring and listened, to make sure that it was still saying the same thing. Yes, it was: “*Gather gather, pick.*” But there was something else every now and then which I could *not* for the life of me make out at first. I lay down, put my hand round my ear and held my breath. It might have been *bark tree* or *dark tree* or *cask free*. I got impatient at last and said:

“Well, I'm very sorry, but do what I will I *cannot* make out what you are trying to say.”

Instantly a little spirt of water hit me on the ear, and I heard, as clear as possible, what it was: “*Ask tree.*”

I got up at once. “I *beg* your pardon,” I said, “of course. Thank you very much;” and the water went on saying “*Gather gather, all right, dip dip.*”

After thinking how best to greet it, I went back to the oak, stood in front of it and said (of course baring my head):

“Oak, I humbly desire your good leave to gather the green plant which grows between your roots. If an acorn falls into this my right hand” (which I held out) “I will count it that you answer yes—and give you thanks.” The acorn fell straight into the palm of my hand. I said, “I thank you, Oak: good growth to you. I will lay this your acorn in the place whence I gather the plant.”

Then very carefully I took hold of the stalk of the plant (which was very short, for, as I said, it grew rather flat on the ground) and pulled, and to my surprise it came up as easily as a mushroom. It had a clean round bulb without any rootlets and left a smooth neat hole in the ground, in which, according to promise, I laid the acorn, and covered it in with earth. I think it very likely that it will turn into a second plant.

Then I remembered the last word of the spring and went back to dip the plant in it. I had a shock when I did so, and it was lucky I was holding it firm, for when it touched the water it struggled in my hand like a fish or a newt and almost slipped out. I dipped it three times and thought I felt it growing smaller in my hand: and indeed when I looked at it I found it had shut up its leaves and curled them in quite close, so that the whole thing was little more than a bulb. As I looked at it I thought the water changed its note and said, “*That'll do, that'll do.*”

I thought it was time to thank the spring for all it had done for me, though, as you may suppose, I did not yet know in the least what was to be done with the plant, or what use it was going to be.

So I went over and said in the politest words I could how much I was obliged, and if there was anything I had or could do which would be agreeable, how glad I should be. Then I listened carefully, for it seemed by this time quite natural that I should get some sort of answer. It came. There was a sudden change in the sound, and the water said clearly and rapidly, “*Silver silver silver silver.*” I felt in my pocket. Luckily I had several shillings, sixpences and half-crowns. I thought the best way was to offer them all, so I put them in the palm of my right hand and held it under the water, open, just over the dancing sand. For a few seconds the water ran over the silver without doing anything: only the coins seemed to grow very bright and clean. Then one of the shillings was very neatly and smoothly slid off, and then another and a sixpence. I waited, but no more happened, and the water seemed to draw itself down and away from my hand, and to say “*All right.*” So I got up.

The three coins lay on the bottom of the pool looking brighter than even the newest I have ever seen, and gradually as they lay there they began to appear larger. The shillings looked like half-crowns and the sixpence like a shilling. I thought for a moment that it was because water magnifies, but I soon saw that this could not be the reason, for they went on growing larger, and of course thinner, until they finally spread into a kind of silver film all over the bottom of the pool; and as they did so the water began to take on a musical sound, much like the singing that comes when you wet your finger and draw it round the edge of a finger glass at dessert (which some people's idea of table manners allows them to do). It was a pretty sight and sound, and I listened and looked for a long time.

But all this time what had become of the plant? Why, when I gave the silver to the spring I had wrapped the plant carefully in a silk handkerchief and put it safe in my breast pocket. I took the handkerchief out now, and for a moment I was afraid the plant was gone; but it was not. It had shrunk to a very small whity-green ball. Now what was to be done with it, or rather what could it do? It was plain to me that it must have a strange and valuable property or virtue, since I had been put on its track in such a remarkable way. I thought I could not do better than ask the spring. I said, “O Spring of water, have I your good leave to ask what I should do with this precious plant to put it to the best use?” The silver lining of the spring made its words much easier to catch when it said anything—for I should tell you that for the most part now it did not speak, or not in any language that I could understand, but rather sang—and it now said, “*Swallow swallow, drink, swallow.*”

*Prompt* obedience, dear Jane, has always been my motto, as it is doubtless yours, and I at once laid myself down, drank a mouthful of water from the spring, and put the little bulb in my mouth. It instantly grew soft and slipped down my throat. How prosaic! I have no idea what it tasted like.

And again I addressed the spring: "Is there anything more for me to do?"

"*No no, no no, you'll see, you'll see—good-bye, good-bye,*" was the answer which came at once.

Accordingly I once more thanked the spring, wished it clear water, no mud, no trappings of cattle, and bade it farewell. But, I said, I should hope to visit it again.

Then I turned away and looked about me, wondering whether, now that I had swallowed the mysterious plant, I should see anything different. The only thing I noticed was due, I suppose, not to the plant, but to the spring; but it was odd enough. All the trees hard by were crowded with little birds of all kinds sitting in rows on the branches as they do on telegraph wires. I have no doubt they were listening to the silver bell in the spring. They were quite still, and did not take any notice when I began to walk away.

I said, you will remember, that the ground I was on was a sort of flat terrace at the top of a steep slope. Now at one end this terrace just went down into the wood, but at the other end there was a little mound or hillock with thick underwood behind it. I felt a curiosity, an inclination, to walk that way: I have very little doubt that the plant was at the bottom of it. As I walked I looked at the ground, and noticed a curious thing: the roots of the plants and grasses seemed to show more than I was accustomed to see them.

It was not a great way to the hillock. When I got to it I wondered why I had gone, for there was nothing odd about it. Still I stepped on to the top, and then I did see something, namely, a square flat stone just in front of my feet. I poked at it with my walking-stick, but somehow I did not seem to touch it, nor was there any scraping noise. This was funny. I tried again, and now I saw that my stick was not touching it at all; there was something in between. I felt with my hands, and they met with what seemed like grass and earth, certainly not like stone. *Then* I understood. The plant was the one which makes you able to see what is under the ground!

I need not tell you all I thought, or how surprising and delightful it was. The first thing was to get at the flat stone and find out what was underneath it.

Accordingly, what with a knife and what with my fingers, I soon had it uncovered: it was four or five inches under the surface. There were no marks on it; it measured more than a foot each way. I lifted it. It was the cover of a sort of box with bottom and sides each made of a slab just like the lid. In this box was another, made of some dark metal, which I took to be lead. I pulled it out and found that the lid of the box was all of one piece with the rest, like a sardine tin. Evidently I could not open it there and then. It was rather heavy, but I did not care, and I managed without too much inconvenience to carry it home to the place I was lodging in. Of course I put back the stone neatly and covered it up with earth and grass again.

I was late for tea, but I had found what was better than tea.

## II

# THE FIRST JAR

That night I waited till the moon was up before trying to open the box. I do not well know why, but it seemed the right thing, and I followed my instinct, feeling that it might be the plant that made me think as I did. I drew up the blind and laid the box on a table near the window, where the moon shone full on it, and waited to see if anything else occurred to me. Suddenly I heard a sort of metallic snap. I went and looked at the box. Nothing appeared on the side nearest to me—but when I turned it round I saw that all along the side which the moon had shone upon there was a line along the metal. I turned another side to the moonlight, and another snap came in two or three minutes. Of course I went on. When the moon had made a groove on all four sides, I tried the lid. It would not come off yet, so there was nothing to be done but continue the process. Three times I did it: every side I turned to the moon thrice, and when that was done the lid was free. I lifted it, and what did I see in the box? All this writing would be very little use if I did not tell you, so it must be done.

There were five compartments in the box: in each of them was a little jar or vase of glass with a round body, a narrow neck, and spreading out a little at the top. The top of each was covered with a plate of metal and on each plate was a word or two in capital letters. On the one in the middle there were the words *unge oculos*, the other jars had one word apiece, *ures*, *linguam*, *frontem*, *pectus*.

Now, years ago, I took great pains to learn the Latin language, and on many occasions I have found it *most useful*, whatever you may see to the contrary in the newspaper: but seldom or never have I found it more useful than now. I saw at once that the words meant *anoint the eyes, the ears, the tongue, the forehead, the chest*. What would be the result of my doing this, of course I knew no more than you: but I was pretty sure that it would not do to try them all at once, and another thing I felt, that it would be better to wait till next day before trying any of them. It was past midnight now, so I went to bed: but first I locked up the box in a cupboard, for I did not want anyone to see it as yet.

Next day I woke bright and early, looked at my watch, found there was no need to think about getting up yet, and, like a wise creature, went to sleep again. I mention this, not merely by way of being jocose, but because after I went to sleep I had a dream which most likely came from the plant and certainly had to do with the box.

I seemed to see a room, or to be in a room about which I only noticed that the floor was paved with mosaic in a pattern mostly red and white, that there were no pictures on the walls and no fireplace, no sashes or indeed panes in the window, and the moon was shining in very bright. There was a table and a chest. Then I saw an old man, rather badly shaved and bald, in a Roman dress, white for the most part, with a purple stripe somewhere, and sandals. He looked by no means a wicked or designing old man. I was glad of that. He opened the chest, took out my box, and placed it carefully on the table in the moonlight. Then he went to a part of the room I could not see, and I heard a sound of water being poured into a metal basin, and he came into sight again, wiping his hands on a white towel. He opened the box, took out a little silver spoon and one of the jars, took off the lid and dipped the spoon in the jar and touched first his right eye and then his left with it. Then he put the jar and the spoon back, laid the lid on the box and put it back in the chest. After that he went to the window and stood there looking out, and seemed to be very much amused with what he saw. That was all.

“Hints for me,” I remember thinking. “Perhaps it will be best not to touch the box before the moon is up to-night, and always with washed hands.” I suppose I woke up immediately, for it was all very fresh in my mind when I did.

It was something of a disappointment to have to put off my experiments till the night came round. But it was all for the best, for letters came by the post which I had to attend to: in fact, I was obliged to go to the town a little way off to see someone and to send telegrams and so on. I was a little

doubtful about the seeing things underground, but I soon found that unless I—so to say—turned on the tap, and specially wished and tried to use the power, it did not interfere with my ordinary seeing. When I did, it seemed to come forward from the back of my eyes, and was stronger than the day before. I could see rabbits in their burrows and followed the roots of one oak-tree very deep down. Once it threatened to be awkward, when I stooped to pick up a silver coin in the street, and grazed my knuckle against a paving stone, under which, of course, it was.

So much for that. By the way, I had taken a look at the box after breakfast, I found (not very much to my surprise) that the lid was as tight on it as when I found it first.

After dinner that evening I put out the light—the moon being now bright—placed the box on the table, washed my hands, opened it and, shutting my eyes, put my hand on one of the jars at random and took it out. As I had rather expected, I heard a little rattle as I did so, and feeling in the compartment, I found a little, a very little, spoon. All was well. Now to see which jar chance or the plant had chosen for my first experiment. I took it to the window: it was the one marked *aurēs*—ears—and the spoon had on the handle a letter A. I opened the jar. The lid fitted close but not over tightly. I put in the spoon as the old man had done, as near as I could remember. It brought out a very small drop of thick stuff with which I touched first my right ear and then my left. When I had done so I looked at the spoon. It was perfectly dry. I put it and the jar back, closed the box, locked it up, and, not knowing in the least what to expect, went to the open window and put my head out.

For some little time I heard nothing. That was to be expected, and I was not in the least inclined to distrust the jar. Then I was rewarded; a bat flew by, and I, who have not heard a bat even squeak these twenty years, now heard this one say in a whistling angry tone, “Would you, would you, *I’ve* got you—no, drat, drat.” It was not a very exciting remark, but it was enough to show me that a whole new world (as the books say) was open to me.

This, of course, was only a beginning. There were some plants and flowering shrubs under the window, and though I could see nothing, I began to hear voices—two voices—talking among them. They sounded young: of course they were anyhow very small, but they seemed to belong to young creatures of their kind.

“Hullo, I say, what have you got there? Do let's look; you might as well.”

Then a pause—another voice: “I believe it's a bad one.”

*Number one*: “Taste it.”

*Number two*, after another pause, with a slight sound (very diminutive) of spitting: “Heugh! bad! I should rather think it was. Maggot!”

*Number one* (after laughing rather longer than I thought kind): “Look here—don't chuck it away—let's give it to the old man. Here—shove the piece in again and rub it over—here he is!” (Very demurely): “O sir, we've got such a nice-looking—” (*I could not catch what it was*) “here; we thought you might perhaps like it, sir. Would you, sir?... Oh no, thank you, sir, we've had plenty, sir, but this was the biggest we found.”

A third voice said something; it was a deeper one and less easy to hear.

*Number two*: “Bitten, sir? Oh no, I don't think so. Do you —?” (*a name which I did not make out*).

*Number one*: “Why, how could it be?”

*Number three* again—angry, I thought.

*Number two* (rather anxiously): “But, sir, really, sir, I don't much like them.... Must I really, sir?... O *sir*, it's got a maggot in it, and I believe they're poison.” (*Smack, smack, smack, smack.*)

Two voices, very lamentable: “O *sir*, sir, please sir!”

A considerable pause, and sniffing. Then *Number two*, in a broken voice: “You silly fool, why did you go laughing like that right under his snout? You might have known he'd cog it.” (“Cog.” I had not heard the word since 1876.) “There'll be an awful row to-morrow. Look here, I shall go to bed.”

The voices died away; I thought *Number one* seemed to be apologizing.

That was all I heard *that* night. After eleven o'clock things seemed to get very still, and I began to feel just a little apprehensive lest something of a less innocent kind should come along. So I went to bed.

### III

## THE SECOND JAR

Next day, I must say, was very amusing. I spent the whole of it in the fields just strolling about and sitting down, as the fancy took me, listening to what went on in the trees and hedges. I will not write down yet the kind of thing I heard, for it was only the beginning. I had not yet found out the way of using the new power to the very best advantage. I felt the want of being able to put in a remark or a question of my own every now and then. But I was pretty sure that the jar which had *linguam* on it would manage that.

Very nearly all the talking I heard was done by the birds and animals—especially the birds; but perhaps half a dozen times, as I sat under a tree or walked along the road, I was aware of voices which sounded exactly like those of people (some grown-up and some children) passing by or coming towards me and talking to each other as they went along. Needless to say, there was nothing to be *seen*: no movement of the grass and no track on the dusty road, even when I could tell exactly where the people who owned the voices must be. It interested me more than anything else to guess what sort of creatures they were, and I determined that the next jar I tried should be the Eye one. Once, I must tell you, I ventured to say “Good afternoon” when I heard a couple of these voices within a yard of me. I think the owners must nearly have had a fit. They stopped dead: one of them gave a sort of cry of surprise, and then, I believe, they ran or flew away. I felt a little breath of wind on my face, and heard no more. It wasn't (as I know now) that they couldn't see me: but they felt much as you would if a tree or a cow were to say “Good afternoon” to you.

When I was at supper that evening, the cat came in, as she usually did, to see what was going. I had always been accustomed to think that cats talk when they mew, dogs when they bark, and so on. It is not so at all. Their talking is almost all done (except when they are in a great state of mind) in a tone which you cannot possibly hear without help. Mewing is for the most part only shouting without saying any words. Purring is, as we often say, singing.

Well, this cat was an ordinary nice creature, tabby, and in she came, and sat watching me while I had soup. To all appearance she was as innocent as a lamb—but no matter for that. What she was saying was something of this kind:

“Get on with it, do: shove it down, lap it up! Who cares about soup? Get to business. I know there's fish coming.”

When the fish actually came, there was a great deal of good feeling shown at first. “Oh, *how* much we have to be thankful for, all of us, have we not? Fish, fish: what a thought! Dear, kind, generous people all around us, all striving to supply us with what is best and pleasantest for us.”

Then there was a silence for a short time, then in a somewhat different tone I heard: “Ah dear! the longer I live, the wiser I find it is not to expect too much consideration from others! Self-love! how few, how terribly few, are really free from it! The nature that knows how to take a hint, how rare it is!”

Another short silence, and then: “There you go—another great bit. I wonder you don't choke or burst! Disgusting! A good scratch all down your horrible fat cheek is what you want, and I know some cats that would give it you. No more notion how to behave than a cockroach.”

About this time I rang the bell and the fish was taken away. The cat went too, circling round the maid with trusting and childlike glances, and I heard her saying in the former tone:

“Well, I daresay after all there are *some* kind hearts in the world, some that can feel for a poor weary creature, and know what a deal of strength and nourishment even the least bit of fish can give—” And I lost the rest.

When the time came and the box was open once more, I duly anointed my eyes and went to the window. I knew something of what I might expect to see, but I had not realized at all how much of it

there would be. In the first place there were a great many buildings, in fact a regular village, all about the little lawn on which my window looked. They were, of course, not big; perhaps three feet high was the largest size. The roofs seemed to be of tiles, the walls were white, the windows were brightly lighted, and I could see people moving about inside. But there were plenty of people outside, too—people about six inches high—walking about, standing about, talking, running, playing some game which might have been hockey. These were on levelled spaces, for the grass, neatly kept as it was, would have come half-way up their legs; and there were some driving along smooth tracks in carriages drawn by horses of the right size, which were really the most charming little animals I ever saw.

You may suppose that I should not soon have got tired of watching them and listening to the little treble buzz of voices that went on, but I was interrupted. Just in front of me I heard what I can only call a snigger. I looked down, and saw four heads supported by four pairs of elbows leaning on the window-sill and looking up at me. They belonged to four boys who were standing on the twigs of a bush that grew up against the wall, and who seemed to be very much amused. Every now and again one of them nudged another and pointed towards me; and then, for some unexplained reason, they sniggered again. I felt my ears growing warm and red.

“Well, young gentlemen,” I said, “you seem to be enjoying yourselves.” No answer. “I appear to be so fortunate as to afford you some gratification,” I went on, in my sarcastic manner. “Perhaps you would do me the honour of stepping into my poor apartment?” Again no answer, but more undisguised amusement. I was thinking out a really withering remark, when one of them said:

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