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Half a Sovereign

BOOKS BY Ian Hay

1907 PIP, A Romance of Youth

Two Hundred and Thirteenth Thousand

1908 THE RIGHT STUFF

Two Hundred and Third Thousand

1909 A MAN'S MAN

Two Hundred and Twentieth Thousand

1911 A SAFETY MATCH

Two Hundred and Twenty-First Thousand

1913 HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Two Hundred and Ninth Thousand

1914 A KNIGHT ON WHEELS

Two Hundred and Sixty-First Thousand

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF SCHOOL LIFE

Forty-Fourth Thousand

1915 THE FIRST HUNDRED THOUSAND

Three Hundred and Ninety-Sixth Thousand

1917 CARRYING ON, AFTER THE FIRST
HUNDRED THOUSAND

One Hundred and Fifty-Seventh Thousand

GETTING TOGETHER

Sixty-Second Thousand

1919 THE LAST MILLION

Thirty-Eighth Thousand

1921 THE WILLING HORSE

One Hundred and Twelfth Thousand

1923 THE LUCKY NUMBER

Sixty-Eighth Thousand

1924 THE SHALLOW END

Eleventh Thousand

1925 PAID WITH THANKS

Thirtieth Thousand

1926 HALF A SOVEREIGN

The New Book

HALF A SOVEREIGN

An Improbable Romance

BY

IAN HAY

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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Chapter I

In Pursuit of Tranquillity

I took a dislike to Jimmy Rumborough as soon as I saw his car. I suppose I take dislikes rather readily, but this time I think I had some excuse.

The car was standing beside the arrival platform in St. Pancras Station, and my smoking-compartment drew up exactly opposite. It was an outrageous-looking vehicle, in size and shape rather resembling a horizontal thermos flask on wheels, painted vermilion, except for a resplendent nickel bonnet, and wearing some of its internal organs outside, after the indelicate fashion of Prometheus. (For instance, there were four enormous asbestos-covered exhaust pipes, parallel to one another, running down the side of the bonnet and merging into one single exhaust pipe about the thickness of a fire-hose, which led away aft, discharging mephitic vapours.) Body, in the ordinary sense, the car had none; but there was a sort of cock-pit sunk into the upper circumference of the flask, in which Jimmy Rumborough was sitting, grasping a steering-wheel about the size of a circus hoop, and smoking a cigarette. Protruding from a species of horizontal port-hole further astern, I observed the head of what I took to be a small boy, wearing motor goggles, and smoking another cigarette.

At Brooklands the car, for those who like that sort of thing, would have been well enough; but as a domestic conveyance it struck me as vulgar without being funny. This impression was confirmed when Master Rumborough—either from sheer *joie de vivre* or, more probably, to mark the contempt of petrol for mere steam—greeted the arrival of the train by emitting a machine-gun-like series of explosions from his exhaust.

Since noises—especially unnecessary noises—and personal advertisement of one's own presence are the two things which I happen to loathe most in all the world, I promptly conceived a murderous hatred for this forward youth and his detestable conveyance. (Besides, the old place in my head was aching furiously that day.) Unfortunately, though I am surpassed by few as a deviser of horrible punishments, I am singularly useless at carrying these out; so I merely put my fingers in my ears, condemned Jimmy Rumborough to perpetual boiling motor-oil, and scanned the carriage-way for the sober limousine which I was expecting—such a vehicle as would beseem the establishment of a family lawyer of high and solemn standing. Little did I dream that the roaring horror before me was the vehicle in question.

It was Jimmy Rumborough himself who broke the news. That is to say, he eased up his engine, and yelled across the platform, without removing his cigarette from his mouth:

'I say, aren't you Leslie Miles?'

Stifling an insane impulse to deny my own identity, I assumed as unselfconscious an appearance as I could, and approached the thermos flask.

'Yes,' I said. 'Are you from Lady Rumborough? She said in her letter that she would send——'

'I am her ladyship's blue-eyed boy,' replied the youth. 'You got a man?'

I indicated my Scottish soldier-servant and indispensable factotum, one Rorison, who had deftly collected my belongings, and was now standing by, with his usual air of detached indifference to the English race, awaiting further orders.

'Tell him to snaffle a taxi,' commanded the blue-eyed one. 'You creep into the buzz-waggon.'

Construing this as an invitation to take my seat in the thermos flask, I painfully scaled its slippery heights and inserted myself into the cock-pit beside Master Jimmy.

'Hold tight, old scream!' he shouted over his shoulder, apparently addressing my fellow-passenger, and drew a resounding screech from that invention of the devil, the Klaxon horn. Next moment, with a jerk which nearly severed my spinal column, and another deafening arpeggio from the exhaust, we were under way—cleaving a passage into the Euston Road amidst the justifiable curses of all men, and heading at demoniac speed in the direction of Regent's Park.

All the reader knows about me so far is that my name is Leslie Miles, and that I do not like noises or publicity. The latter

characteristic has been mine from birth, thirty-four years ago: I have been shy of my fellow-creatures ever since the days when I was of an age to be forced into a clean white frock and passed round at a tea-party of young matrons. The former is of more recent acquisition, and dates from a sudden and unexpected participation on my part in a mine explosion somewhere in the neighbourhood of Messines Ridge in early 1917. When I came down again I was removed to a base hospital, where I lay for weeks, and thence to a convalescent hospital in Surrey, where I stayed perforce until the end of the war. When peace and demobilisation came, I betook myself to distant lands, in search of a commodity still far to seek in those days—tranquillity—slowly coaxing a shaken body and a troubled spirit back to normality.

I stayed abroad for nearly five years. There was no occasion to hurry home. I have no parents or near relatives. My little manor in Leicestershire is a pleasant enough spot, or would be if I had any one with whom to share it. If things had worked out differently during my Christmas leave in '16—— But that is neither here nor there. My present task is to explain how I came to be travelling in Jimmy Rumborough's nightmare tumbril to Mulberry Lodge, Regent's Park, upon an early autumn evening in the present year of grace.

My lawyers, and my father's before me, are the firm of Rumborough, Rumborough, and Rumborough, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. The head of the firm is Sir James Rumborough, Jimmy's father, and I was visiting London that evening in answer to a pressing—one might almost have called it a fussy—letter from him regarding the business of the estate, which apparently I had been neglecting most grossly since coming into my inheritance. The letter was accompanied by a peremptory—one might almost have called it a hectoring—invitation from Lady Rumborough to make Mulberry Lodge my home while in town. This I had accepted. As an alternative to the smoking-room of my club, where the members are all, to the outward eye and ear, either dead or delirious, I had come to the conclusion that even a stodgy British household in Regent's Park would be preferable. At least one would have quiet.

I confess I had overlooked Jimmy—or rather the fact that Jimmys grow up. More than ten years ago I had dined at Mulberry Lodge with my father, and still carried, in the part of one's brain where one stores distasteful recollections, the memory of a bumptious and unkempt youth of thirteen or so, who came into dessert, cracked nuts with his teeth, and interrupted the conversation. Well, here he was again, burning up the Marylebone Road for my benefit, and exchanging simple and primitive repartees with 'bus-conductors and newsvendors. Who the young gentleman protruding from the manhole behind me might be I had no idea; but I found myself fearing that Sir James had had an addition to his family.

We roared on. The Euston Road, with its singularly appropriate fringe of monumental-masonry establishments, was far astern. By some undeserved miracle we had escaped arrest for practically driving over a policeman at the Hampstead Road crossing: we had ploughed our way ruthlessly through a seething and protesting stream of homeward-bound citizens outside Great Portland Street Underground Station, and were now in Regent's Park itself, tearing round the outer circle, to a Klaxon horn *obbligato* calculated to discourage the very hyenas in the adjacent Zoo.

Suddenly a shrill voice shrieked into Jimmy's left ear, and my right:

'Steady on, Jimmy! Those are blind men! St. Dunstan's Hospital!'

Evidently and unexpectedly, our young friend behind cherished certain elementary instincts of humanity. Moreover, he appeared to exert some sort of occult influence over our lunatic charioteer, for James not only gave the road to the three sturdy, blinded war-veterans crossing in the lamp-light, but for the rest of the journey travelled at a pace slightly less offensive to common decency.

Half an hour later I sat taking tea in Lady Rumborough's drawing-room, with my heart in my boots. My dream of tranquillity was shattered to the four winds: the house was full of people, and more were coming.

Beside me upon the sofa sat my hostess—tall and deaf, with that not uncommon accompaniment of deafness, a voice to wake the dead. Opposite to us, upon the other side of the fireplace, sat a large, flabby, and extremely verbose person, with three chins and grey side-whiskers, under whose discourse flinched a sandy-haired, middle-aged man who could have done very well with one of the orator's chins.

'Very interesting!' the fat man was saying: 'most illuminating! And you actually participate in these exercises yourself?'

'Yes,' replied the chinless one. 'Of course, there is a graduated series, aiming at the combination of hygiene and—er—physical grace. In our little society——'

'Ah!' remarked the fat man, who apparently was not so good a listener as talker; 'I wonder if my constituents would be interested——' He fell into an obvious electioneering muse.

One of my troubles in life is that whenever I ought to be talking to some one I always find myself listening to some one else. I was just becoming faintly interested in the conversation opposite, when——

'We are expecting quite a number of old friends here this evening,' boomed Lady Rumborough in my ear. 'Some are going to sleep here; the rest will only dine, thank goodness! Do you play bridge?'

'A very little,' I replied evasively. As a matter of fact, I am a keen player; but mixed bridge of the dinner-party variety, with its mangled opportunities and subsequent recriminations, causes me acute agony.

'That's all right,' said Lady Rumborough. 'I play a great deal. I'll take you as a partner, and teach you all the new conventions—from America, and those places, you know. But they're really coming to-night to talk about the yachting trip.'

'The yachting trip?'

'Yes. James has always had a fancy for the sea, and this year he has got his wish. We're off in less than a fortnight. It's a big boat—thirty thousand tons—or else three thousand. Anyway, it weighs thousands of something: James will tell you.'

'Where are you thinking of going to?'

'The Mediterranean.'

'Is it your own yacht?' I asked, dimly wondering at the turn of fortune's wheel which had enabled Sir James to afford such luxuries.

'No; it was lent us by friends. We're all going.'

'All of you here, you mean.' My eyes slid round the room. I was uncertain whether to pity the others or congratulate myself.

'More than that.'

'That will be delightful,' I observed untruthfully.

'Yes, of course it will. You're coming too. We've got Gwen Gowlland for you.'

My heart stood suddenly still.

'Miss Gowlland?' I asked faintly.

'Yes—Gwen. You needn't be mysterious with us, you know,' pursued Lady Rumborough in a steady roar: 'we know all about it. She'll be at dinner to-night. You've been very slow over her, haven't you? Now come and meet Mrs. Dunham-Massey. You needn't worry about the Dunham, though.'

Mrs. Dunham-Massey proved to be the very antithesis of Lady Rumborough. Her voice was low, gentle, and sweet, and she made room for me beside her with a helpful smile.

'I know how awful it is for a man's man like you,' she said, 'to be led about on a chain at a strange tea-party. Come and sit here, and I'll keep the crowd away. First of all, though, I must warn you that I have a peculiarity: I simply *have* to speak the truth about things—and people! If I don't like them, or trust them—well, I can't pretend that I do. It's the way I'm built. Of course, it requires courage at times; but to speak the truth *is* the only thing in life, isn't it?'

With this unexceptionable exordium, Mrs. Dunham-Massey proceeded forthwith to exercise her hobby.

'That is Mr. Jubberley,' she said, pointing to the man with the three chins. 'He is a Member of Parliament—a great worker in the cause of a better understanding between the nations. He is always asking Czecho-Slovakians to lunch—but he stands too close to you when he talks. The sandy man beside him is Mr. Podmore. He is rather a dear; so utterly insignificant, yet so enthusiastic over the mild little things that thrill him for the moment—morris-dancing, and folk-songs, and all those odd amusements that they have in Garden Suburbs.' Her gentle gaze continued to travel round the room. 'There is our host, just coming in: he's a distant cousin of mine. He's a terribly kind little person, but finicky beyond all words. When you go up to your bedroom you'll find the place simply littered with time-tables and notices—about the hours of meals, and the time to post letters, and remembering to turn off the electric light, and not to tip the servants or leave things behind you when you go away, and all that kind of tiresomeness. He writes them all himself.'

Her eye roved on, and fell upon Lady Rumborough. 'I love his wife: she's one of my oldest and dearest. She has no manners, and cheats at bridge; but after all, it's in spite of their failings that one loves one's friends, doesn't one? Now, never mind the others: tell me about yourself.' I found a wistful but business-like gaze turned upon me. 'It's so interesting, forming new friendships, don't you think? I may say that all I know about you so far is that you were blown up in the war, and got the O.B.E. That is correct, isn't it?'

'It's near enough,' I said. My decoration is not the O.B.E., but it seemed presumptuous to argue with this fountain of knowledge.

'I want to ask you about Gwen Gowlland,' continued Mrs. Massey purringly. 'I always think it's so unsatisfactory not to know the exact facts about people's really deep attachments, don't you? It leads to so much awkwardness and misunderstanding. Now, I should like you and me—I mean I: my grammar's awful—to be perfectly frank about everything. Are we to congratulate you?'

'No,' I said.

'You say that in a curiously constrained sort of way. Surely there's no—trouble—between you and Gwen?' She spoke hopefully.

'Not that I know of,' I replied, writhing.

'I had an idea,' she rippled on, 'that it was actually announced in Simla, last cold weather; but of course I may be wrong.'

'There was nothing to announce,' I snapped. Mrs. Massey held up a gentle, reproachful finger, and smiled deprecatingly.

'I see you are shocked at my frankness,' she said: 'some people are. But I hope you're not going to spoil our friendship by turning out like them. I believe I can read you: I'm rather psychic, you know. You are not quite certain of your feelings towards Gwen. Why not tell me about it? Who knows, perhaps I can advise you? The lion and the mouse, you know. When did you first meet?'

There was a certain awful fascination about the woman. Instead of telling her bluntly to go to the devil, I merely quailed beneath her mild inquiring eye, and said sulkily:

'During the war—near the beginning—before we went out. I was billeted at her father's place——'

'At Bagworthy—yes? And you and Gwen were thrown together a great deal?'

'Not much. Company Training——'

'But you used to meet at dinner in the evening?'

'Yes—sometimes. Of course, there were night operations——'

'By the way, is it true that Lord Bagworthy used to hang tickets on the decanters when the officers were at dinner, with "Port, sixpence a glass" on them?'

It was true enough—except that the ticket had said ninepence; but my spirit revolted against adding to this female scavenger's hoard.

'I don't drink port,' I said doggedly.

'I suppose that means that it *is* true,' she replied. 'You might have told me: it would have gone no further. However, you will soon get to know me better,' she added charitably. 'Poor Lord Bagworthy always was a miser. I stayed there once, and a powdered footman actually tapped on my bedroom door in the morning to ask whether I would require an egg at breakfast or not! Now, tell me when you met Gwen again.'

'At Bagworthy, more than two years later. The place was a convalescent hospital by that time; and oddly enough——'

'What a romantic coincidence! Fate seemed to be throwing you together, didn't it? And after the war you went out to India in the same ship with her?'

'I didn't know Miss Gowlland was on board,' I protested. Mrs. Massey merely shook her head.

'I like a lover,' she remarked, 'who looks the whole world in the face and *boasts* of his love! Anyhow, I suppose you will be making some sort of announcement soon, now that you are home again. Talk to Gwen at dinner to-night. It would be so thrilling if——'

Why did everybody conspire to take Gwen and me for granted? Desperately I changed the subject.

'What about this yachting expedition?' I asked. 'I didn't know Sir James had become a millionaire.'

Mrs. Massey gazed at me with a mixture of surprise and gratification. Here was a really savoury bakemeat of truth to impart.

'Don't tell me you don't know where the yacht came from!' she said eagerly. 'I haven't the foggiest idea.'

'It's the *Virginia*—Lord Bagworthy's own yacht—Gwen's yacht—your yacht!'

I disregarded this last innuendo, and asked:

'But how on earth did Rumborough get hold of it?'

Mrs. Dunham-Massey was all agog at once.

'Lord Bagworthy got into some mess,' she said. 'Blackmail, I was told. I'm afraid the poor man had been dreadfully indiscreet, and the people—or person—had to be bought off. James Rumborough arranged matters for him—most cleverly and tactfully, I believe: raised the money by a mortgage, or something, kept the story out of the papers, and was perfectly wonderful about everything. Of course, Lord Bagworthy was most grateful; but he can't possibly afford to keep up a yacht for several years now, so he has handed it over to James for the season. I'm told that it's his way of paying James's bill, which is enormous. That is why Gwen has been included in the party. She was stuck on the yacht, like the stamp on a receipt.'

'Are you going?' I inquired.

'Oh yes. We're all going: we sail in about a fortnight. Lisbon—Algiers—all those interesting places in the Mediterranean. It ought to be perfectly divine. Of course, dear Charlotte Rumborough is treating the whole thing as a sort of deep-sea bridge-party. So like her, isn't it? So sweet! She made up her own four before she thought of anything else; that was why I was invited. The other two are Mr. Jubberley and George Bumpstead.'

'Who is George Bumpstead?' I asked.

'The explorer and big-game hunter. A delightfully breezy person: he'll make you roar with laughter. Full of jokes and epigrams, and such a mimic! You ought to see him imitate Biff Burbidge.'

'Who is Biff Burbidge?'

'Oh, what a stranger you are to London! Biff Burbidge is a music-hall comedian, or a revue actor, or something of that kind. He stands on the stage in a funny attitude, and reels off long stories about his wife's pet parrot: they make people simply shriek with laughter. George can do it almost as well: at least, he thinks he can, and that makes him so happy, poor dear. He's horribly vulgar, of course. By the way, there's something I ought to tell you. I hate doing it, but—one must live up to one's creed, mustn't one? George is getting far too fond of Gwen. Watch them to-night.'

'Oh, he's coming to-night, is he?'

'Yes: all the yacht party are to be here, except Arabella Hockley. She doesn't get away from school until the end of next week. Rather a terrible child—a female hobbledehoy—not too clean, and given to impish practical jokes. One has to be firm with her.'

Dimly in my mind a composite spectacle began to materialise—the spectacle of the yacht party enjoying itself in the Mediterranean. I could see them all—Sir James attired as a commodore, putting up notices, and keeping a log, and piping all hands on deck upon the slightest pretext; his wife producing four aces out of her sleeve and shouting down adverse comment thereon; Jimmy Rumborough taking the helm and blowing the ship's siren at passing craft; Gwen, my clinging, helpless, soulful affinity, dumbly reproaching me for my deficiencies as a cavalier, and at the same time angling successfully for the admiration of every eligible male on the ship; Arabella Hockley, the female hobbledehoy given to practical jokes, making apple-pie beds and hitting people over the head with a deck-mop; Mr. Jubberley delivering a political speech upon international amity upon the bridge, with Mr. Podmore teaching the crew morris-dances upon the fo'c'sle, what time George Bumpstead gave an imitation of Biff Burbidge upon the quarter-deck. And, of course, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, with her low, rippling voice and apologetic smile, steeling herself to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about everybody on board whom she happened to dislike. What a nightmare vessel! What a phantom ship! Never in this world would I consent to set foot upon its deck. I am a broken reed at repelling unwelcome invitations, but this time I would show myself a pillar of brass.

My ruminations were interrupted by an outbreak of barbaric music, emanating from a particularly raucous specimen of that accursed instrument the gramophone. Like many London drawing-rooms, Lady Rumborough's possessed a sort of second half, or annexe, visible through an arched opening. It was here that the gramophone had sprung to life, grinding forth one of those Ethiopian funeral dirges to which civilised society prefers to dance to-day.

Into our field of vision from round the corner came a dancing couple. The taller was my friend Jimmy Rumborough: the other was a girl—almost a child—slim, dainty, and piquant, with her shapely head closely shingled and two attractive black whiskers brought modishly forward almost into her eyes. They stood together in the middle of the floor, almost stationary except for an occasional epileptic shudder, while Master Rumborough uplifted his voice and howled like a dog, to the effect that he was suffering from Prohibition Blues.

Suddenly I recognised his partner—her pert little nose, the set of her head, and her wide smile. She was not a small boy after all—merely a more than usually attractive specimen of that curious compound of physical allure and sex-alooftness, the young girl of to-day. Well, she would have made a very good boy; an ordinary Eton suit would have fitted her to perfection.

I turned, automatically, to hear the truth about this young person from Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and was aware of Lady Rumborough bearing down upon me again.

'Come and make yachting plans!' she boomed.

Hardening my heart for the coming struggle, I followed her back to the fire. Here I encountered my host, a twittering little man of about fifty-five. His manner was alert and precise: from my earliest youth I could never recall having known him untidy, or unpunctual, or anything but maddeningly meticulous about everything. My old father once said to me: 'James Rumborough knows his job all right, but how he finds time to do it beats me: he's so busy organising his own futile existence. You know that absurd page which one finds in pocket diaries and engagement-books, for entering the number of your watch and your size in collars? Well, Rumborough fills that page right up: I've seen him do it! The fellow's existence is one long, superfluous, footling card-index!'

I thought of the old man as I crossed the room, for Sir James was sitting with a little pocket diary in his hand, issuing embarkation orders therefrom.

'Come and sit down, Miles,' he said, shaking hands. 'Take a cigarette. These are Turkish, those are Virginian. The matches are on the small shelf to the right of the mantelpiece: you should find an ash-tray on the left-hand corner of the lacquer cabinet. I want you to join our Mediterranean party. The yacht sails from Southampton on Saturday the twenty-seventh, at noon precisely. We go down by the nine-eighteen from Waterloo. A seat will be reserved for you. Your heavy luggage will be limited to one cabin trunk, not more than fourteen inches high, to fit underneath your berth.' He turned over a page in his diary. 'As for the itinerary—we leave Gibraltar on the fourth, at seven p.m. We touch at Barcelona, for a ramble ashore of two hours' duration——'

Life on this yacht was obviously going to be several degrees worse than six weeks in the Second Division. The invitation must be refused before I found myself condoning it by any appearance of interest or sympathy. How was I to set about it? The honest course was to say frankly that I loathed yachting, abhorred the Mediterranean, and valued my personal liberty above rubies. The pillar of brass, in fact.

Alas! All I could bring myself to say was:

'By the worst luck in the world, I can't possibly leave England on the twenty-seventh. I have a most important engagement on the third of the following month. It's terribly bad luck, but there it is.' The broken reed again!

Sir James looked up, quite ruffled.

'But, my dear fellow' he said, 'all the arrangements are made. You can't possibly let us down like this. We're depending on you, with your knowledge of travel and foreign languages—especially upon our shore excursions. I may say I am organising some trips into the interior——'

So that was why I had been invited. Well, they could get a courier, and pay him.

'I'm most awfully sorry,' I said lamely. (Confound it, why couldn't I tell the little brute to go and boil his yacht, and himself inside it?)

'What is your engagement on the third?' inquired Lady Rumborough in a voice of thunder.

This was a facer: too late I cursed myself for not having thought out a reasoned defence scheme.

'It's a'—I checked myself just in time: funerals are not usually arranged a fortnight ahead—'wedding!'

It was a tactical error of the first magnitude, because it committed me to a position from which there was no escape.

'Whose wedding?' inquired the same inexorable voice.

'Nobody that you know,' I said. 'Quite a humble affair. If it was an ordinary social function one could dodge it in the ordinary way; but in this case I should cause very deep—you know!'

'Who is it?'

'Rorison,' I replied desperately. 'My man, you know. One can't offend people like that.'

'Rorison shall come with you on the yacht,' announced Sir James, 'instead! That will compensate him more than amply for the postponement of his happiness. Only six weeks, in any case. He can make himself useful on board too: we require an extra steward.'

With the energy of despair I doubled on my tracks.

'I'm afraid that's not my only engagement,' I said: 'there's another.' There was an expectant silence, while I dredged my imagination for Rumborough-proof excuses. It was useless to plead estate business or legal engagements of any kind: Sir James held me in the hollow of his hand there. What else was there? Sport? A shooting party? That would be howled down in a moment. A family reunion? I had no relatives, and the Rumboroughs knew it. Where could I take sanctuary? What spot on all the globe was safe from this omniscient little rabbit, who carried the size of his neck about with him in a memorandum-book? Ah!—I had it!

'What is the engagement?' asked Sir James.

'Well,' I began awkwardly, 'it's not a matter I am at liberty to go into very deeply; but there's a meeting I must attend at the War Office. One of those rather confidential committees, you know.'

'What is he saying?' inquired Lady Rumborough, with whom, I was destined to discover, it was a favourite device, when momentarily baffled, to feign extreme deafness.

'I understood our friend to say that he was compelled to attend a confidential meeting at the War Office,' announced a heavy voice, and I realised that Mr. Oswald Jubberley, M.P., had joined in our deliberations.

'Yes,' I said boldly. 'It is held'—here I had another and, as it proved, a fatal inspiration—'upon the first of every month.'

Sir James suddenly rose from his seat and disappeared from the room.

'I have some small influence,' announced Mr. Jubberley, sitting heavily upon the sofa beside me and laying a pobby hand upon my knee, 'with the Secretary of State for War. I venture to believe that a word from me, tactfully delivered, would be sufficient to secure for our young friend leave of absence for one month, or even two.'

'Please don't do anything of the kind,' I said anxiously. 'The existence of the committee is not officially recognised: it would embarrass the Secretary of State very seriously if any open mention were made.'

'In that case, Colonel Miles,' replied Jubberley, 'may I, in all friendliness, suggest that your revelation of its existence was—shall we say—a trifle indiscreet? But of course, in the circumstances, my offer of mediation is withdrawn.'

He blew over me, like a disappointed grampus, and removed his hand from my knee. I breathed again. I had offended Jubberley, but I had spiked his guns.

The door opened and Sir James reappeared. In his hand he carried a copy of the current edition of that usually romantic but in this case diabolical publication, the *Continental Bradshaw*.

'I have surmounted the difficulty,' he announced briskly. 'Colonel Miles, you will leave London on the morning of the second, and travel overland to Marseilles. There the yacht will meet you, upon the evening of the third. We touch there in any case, for coal, supplies, and mail. The boat-train leaves Victoria at nine a.m. It is advisable to reserve your seat in advance.' He removed his pince-nez and closed the railway guide with a satisfied snap. 'That is settled, then. Now, good people, it is time we all went up to dress for dinner. Eight o'clock precisely, please!'

I sat on in the deserted drawing-room, oblivious to the flight of time, and to the fact that I was violating the most sacred laws of Mulberry Lodge. I had just decided that my only course was to go out to-morrow morning and throw a brick into a plate-glass window and really get six weeks in the Second Division, when the door opened and a slim, shimmering vision, in an abbreviated evening frock, appeared before me. It was my boyish little fellow-passenger of the afternoon.

'Hallo!' she said. 'Aren't you going to dress?'

I rose.

'I'm just going up,' I said.

'You'll get a fearful ticking-off if you're late,' she warned me, 'from Mutt and Jeff, or both.'

'Whom did you say?'

'Mutt and Jeff—our noble host and hostess. You know the pictures of Mutt and Jeff, don't you—the tall scraggy man and the little fat one?'

'Yes, rather.'

'Well, of course Lady Rumborough isn't a man, but she looks very like Mutt when she's walking out with Sir James. And he simply is Jeff. It was Jimmy who christened them.'

'Most unfilial!' I observed severely. 'By the way, forgive my asking, but what is your name? I—I wasn't introduced this afternoon.'

'No, of course you weren't. Jimmy has filthy manners,' replied the young lady, helping herself to a cigarette. 'Who did you think I was?' She favoured me with a smile. It was the smile of an expert flirt; but there was no intention behind it—nothing but the natural camaraderie of a friendly spirit. I chuckled.

'I took you for a boy,' I said. 'All I saw was your head sticking out of that sort of manhole, and your short hair, and——'

'It's all right: don't apologise. To be perfectly frank, I'm a girl. My name's Lila Chatterton.'

'Chatterton?' I said.

'Yes. Why?'

'I used to know a girl of your name, some time ago—Barbara Chatterton.'

Lila's face lit up.

'Babs? You know my darling Babs? She's my big sister!'

'No!'

'Yes!'

In our excitement, I found, we were holding one another's hands.

'Now I come to look at you,' I said—all my shyness seemed to have been thawed out of me by this agreeable discovery—'you're like her. She is taller, and fair——'

'Besides being the loveliest thing that ever lived,' said Lila simply.

'She married, didn't she?' I asked awkwardly.

Lila made a face.

'She did; but Heaven has been kind. Oh, my dear, what a horror that man was! But he's been an angel for two years now—at least, we hope he is an angel—so all is well. Babs is at Algiers: she's going to join us there. Won't it be lovely? You're coming, of course?'

'Rather!' I said, almost enthusiastically.

Chapter II

Noah's Ark

I lay on my back on the top of the chart-house of the *Virginia*—the yacht which weighed thousands of something—extracting what comfort I could from the pleasant sun and a bubbling briar pipe, and indulging in a little morning hate.

I had not been long in discovering this refuge. It was approached by a difficult little iron ladder, and was employed mainly as a depository for spare spars and coils of rope. Consequently it had been overlooked by my fellow-passengers as a place of resort—a fact which rendered it invaluable to me: this was the second time I had taken sanctuary there in twenty-four hours.

I had reached Marseilles the previous morning, having fortified myself for the forthcoming ordeal by a quiet week-end in Paris. The yacht was waiting for me, as inexorable as Fate, and as I dragged my reluctant feet up the gangway I was received by both Mutt and Jeff in person. Mutt, whom I had interrupted in a game of bridge, contented herself with shaking hands, and then hurried off to put her oar in at the subsequent recriminations; but her consort was kind enough to show me my cabin and rehearse me in the rules of the ship.

The cabin was a pleasant enough place, with a port-hole opening on to the main deck, and a neat brass bedstead instead of a berth: also that indispensability of the bad sleeper, an electric reading-lamp over the pillow.

Sir James got to work at once.

'We breakfast at eight bells,' he announced. 'Luncheon is at three bells. Tea is served on deck during the first dog-watch. We dine at eight bells again. Do not attempt to open your port-hole: when the state of the weather permits, your steward will do so for you. In the rack above your head you will observe a life-jacket: kindly try it on at your earliest convenience. There will be an emergency boat-drill during the course of the day: I have purposely postponed it until your arrival. The exact time of the alarm is, of course, an official secret, but its occurrence will be notified by three short blasts on the yacht's siren, when all hands will proceed at once to the upper deck and take station. Ship's discipline must, of course, be maintained, even upon pleasure-excursions. You are in Boat Number Two: your fellow-passengers will be Mrs. Dunham-Massey, Mr. Jubberley, Mr. Bumpstead, Miss Hockley, and—er—Miss Gowlland. The chief engineer will command, and eight members of the yacht's crew will also be in the boat—which I need hardly say has been already provisioned and watered. You will find a *résumé* of these instructions on the printed card hanging on that wa—bulkhead. Have you breakfasted?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Very good. If you should require anything before luncheon, do not hesitate to ring for your steward. There shall be no stint of rations and grog under my roo—fo'c'sle.' And with this brief lapse into jocularly, my little host left me, already determined in my own mind that if we were fortunate enough to be wrecked I would go down with the ship rather than commit myself for an indefinite period to a small boat containing Jubberley, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and Gwen.

It was at boat-drill that I first encountered my shipmates. The alarm sounded barely an hour after our departure from Marseilles; and summoning to my aid my entire stock of respect for good order and discipline, I arrayed myself in a singularly unbecoming life-jacket and went on deck. Needless to say, I was the first arrival.

I found Boat Number Two, a steam launch, swung outboard on its davits, and waited forlornly. Presently I was joined by the chief engineer, a sardonic Scot, who evidently had his own opinion of emergency boat-drills. He accepted a cigarette, and we conversed laboriously.

Next came various members of the crew, looking sheepish and resentful after the manner of seafaring men when called upon to perform what they regard as unnecessary antics in company with passengers. They were followed by Rorison, wearing his life-jacket wrong way round, and depressed to the roots of his being. (This was not because of the postponement of his nuptials, which were a pure figment of my own hard-pressed imagination; but because, like his master, he disliked making a public exhibition of himself.) The only person who seemed to be extracting any enjoyment from the proceedings was the cook's mate, an enormous negro, with rolling eyes and flashing teeth, who arrived straight

from his labours in the galley, armed with a knife about two feet in length. I remember hoping that he would bring it along if we were actually wrecked: it might be useful with Jubberley.

Finally my fellow-passengers began to put in an appearance. I had not encountered any of them since the dinner at Mulberry Lodge, and to my jaundiced eye they appeared even more repulsive in their present setting than in Regent's Park.

Jubberley wore white duck trousers, a red cummerbund, an alpaca jacket, and a panama hat. Upon Margate sands, or at the annual picnic of his parliamentary constituents, he would have made a majestic and appropriate figure; but against a Mediterranean background he was merely a polychromatic and gelatinous outrage. Mrs. Dunham-Massey was spruce enough; she was too shrewd a woman to be caught napping where her personal appearance was concerned. I knew that if the alarm had sounded at three o'clock in the morning she would have answered the call with her nose perfectly powdered and her mouth on quite straight.

Gwen, whose appearance was more than proof against picturesque disorder, arrived with her hair down, wearing a fetching kimono and little pink bedroom slippers. Needless to say, she was in a becoming state of distress. The siren had frightened her to death, and no one had warned her that it was only a joke, and no one had helped her on with her life-jacket, and she knew she looked horrible.

'You mean to be kind, Leslie,' she wailed, as I shook hands and began to fumble with the strings of her jacket; 'but now that you have come on board, at last, you might have—you are a tiny bit thoughtless, dear, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry,' I mumbled.

'These sudden shocks don't upset big strong Leslie; but poor little Gwen's different. She gets *terrified*! You might have come and knocked at Gwen's cabin door!'

'I've only been on board an hour,' I said, 'and didn't even know if you were up or not.'

'I wasn't. That's why I'm dressed like this.' She looked up, meltingly. 'Does Leslie like Gwen's kimono?'

When Gwen gets down to baby-talk—which is her way of indicating extreme favour—I turn sick and faint. She does it for the same reason that a kitten throws a live mouse into the air two or three times before swallowing it—because she knows there is no need to hurry over such absolutely helpless provender as this. She had started in on baby-talk half-way through my so-called convalescent days at Bagworthy, and she had talked it whenever she felt like talking it, ever since. She had even done it in the presence of her father, and I still remember that long-suffering nobleman's start of incredulous joy and relief when he realised that here, upon the horizon, was the glimmering dawn of a hope that Gwen was at last going to permit some one to take her off his hands. As for me, it was only by calling up my entire stock of mental and moral fortitude that I had left Bagworthy still sane and free.

I may as well be quite frank about my relations with Gwen. A man has to admit certain things about himself sometimes, even to himself. Sentimental attachments are formed with fatal ease in days of national stress, especially when the pursuer is disguised as an angel and the pursued is an interesting invalid. Gwen certainly looked lovely in her hospital uniform, and I suppose I looked lovely in my jaeger dressing-gown; because there is no denying that for a short time it was what is technically known as 'a case' between us. It was a very mild case. I never even kissed her: disillusion came too swiftly.

Gwen proved to be a clinger of the most wistful and exhausting type—and not a particularly fastidious clinger at that. She angled impartially for the admiration of every man in sight, and, to be just, she usually got it. And she seldom let any of her victims go. An old Irishwoman of my acquaintance once summed up a particularly artful friend and neighbour of hers for my benefit by saying: 'That one would mind a flock of mice at a cross-roads!' She must have been thinking of some one just like Gwen.

Unfortunately, for some reason which I could never understand, Gwen elected to install me as Principal Mouse. Other members of the flock were permitted, in fullness of time, to escape by devious ways, their places being taken by younger and less experienced victims; but I went on for ever. I do not believe that Gwen cared for me one particle after the first fortnight—in fact, I do not believe she ever cared for any one in the world except Gwen Gowlland—but I seem to have grown into a habit. At any rate, without denying herself anything at all in the way of auxiliary attachments, she had pursued me from that day to this with gentle, reproachful, remorseless fidelity until the world in general had taken an understanding between us for granted.

I had just succeeded in adjusting my appointed soul-mate's life-jacket, when our numbers were augmented by the arrival of an odd-looking being, whom I took to be Miss Arabella Hockley, the female hobbledehoy. I must say that Mrs. Dunham-Massey's candid description seemed to fit her well. She was a stocky, shambling creature of fifteen or sixteen. She wore horn-rimmed spectacles and a pigtail, the latter fastened apparently with a piece of fishing-line. She suffered from the further disability of beetling brows and a shiny nose. She was attired in a ragged old Aquascutum and rubber boots, and was eating an orange—a rather pulpy orange—and trailing her life-jacket behind her by one of the strings. She was suffering from a heavy cold in the head, an affliction which I afterwards discovered to be more or less chronic.

'Hallo!' she remarked to Gwen and myself. 'Spoodig?'

'Arabella darling, don't be naughty!' protested Gwen, in becoming confusion. 'Here's Sir James!'

There was another group lined up on the deck, not far from ours. It consisted of the remainder of the yacht party, headed by Lady Rumborough, and a further contingent of the crew. Sir James himself, in white ducks and a yachting cap, accompanied by the captain, a large man with an obvious sense of humour, had just finished inspecting them.

'You may dismiss,' I heard him say. 'Life-jackets will be replaced exactly where found, forthwith.'

Instead of obeying these perfectly explicit orders, several of Number One Boat party, headed by Lila and Jimmy, followed the inspector and escort along the deck in our direction.

Sir James took his stand facing us, and surveyed us longingly. It was quite obvious that he would have liked to call us to attention in military style, but possibly he was deterred by the somewhat ribald attitude of at least two of the spectators. He contented himself by barking, 'Silence, please!' He then produced a memorandum-book from his pocket, and proceeded to call out our names.

'The Honourable Gwendolyn Gowlland?'

'Yes, Sir James; do you want me?' inquired the lady indicated, bestowing upon her host the unused half of a smile which she had already employed, without success, to demoralise the ship's boy, who formed part of the gallery.

Sir James frowned. Evidently this was not the right answer.

'Mrs. Dunham-Massey?' he called.

'Here I am, James. It's a lovely morning, isn't it?'

Sir James's frown deepened. Wrong again.

'Miss Arabella Hockley?'

'Hallo!' responded Arabella affably, her utterance obscured by orange-pulp. With a little sigh Sir James turned over a page and tried a fresh sex.

'Mr. Oswald Jubberley?'

'Present!' This was evidently the right word, for Sir James proceeded briskly:

'Colonel Leslie Miles?'

'In attendance!' At the last moment my tongue had flatly declined to follow a lead set by Jubberley. Jimmy and Lila sniggered. My host gave me a reproving look over his pince-nez, and passed on.

'Mr. George Bumpstead?'

There was silence. Evidently the renowned explorer, big-game hunter, humorist, and mimic had not heard the siren.

'Mr. George Bumpstead?' repeated Sir James, raising his voice.

Arabella removed her orange with an audible squelch.

'It's dot buch use callig hib out,' she observed: 'he's dot here.'

'But he ought to be here,' rejoined Sir James severely. 'An order is an order. My God! what's that?'

The door of the deck-house behind us burst violently open, and, with an ear-splitting shriek, the figure of a female, closely veiled, shot forth and projected itself upon Sir James's bosom.

'Save me! save me!' the apparition howled, in a robust falsetto. 'Don't let me go to the bottom of the sea! I will be good!'

Stop the storm! I'm not fit to die. Don't go down the ladder, laddie: they've taken it away! Ow! Ow!

Further lamentations were cut short by Lady Rumborough, who strode forward and seized the suppliant by the shoulders.

'You're wearing my hat!' she announced.

Besides the hat and veil this singular vision wore a multi-coloured jumper, a pink chiffon scarf, and a green silk petticoat. Below all protruded trousered legs and a pair of number eleven yachting shoes.

'Come, come!' spluttered Sir James. 'This is an official parade——'

But these very proper remonstrances were drowned by a second outbreak of hysteria, in the course of which the new arrival scrambled up by one of the davits into the boat. Having achieved this eminence, she removed her hat and veil with a single flourish, revealing herself as a pudding-faced young man of about thirty, with a low forehead and a mouth like a fish. To the appreciative laughter of Jimmy, Lila, the cook's mate, and the ship's boy, he now placed his right elbow in his left palm, and his right palm behind his right ear, uttered a parrot-like screech, and embarked upon an imitation of that incomparable comedian, Mr. Biff Burbidge.

In other words, it was George Bumpstead being funny—at eleven o'clock in the morning!

After lunch I discovered the iron ladder and the roof of the chart-house. Here I spent a tolerable afternoon. And now, next morning, I was up there again, chiefly to escape fulfilment of various commitments entered into, under duress, at dinner, or thereafter, the previous evening.

At that meal, as the tenderfoot of the party, I sat next to Lady Rumborough. On her other side was Jubberley, who had Lila for his right-hand neighbour. Mrs. Dunham-Massey, Podmore, and Arabella Hockley were at Sir James's end of the table. I was particularly glad to be removed from the neighbourhood of Arabella. She had taken a sort of ungainly fancy to me, and after tea had insisted on bringing her chair over beside mine, where she sat extracting mussels from their shells, with a view to a little deep-sea fishing in the near future, breathing heavily, and endeavouring to charm me to some romantic confidence upon the subject of Gwen.

Upon my left, needless to say, was Gwen herself. Beyond her sat George Bumpstead, at the top of his form. Apparently he always was.

Beyond the fact that he was an oaf of the first water, possessed enormous quantities of money, and had mysteriously acquired a reputation—among the Rumborough household, at any rate—as a sportsman, I knew nothing of him. To my intense satisfaction he devoted practically the whole of dinner to a sort of cave-man courtship of Gwen. If he did not actually strike her over the head with a decanter, he contradicted all she said, commanded her in thunderous tones to eat or drink this or that, and issued a stream of intimations as to what she was to do—in his company, of course—to-morrow. Gwen, to whom no form of masculine attention came amiss, sized up her man with unerring instinct, and adopted the rôle of trembling fawn, thus luring the uncouth youth to incredible heights of palæolithic gallantry. Occasionally she gave me a 'poor-little-Gwen' look. But I was not to be drawn: I kept my eyes resolutely on my plate.

'Well, we've got nearly all of them on board now,' said Lady Rumborough to me. 'Do you know Barbara Hatton?'

'Yes. I used to see her a bit before she—was married.'

'He was impossible. Besides, he's dead. She's coming on board at Algiers.'

'When will that be?'

'Next week, I think. Where is it, do you know?'

'Algiers? North Africa, I believe.'

'Oh! Is it near Majorca? We're on our way there now: we ought to arrive to-morrow evening. Isn't Majorca the place where the pottery comes from? Or is it canaries?'

'Hens, I think. Anyhow, Minorca is.'

'Well, it doesn't matter in the least. I suppose you know every one else on board by this time?'

'Yes: I had met them at your house at dinner, except Miss Hockley.'

'Oh, Arabella? We had to have her. She's a niece of some kind of James's—his younger brother Vernon's second wife's daughter by her first husband, or something rather tiresome like that. Did you find her a nuisance this afternoon?'

'Not at all. I found her delightful.'

'Speak up! You're on my deaf side.'

I perjured myself a second time, fortissimo.

'Oh! I thought you said "frightful,"' said Lady Rumborough unconcernedly, and continued:

'Are you a good sailor?'

'Yes.'

'So am I. Margot Massey isn't, so you may have to take her place at bridge. You haven't met George Bumpstead before?'

'Only at Mulberry Lodge.'

'Oh! His father was a brewer. He's very amusing, isn't he? What?'

'Yes,' I bellowed. Gwen turned to me.

'Leslie dear,' she said pathetically, 'your voice goes through my head.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know you were listening.' My tone was a trifle short, and I was punished at once.

'Leslie dear, don't bully me to-night: I can't bear it! I had been looking forward to a perfectly sweet talk with you; but this man!—with an attractive left shoulder-blade she indicated Bumpstead, who was showing Mrs. Dunham-Massey how it is possible to play a tune on one's cheek with the flat of a table-knife—'simply won't let me talk to any one but him. Poor little——'

As if to give point to Gwen's words, the humorist at this moment demanded and received her undivided attention while he gave his celebrated imitation of Biff Burbidge's celebrated imitation of a man eating spaghetti. I took a despondent draught of claret. And this was only the first night of my trip!

My hostess was conversing with Jubberley, in what she plainly imagined was an undertone.

'He was blown up in the war,' she announced in a reverberating stage whisper. 'He's very moody and unsociable: I don't think he's always quite right in his head.'

'Extremely likely,' commented Jubberley. 'I will have a chat with him afterwards. He may like to hear of the conclusions reached by the Parliamentary Sub-committee, of which I was chairman, appointed a few years ago to inquire into the questions of War Strain and Industrial Fatigue. I feel sure I could interest him.'

I had just realised who Jubberley's after-dinner auditor was going to be, when Lady Rumborough gave the signal for upheaval, and we adjourned to the upper deck for coffee.

I spent the next hour enduring or evading the attentions of my shipmates. By bedtime I had danced a one-step with Arabella Hockley, heard all there was to be known about War Strain and Industrial Fatigue, played a rubber of bridge with George Bumpstead as partner, reduced Gwen almost to tears by failing to exhibit resentment over her flirtation with the same gentleman, and faithfully promised to attend choir-practice upon the fo'c'sle deck at nine o'clock next morning—subject of practice, Sea Chanties; conductor, Mr. Podmore.

That was why I was now lying doggo upon the roof of the chart-house. Below me, on the main deck, I could hear Mr. Podmore's high-pitched voice inciting Lila, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, Jimmy Rumborough, and, to judge by the noise, the ship's boy—who, since his voice had just reached the cracking stage, was able to sing two octaves at once—to persevere in a ditty beginning:

Boney was a warrior—
Yah! Yay! Yah!
Boney was a warrior—
John Frangswah!

Well, Majorca was in sight, and with luck they would all be ashore during the afternoon. If not, I would be. I leaned against a coiled two-inch hawser, and refilled my pipe.

I may note that my escape from the musical exercises in progress was due to the fact that Mr. Podmore, to his bitter disappointment, had discovered that the yacht possessed no capstan.

'Chanties are of two kinds,' he explained—'Capstan Chanties and Halyard Chanties. In the former case, capstan bars were inserted into the customary holes in the capstan—usually eight in number—and the crew walked round the capstan, pushing the bars before them, and singing the chanty. The musician stood upon the summit of the rotating capstan, and accompanied. In this manner the labour of raising the anchor was agreeably lightened. However, as there appears to be no capstan upon this vessel—nothing, in fact, but a quite unsuitable horizontal contrivance, operated by steam—we must content ourselves with a Halyard Chanty. In that case, I shall not require quite so many volunteers.' (I began to back stealthily towards the chart-house.) 'We will haul on to this rope, which I have secured to the foot of this mast, in time to the music of the chanty, singing and heaving rhythmically together until I cry, "Belay, there!"—which means, "Pause for rest."'

By this time I was out of sight, and almost out of hearing. That was half an hour ago, but Mr. Podmore's voice was still audible at intervals.

'This chanty,' I could hear him say, 'is employed by sailors when operating the top-gallant halyards. "Boney," of course, is Napoleon Bonaparte. The expression "John Frangswah!" is a corruption of "Jean François." It is not known precisely who——'

Feet grated upon my hitherto inviolate iron ladder, and a snoring sound became audible. Next moment an unclean hand rose above the edge of the chart-house roof, followed by an unkempt head, and I found myself gazing into the face of Arabella Hockley.

'Hallo,' she said; 'you're sittig od by bussels.'

Chapter III

The Mixer at Work

I

Of the succeeding week on board the *Virginia* I need say little, because the record of my sufferings during that period has no very direct bearing upon this narrative. A few isolated incidents will suffice.

I found myself disliking my shipmates more and more. However, I struggled gallantly against my healthiest instincts: over and over again I told myself that I was a morose, self-centred curmudgeon, and that every one in this world improves upon acquaintance if only we take the trouble to cultivate him. Therefore, determined to cultivate my present companions—if only in the sense in which a bacteriologist cultivates germs; that is, for the purposes of inoculation—I set out to convert myself into what Americans call 'a good mixer.'

First of all I tried mixing with George Bumpstead. I invited him to come ashore with me when we touched at Majorca.

We landed at the jetty of the clean, sunny little town of Palma, and George immediately assumed the port and mien of the Englishman abroad—the Englishman of the French comic papers. He swaggered up the middle of the steep, narrow streets, wearing a sun-helmet and plus-fours of the cross-word-puzzle type, and declining to make way for anything on legs, whether four or two. He greeted the architecture of the quaint little town, and the picturesque costumes of its inhabitants, with the simple and honest derision of a higher civilisation. He addressed all gendarmes as 'Alphonso,' and gave an imitation of Biff Burbidge to a dazed old woman selling fruit by the quayside.

At luncheon, which we took in a pleasant little hotel, in company with Jimmy Rumborough and Lila, he began by quarrelling with the food. It was admirable food, though the dishes were served in an order foreign to British ideas. They were certainly foreign to the ideas of George Bumpstead, and that sturdy patriot said so, crescendo, with each successive course.

We began, orthodoxly enough, with a tray of hors-d'œuvres of every shape and colour, and one flavour—garlic. After that came spaghetti, then a ragout of mutton; then, a little unexpectedly, fish. From this we proceeded to solid fillets of beef; then, mercifully, dessert. I began to realise that the Spanish post-prandial siesta is not a siesta at all: it is a state of coma. We drank two bottles of agreeable white wine, and the whole meal cost us a little over twenty pesetas, or about fifteen shillings. But, needless to say, George Bumpstead exercised his prerogative as a true-born Englishman to pronounce the charge excessive and send for the manager. When that functionary was not forthcoming, he threatened to send for the police. Of course, he did not speak Spanish: he cherished a theory, amounting to an obsession with persons of his type, that upon the Continent of Europe you can always make yourself understood if you speak English long enough and loud enough.

However, the unshaven but courtly old hidalgo who waited upon us, though apparently unfortified by any special gift of repartee or irony, undoubtedly had the best of the contest. In response to George's reiterated demands for a gendarme he proffered successively a sliced sausage, a banana, and finally George's own stick and sun-helmet, the latter possibly as a delicate intimation that we had his leave to go.

Jimmy and Lila were highly diverted.

'Try Esperanto, old fellow,' suggested Jimmy.

'Try drawing a picture of a gendarme on the back of the menu,' said Lila.

At this point I intervened—still persevering in my rôle of good mixer.

'That reminds me,' I said, 'of a story I once heard of a man who was lunching in Madrid. He couldn't get milk for his coffee, and couldn't make the waiter understand. Finally, he drew a picture of a cow on the tablecloth, and the waiter hurried away and brought him back two tickets for a bull-fight!'

'Why?' asked Lila.

'That's a rotten story,' said George Bumpstead.

'A bit frosty about the whiskers, Colonel—what?' was Jimmy's comment.

I have an odd and exasperating temper. I am slow to anger: that is to say, if any one ruffles me or insults me I am not conscious of any particular feeling of resentment for a considerable time, sometimes as much as five minutes. Then suddenly it all comes with a rush—blind, inarticulate, and useless rage. By this time, of course, it is too late to do anything about it: as likely as not I answered the insult at the time with a smile or an acquiescent nod of the head. It is impossible to interrupt conversation now in order to say to my opponent: 'On thinking over your remark of five minutes ago, I realise that I am in a towering rage and I propose to hit you on the jaw.' No, I simply sit consuming my own smoke and muttering to myself scathing retorts which are now worse than useless.

That is how I felt upon this occasion. I had tried to be a good mixer. These people were my guests. I disliked them all—their point of view, their personal habits, and their mode of speech. Yet I had asked them to luncheon and endeavoured to amuse them by an apt anecdote. And this was my reward. I boiled: my teeth chattered: I grew as red as a pillar-box. But no one took any notice: the argument over the bill was being continued.

'I am not going to be done by any Dago!' roared George Bumpstead. 'Let's break this lousy place up.'

'George darling,' announced Lila, busy with her lip-stick, 'remember there are ladies present. Stop making circus noises, and let's go and play on the beach.'

'You've overeaten yourself anyhow, George,' added Jimmy. 'Climb out of the trough, and wipe your trotters.'

'Talking of circuses,' continued Lila, lighting a gold-tipped cigarette which bore her initials in gilt letters, 'Mr. Podmore has another spasm in store for us. We're going to do a morris-dance on the deck one afternoon. You'll be for it, Leslie.' (I may note that Lila had dropped into the habit of calling me by my Christian name practically from our first meeting. This, I soon discovered, was a gesture of respect: had she classed me with most of her friends, I should have been addressed as Blobs, or Nobbs, or Tops, or Putty.)

'What in hell is a morris-dance?' inquired George Bumpstead.

The expressions 'hell' and 'damn,' together with informal invocations of the Deity, are common enough in these days in the highest society, and, compared with some which might be employed, are, when you come to think of it, not particularly pernicious. But I suppose I am old-fashioned, and it still makes me uncomfortable to hear them employed in the presence of a young girl. I stirred in my seat, and wished that I possessed the moral courage to improve the occasion. Perhaps I should have done so, for I was in a savage mood, but for the fact that Lila herself appeared quite undisturbed.

'You will soon know, Georgie,' she replied. 'Podmore will dress you up in a smock-frock, and a top-hat brushed the wrong way, with chiffon round it; and they'll tie leggings round your legs with bells on, and give you two silly little sticks to crack together.'

'My God! what for?' inquired George Bumpstead simply.

'To cultivate the old folk spirit.'

'What old folk?'

'I don't know, dear. But I fancy it's the old folks at home—down the Swanee River, and so on. Am I right, Jimmy?'

'Don't talk tripe, Lila,' begged the gentleman addressed.

'Then, George,' continued Lila, with a seraphic smile in my direction, 'you will be placed opposite to Gwen, who will wave her handkerchief at you, and you'll trip round the mast after her, cracking your heels together. Have you ever tried cracking your heels together? It hurts horribly. You'll look perfectly divine.'

'Perfectly nothing!' retorted George. 'I don't stand for any of that rot. Leslie Miles shall do it.'

And somewhere in the bottom of my heart I felt that the uncouth young man was right.

'All the same, though,' interposed Jimmy, 'we might get some innocent fun out of old man Podmore in another way. He's dippy on spooks. We'll make him hold a *séance*—rapping, and table-turning, and psychic messages, and punk of that kind.'

'What does he do, exactly?' asked Lila.

'I'm not sure; but you sit in a circle holding hands——'

'I will not hold Jubberley's,' said Lila. 'They feel like poached eggs.'

'You needn't: I'll hold one of yours and old Miles shall hold the other. Then the lights are turned out——'

'In that case, Mr. Rumborough,' announced Lila, virtuously rolling up her eyes, 'I shall sit next to my chaperon.'

'Don't talk bilge, Lila. Listen! We sit in the dark holding hands, and ask questions; and then we get answers and messages.'

'Who from?'

'From any one you like to ring up. Cæsar, Pompey, Crippen, anybody. And if you and I and one or two others of the best type of bright young modernists sit together, and have had a bit of a rehearsal, old Podmore will get one or two messages from the Great Beyond that'll surprise him—what, what?'

'Righto!' agreed Lila. 'But let's wait till Babs comes. She'd adore it.'

'Where is she due?'

'At Naples. She'll board the lugger in a couple of days now. When she does, I'm afraid she'll get it hot from your esteemed pop, Jimmy dear.'

'Why?'

'Because she wrote to say that she was joining us at Algiers. Now a cable's arrived to say that she's at Naples. Apparently she mixed the two places up: she has entirely disorganised about six pages of the yacht's time-table. However, it's up to her to fix Mutt and Jeff—not us. Darling Babs! She always was waffly about dates, and places, and things like that.'

Two days—reinforcements in two days! And I had expected no relief for a week. My black mood lifted, and I even contrived to smile when George Bumpstead addressed an elderly Spanish lady in the vestibule of the hotel as Mary Pickford.

II

A casual student of human nature might have said that there could never have been a milder or more inoffensive creature than Mr. Podmore. Another student, a little more advanced, might have added that no one could be quite so inoffensive as Mr. Podmore looked. He possessed a receding chin, a long and bird-like neck, a low voice, and a deprecating manner; and his outstanding characteristic was a sort of timid but remorseless pertinacity. For him the sun rose and set upon his hobbies, and for their sake he would endure any rebuff, any insult; and he could enforce his schemes with flinching inflexibility upon people blatantly amused, politely evasive, or frankly hostile.

We were at sea again, and were bridging the interval between luncheon and tea in characteristic fashion. Lila and Jimmy were dancing the tango, to the sound of the eternal gramophone, weaving a languid course among bollards and deck-chairs. Jimmy had arrayed himself for the occasion in a costume which, though for a time it became tolerably familiar to our aching vision in London, was at that moment a comparative novelty—pinkish flannel trousers, so wide round the lower edges that they entirely covered his shoes, and a sage-green jersey with a high collar terminating somewhere under the ears. Since coming on board, Jimmy had also grown some rather nasty little side-whiskers, reaching as far down as the top of the sage-green collar, and making him look like an Argentine *gigolo*. Lila was attired, for no particular reason that I could see, in white cord breeches and a soft silk shirt. As an illustration of the modern passion for all outward effacement of sex, the picture was complete.

Lady Rumborough, Jubberley, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and George Bumpstead were playing bridge under the awning over the stern—or rather, they were engaged upon one of the usual post-mortems, with Jubberley as coroner. Sir James was doing something busy down below—probably checking up empty soda-water bottles with the steward. Gwen and I were leaning over the taffrail a few yards from the bridge-party, in a proximity which looked much more sentimental than it really was. Gwen was endeavouring, with indifferent success, to stimulate me to some lover-like outburst, what time I gloomily surveyed the receding island of Elba and wondered why Napoleon should ever have wished to escape from it. Somewhere behind the deck-house which contained the steam steering gear hovered Arabella Hockley, fingering a kodak, in the sure and certain hope that I, given time, would eventually put my arm round Gwen's waist, and thus render myself liable, if not to blackmail, at least to elephantine pleasantries.

To us, suddenly, entered Mr. Podmore, from below. In his arms he clasped an assortment of oddments resembling

nothing so much as the 'souvenirs' which are given away so lavishly on so-called gala nights at our more progressive restaurants, as an incentive to mad gaiety. There were things which jingled, and things which fluttered, and things which merely dropped upon the deck as Mr. Podmore advanced upon us.

Glad of any diversion, I turned from Gwen and watched him. Having deposited his paraphernalia in a heap, he took up an apologetic position on Lady Rumborough's right hand and George Bumpstead's left.

'I wonder——' he began.

'I shall make it two hearts,' announced Jubberley, who was Lady Rumborough's partner.

Podmore tried again.

'If you are interested in morris-dancing at all, Lady Rumborough——'

'Well, I haven't got any hearts,' said her ladyship; 'you'll have to make them yourself.'

George Bumpstead broke in.

'Three clubs,' he remarked loudly.

'I am collecting volunteers for a morris-dance——' Mr. Podmore pursued. Needless to say, no one took the slightest notice.

'I don't know what to do,' mused Lady Rumborough, with her accustomed frankness. 'My partner goes something I haven't got, and my opponent goes something that I have practically all of. What did you declare on, George?'

'Charlotte dear!' murmured Mrs. Dunham-Massey; 'I am only your guest, but really, there are times when one must speak out. One isn't allowed to give information to one's partner, is one?'

'Why not abandon your gaming-table,' suggested Mr. Podmore, whose moral outlook recognised no degree of comparison in frivolous recreation, 'and substitute a little health-giving——'

For the first time the party seemed aware of his presence. Lady Rumborough looked up.

'Stand further away, Mr. Podmore,' she said. 'You're in my light.'

'Buzz off! This means you,' added George Bumpstead.

'Charlotte dear, do declare something!' said Mrs. Dunham-Massey. 'George has gone three clubs.'

'Very well. Two spades.'

'Not enough, not enough!' trumpeted Bumpstead joyfully.

'Then I'll go three. It's no use going hearts, because I haven't got any.'

'Partner,' protested Jubberley in his best House of Commons manner, 'may I, in all friendliness, suggest that such an intimation——'

'May I suggest a morris-dance?' inquired Mr. Podmore, with the air of one who has just had a brilliant inspiration.

Every one looked up and scowled at him.

'Dear Mr. Podmore,' said Mrs. Dunham-Massey, 'I know you don't play bridge, but one must be frank: it's quite impossible to concentrate on the game——'

'What's the score?' inquired Lady Rumborough suddenly.

'Our opponents,' replied Jubberley, 'are one game up, and have scored twenty-four to nothing in the second.'

Lady Rumborough turned to Mr. Podmore, with something almost approaching geniality.

'What is it you want us to do?' she asked.

'I was about to propose a morris-dance.'

Lady Rumborough threw down her cards, face upwards, and dexterously swept George Bumpstead's into the heap.

'Very well,' she said, 'we'll wash this game out.'

Mr. Podmore pounced upon his opportunity, oblivious of the stentorian protests of George Bumpstead and the acidulated

comments of his partner.

'The dance which I propose to try first,' he said, 'is called Shepherd's Hay, or Ray. It used to be very popular in the counties of Oxfordshire and Warwickshire—in the rural districts, of course.'

'Ah!' said Jubberley, looking up. Jubberley's constituency was a rural district in Warwickshire.

'You will be glad to hear,' continued Mr. Podmore, dropping contentedly into his lecture-room manner, 'that our efforts to revive these merry dances have been crowned with considerable success. For "Shepherd's Hay" I require six dancers and a musician. The dancers should be all male——'

'All male? Ha!' said Jubberley again, with increased interest. Plainly he could already see his constituents dancing the morris-dance on Saturday afternoons instead of going to Socialistic meetings.

'But we can waive that point. The proper musical instrument is a small pipe, having three holes. Unfortunately I have not been able to obtain this; but a violin will serve. Does any one here play the violin?'

'No!' replied several people at once.

'Jimmy plays the saxophone divinely,' announced Lila, who had stopped the gramophone and joined the group. 'Run and fetch it, Jimmy dear.'

Master James complied, unquestioningly: Mr. Podmore's subtle magnetism was making itself felt. The whole of our company were now gathered round him; even Sir James had been drawn upon deck by the same mystic influence, and was already taking fatuous charge of the arrangements.

'An admirable suggestion!' he announced. 'But we must do things properly and in order. You require six dancers, Podmore?'

'Yes; in two ranks of three each. The leader of the first rank is designated the Foreman; of the other, the Hindman. The other dancers are termed Middlemen.'

'Capital!' said Sir James. 'Mr. Podmore, you shall be Foreman; Bumpstead, you are Hindman.'

'No, thanks,' replied the gentleman addressed. 'You can count me out of this, James: Sunday School romps aren't in my line. If it was a point-to-point race, or a bit of crocodile shooting, now——'

'George is much too clumsy,' announced Lady Rumborough, ruthlessly cutting short the speaker's catalogue of his manly accomplishments, with which we were all by this time painfully familiar. Her eye roved round the group, and fell on me. 'Leslie Miles, you can be Hindmost, or whatever it is.'

Despondent but unsurprised, I fell in beside Podmore.

'Now for some Middlemen,' continued Sir James briskly.

'May I be permitted to participate?' inquired Jubberley, upheaving himself with the massive condescension of an elephant who has decided to mingle, for once, with the Bandar Log.

'By all means,' said Sir James. 'Stand over there, by Leslie Miles and Mr. Podmore, Jubberley. Now for the ladies. Mrs. Dunham-Massey——'

'*Must I?*'

'Certainly. Stand opposite to Podmore and be Forewoman.'

'"Foreman" is the correct term,' interposed Mr. Podmore mildly. 'Strictly speaking——'

Needless to say, our organiser took no notice.

'Lila,' he continued, 'you shall be Hindwoman.'

'Not in these trousers!' objected Lila. 'I want to be a man.'

'And Gwen, my dear,' continued Sir James, 'you shall complete the sextette.'

Needless to say, Gwen was quite ready for him.

'Oh, Sir James,' she bleated, 'I'm too nervous! Please! Can't somebody else——'

'Nonsense! Leslie Miles will look after you.'

At this moment a resounding blare from the companionway announced the arrival of the saxophone; and Gwen, with a piteous glance in my direction, crossed the deck and joined our dismal troupe.

Mr. Podmore now proceeded to the subject of costume.

'To be quite correct,' he told us, 'the dancers would wear white knickerbockers—as I have already explained, they *should* be all males: the sexes do not join in morris-dances—supported by braces. Coats and waistcoats, needless to say, are discarded, and coloured rosettes are pinned to the braces, both in front and behind. Strips of ribbon are tied round the upper and lower arm, and also round—— But we need not be too meticulous to-day, as this is merely a first rehearsal. Let us keep to essentials. Kindly help one another to dress.'

He dived into the heap of miscellaneous rubbish at his feet, and proceeded to deal out our festal attire. Presently I found myself, in my shirt-sleeves, fastening red and green ribbons round Gwen's arms; while Gwen, with more coyness than efficiency, pinned a rosette on to my braces and, incidentally, myself.

This done, other and more direful apparatus was served out to us. In due course Mr. Podmore placed upon my head—or rather, well down over my ears—a species of white glazed bowler hat, decorated with more ribbons; and then bade me encase my shins in a pair of leather pads covered with bells, which jingled maddeningly at the slightest movement.

Finally, we were each furnished with a pair of 'sally-sticks'—wooden batons with coloured streamers—and were herded into our places by our self-appointed master of ceremonies, Sir James Rumborough.

I was stationed between Podmore and Jubberley. If I looked a more repellent object than I felt, I am only sorry for the trio who stood facing me. My companions, though, were well in the picture. Podmore looked like a decrepit but dissipated flamingo. As for Jubberley, words fail to describe him. He wore ribbons on his braces and bells upon his shins like the rest of us, but there was an elusive something about him—some *ne plus ultra* of pompous imbecility—which I felt that we had somehow failed to achieve. Perhaps it was his bowler, which was many sizes too small for his head, and suggested a portrait by Mr. Heath Robinson.

Gwen was my *vis-à-vis*. She made a pretty enough picture, with her white pleated skirt, trim ankles, and great melting eyes, all set off by gay ribbons. And she knew it, too, as her shrinking glances in my direction attested. Mrs. Dunham-Massey looked as well-preserved and self-composed as usual. Lila, with her bowler cocked on one side, and her slim arms and legs all aflutter, really did suggest the spirit of youth and dancing.

'I will now briefly describe the steps,' announced Mr. Podmore. 'You will stand behind one another in two parallel ranks of three each, facing the musician and directing all your movements towards him. Standing strictly at attention while the air is played over is an important point, and should always be observed—Miss Chatterton!'

'Sorry,' said Lila, putting away her powder-puff.

'Now for an air,' continued our Foreman.

The saxophone emitted a preliminary eructation.

'What shall I play?' asked Jimmy.

'Try *Red-Hot Mommer*,' suggested Lila.

'Something quite simple, please,' said Podmore hastily. 'I may add that the player should avoid the temptation to put his own variations into the tune. That would be contrary to the spirit of morris-dancing.'

'Righto!' said James, and played a few bars. 'How's that?'

'Filthy,' replied the voice of George Bumpstead, from the depths of his chair.

'Don't be jealous, Georgie!' This from that small loyalist, Lila. 'Will it do, Mr. Podmore?'

'It must do,' said Mr. Podmore resignedly. 'Now for the steps. The step is always begun with the right foot. Spring twice from that foot, thus'—Mr. Podmore leaped into the air with uncanny suddenness—'and as you drop on to the left, kick smartly out with the right leg, as if to straighten it. Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Jubberley!'

Jubberley, tenderly massaging his left kneecap, said it was of no consequence.

'Then spring twice from the left foot. The spring should have nothing mincing or dainty about it: the intention is merely to

make the bells tinkle heartily. Then, on a rising cadence of the music, jump with both feet and come down on the heels, at the same time cracking the sally-sticks together. That will be sufficient to begin with, I think. Let us rehearse these simple movements thoroughly before proceeding further. Now, musician, if you please!

The revels began. Feeling as I had not felt since attending my first dancing-class (mixed) at the age of seven, I did as I was told, leaping forlornly into the air, with my bells jangling and my nightmare headpiece flapping about my ears, ashamed to the roots of my being.

Behind me I could hear the joyous laughter of that child of nature, George Bumpstead, and for once I could not find it in my heart to criticise him. Once, too, in a moment of comparative silence, I overheard the click of a camera, and I realised that Arabella Hockley was doing her bit in the general conspiracy for my humiliation.

Next morning we steamed into the Bay of Naples. The cloud was off the top of Vesuvius, and the crater was smoking in easy and reflective puffs, like an old gentleman with a cigar. I hailed the sight of land as Xenophon's army once hailed the sight of the sea. Not only could I escape from my present company for an hour or two, but somewhere in the human ant-heap piled up on those sunny slopes was—Barbara. It was odd how I held on to the thought of her.

Chapter IV

Truants

I

We sat upon the balustraded terrace which borders Bertolini's Hotel—the famous establishment which you reach by penetrating a long tunnel and then shooting upwards in an elevator through some hundreds of feet of living rock—looking down upon the noisy, dusty, dilapidated, and entirely overrated city of Naples.

Not that I was in a critical mood. I had eluded the whole body of my shipmates for the day, and was drinking coffee and smoking in the warm sunshine, with Barbara smiling upon me from the other side of the little table.

I do not think I have described Barbara as yet, and I am not quite sure that I can. She is an extraordinarily beautiful person, with that unique air of unruffled serenity which goes with women of really patrician mould. One could never imagine her fussing, or nagging, or indulging in those whims and caprices which form the entire stock-in-trade of another type of beauty. (I name no names. All I mean to imply is that upon this particular morning I found Barbara incredibly soothing.)

Barbara is tall—five feet eight, I should say—and her eyes are as blue as the waters round Capri. Her hair is as fair as her little sister's is dark. The lines of her body are long and slim; her smile is a thing to dream about; and in all our acquaintance I have never known her harbour a mean thought or do a spiteful thing.

However, I appear to be drifting into the present tense, which is surely wrong in an historical narrative. Let us begin again.

My recollections of Barbara Chatterton stretched back ten years or so, to days when she had been less serene than this—a long-legged, impulsive, tempestuous creature with a flying mane, my accomplice in many a boy-and-girl escapade, and at once my wise counsellor and loyal backer. She had always mothered me, even when she was fourteen and I was eighteen. It was Barbara who had rejoiced when I won my colours at school; it was Barbara who had approved when I made up my mind to enter Sandhurst; and it was Barbara who had comforted me when I failed, ignominiously. Dear Barbara!

Then suddenly, a few years later, when she was barely nineteen, and I was buried in the country, tied there by my father's last illness, she married one Eric Hatton, and went clean out of my life. I had been unconsciously schooling myself for some such shock as this for years—who of us has not?—but I felt it pretty badly for a while. Of course, the thing could not be helped: I had foreseen that all along. Englishmen of our class do not marry young: their entire career is shaped upon the supposition of a late marriage. So your English boy, since he feels that he cannot in decency invite his first love to wait five or ten years for him, lets her go without a struggle, if not without a pang. When he is thirty or so he marries a girl of twenty, taking her away, as often as not, from some lifelong cavalier of twenty-one.

It had never occurred to me when I was twenty-one to ask Barbara to wait. Why should I be a dog in the manger, and grudge her the happiness which I was in no position to give her? Still—still—I could not help wishing that she had chosen any other mate than Eric Hatton.

Of her married life I knew little, except that it had not been a happy one. Eric Hatton had taken her to India, and after a few years she had returned alone, a widow of four-and-twenty. Her husband's death had been sudden, and was officially ascribed to sunstroke. Every one seemed content to leave it at that—eager to leave it at that. Hatton's brother-officers spoke with guarded appreciation of his charm of manner, of his amusing sallies at mess, of his fine horsemanship. No reference was made to the constancy of his nature, or his temperate habits, or his solicitude for those dependent upon him. All were content to hope, with Lila, that he was an angel now, and leave it at that.

But at the time these things were all hidden from me, for my attention was fully occupied elsewhere. The great upheaval of war had come, and it did for me what Sandhurst could never have done: it made me a lieutenant-colonel before I was thirty. Those were full and strenuous days, obliterating many useless longings and foiled ambitions, curing many fancied ills, and giving thousands of us a chance to start life all over again. I know they kept me, for one, entirely preoccupied and, except towards the end, healthy and happy.

But I never quite forgot Barbara Chatterton, especially when I was elated or miserable; and one requires a confidant in

either case—especially the former. And here she was, after nearly ten years, wife and widow since last we met, composedly consorting with me on Bertolini's terrace, hardly changed, except for a certain added regality, almost divinity, of presence.

II

We had already talked for an hour, during which I had furnished Barbara with a concise history of my life since our parting, and Barbara had told me as much of hers as she deemed suitable for my ears. We leaned back in our seats, and smiled upon one another in our old friendly, understanding fashion. Then Barbara rose lazily to her feet.

'Oughtn't we to go on board your yacht, Leslie?' she asked.

'God forbid!' I replied.

Barbara sat down again.

'Tell me!' she commanded.

I told her—for the space of another half-hour. I felt better when I had finished, better than I had felt for weeks. Barbara put her head on one side, in an attitude I knew well, and smiled at me.

'Turkey!' she said.

It was my ancient nickname, and despite myself I justified it on the spot, turning fiery red and gobbling impotently.

'I see you haven't lost your old capacity for silent suffering and righteous wrath,' continued Barbara.

'No, confound it! It isn't the wrath that makes me suffer, though: it's keeping silent about it.'

'I know. But why do you?'

'It's my nature, I suppose. It's a complex or an inhibition, or something of that kind.'

'Forgive a country cousin,' said Barbara; 'but what are they—those things you mentioned?'

'I haven't the slightest idea; but according to Mrs. Dunham-Massey and Gwen all the best people have them nowadays. You simply don't get invited anywhere in London unless you have at least one of each. They put "Complexes and Inhibitions" in the corner of the invitation card now, I'm told.'

'But what are they, my dear?'

'As far as I can make out, they are impulses that make people unhappy, or cowardly, or mopey, or shy.'

'New names for old things. What's the difference between a complex and an inhibition?'

'There you rather have me. But, roughly speaking, a complex ties you all up into mental knots, and makes you believe something unpleasant to be true when you know it isn't: while an inhibition is a conviction that you simply can't *do* a certain thing—like going down into the Tube, or crossing a road, or accosting a stranger in the street.'

'My dear, where did you acquire all this learning?'

'Mrs. Dunham-Massey told me about the complex. Because I said to her last night that I loathed being compelled to dress up like a Christmas tree and dance the morris-dance with Jubberley, she said that I was suffering from an inferiority complex, which made me defer against my will to the wishes of other people.'

'Well, perhaps she was right. Go on. What about the inhibition?'

'I got that from Gwen Gowlland. After dinner we were playing some idiotic game of forfeits, and I was sentenced to kiss the person I loved best. Ye gods, what an evening!'

Barbara gurgled gently.

'What did you do, Turkey?'

'I declined to kiss anybody. At least, I didn't decline: that was just it! I merely looked several kinds of idiot, and mumbled something about not doing that sort of thing in public. So George Bumpstead said he would deputise for me, and got up and kissed Gwen Gowlland on the left ear.'

'How did Gwen Gowlland take it?'

'Oh, she was the picture of innocent reproach and maidenly distress, as usual. She was very pathetic with me about it afterwards.'

'What did she say?'

'She said she was the one who had to suffer for my inhibitions. That's how I know what inhibitions are. On the whole, I'm rather glad I've got them!'

Barbara regarded me whimsically.

'Are you *quite* sure, Leslie?'

'I loathe the sight of the girl,' I said.

'Well, twenty-four hours on the yacht will show me whether you are speaking the truth or not; but for the present I'm not at all sure. I know men! Reverting to the yacht, isn't it time I went on board now and reported myself to our little admiral?'

'He's not there: nobody's there. Most of the gang have gone up Vesuvius—and I hope they all fall down the crater!'

'Including my only sister?'

'Bless you, no! I wouldn't hurt a hair of her head, although I don't think she would be so particular about mine. I'm sorry to say we had a little tiff yesterday. She asked me to shake her a cocktail at ten o'clock in the morning, and I declined.'

'Quite right too, Leslie.'

'Yes; but it was the way I said it. Some men could have jollied her out of the idea: all I did was to give her the impression that I was an old woman. She as good as called me one, and got some one else to shake the cocktail. She's ashore now, with Jimmy.'

'Is that quite safe?' There was a touch of real anxiety in Barbara's voice.

'It ought to be. Jimmy has a revolver on his hip, and an aluminium knuckle-duster in his left-hand jacket pocket. He tells me he always goes ashore "heeled" in foreign ports: one never knows what may not happen to an adventurous Englishman abroad. I believe he does it when he goes to the opera in Paris. Lila was so thrilled at the prospect of running about under armed escort that she cancelled her engagement with me to come and find you. I can't say I pressed her very much.'

'You mustn't carry your tiff too far, Leslie.'

'It wasn't that. I wanted you all to myself. I wanted to take you to Pompeii—a private party of our two selves. "Pompeii for two, and two for Pompeii," so to speak.'

'You are getting over your inhibitions nicely,' observed Barbara.

'I never had any, my dear, where you were concerned.'

Barbara looked at me oddly.

'Hadn't you?' she said.

III

We lunched in a little wooden restaurant just outside the Porta di Nola, where two smiling local brigands sang softly to the guitar as we manipulated our spaghetti. After that, repulsing guides, I conducted Barbara round Pompeii. I had been there before: antiquity has always fascinated me, ever since certain days of my boyhood spent in grubbing round the Emperor Hadrian's Wall across England during a summer in Northumbria.

We strolled down the long, trench-like, stone-paved streets, scored deep with the parallel ruts of iron chariot wheels, speculating as to what used to happen when two chariots met, for they certainly could not have passed one another. We noted the high stepping-stones crossing periodically from curb to curb; and Barbara observed, with truth, that the Pompeian ladies must have found them invaluable in wet weather.

We wandered through one of the best preserved of the houses—I think it was the House of Pansa. Barbara was disappointed because only the first storey was left.

'What has become of the upper floors?' she asked. 'I always think the upstairs of houses are so much more interesting than the downstairs: the rooms there are more off their guard, if you know what I mean.'

'If it hadn't been for Vesuvius,' I replied, 'there wouldn't have been any ground floor either. The eruption buried all the houses in this town right up to the first-floor windows—packed them in pumice-stone with a solid pie-crust of mud on the top. Only the upper parts were left projecting. Consequently they were cleared away centuries ago. The only part of Pompeii which survives to-day is the part which was destroyed. It's a bit of a paradox.'

'It's very like life,' said Barbara. 'Probably if you and I are ever remembered for anything, Leslie, it will be for something quite private and insignificant which we once did and forgot all about.' We turned a corner. 'Hallo, what is this big place?'

'The Forum. It must have been a busy spot in the old days. Can you picture it?'

'No, my dear: mouldering ruins were not included in my education. Schoolgirls are more interested in their own futures than in other people's pasts.'

'Well, I think I can. Sit down on this seat, and I'll see what I can do.'

Barbara obediently sat down upon the warm stone, and I began. I must have talked for quite a long time. Gradually, in my mind's eye, the ancient stones began to resume their proper places; the ruined buildings took shape; Pompeii lived again. I described what I saw to Barbara. I pictured for her the Forum itself—the jostling throng, the babbling medley of traders, marketers, and slaves; with here and there a commotion of heads where some helmeted figure on horseback was forcing its way, or an eddy in the human tide where men with staves clove a path for some great lady's litter. Above all, the blue Italian sky and the decadent glitter of Imperial Rome.

Then I halted, rather suddenly. Truth to tell, I was feeling a little surprised at my own eloquence. We sat silent for a while.

'You're an odd person, Leslie,' said Barbara presently. 'You made this place live again for me just now. Could you see all those things?'

'In a way, yes. Do you know, Barbara, of late I have begun to think that I must have had a previous existence. For that matter, I believe we all have; but in any case some one or something must have reopened the water-tight door, or whatever it is, that shuts us off from our former experiences. Dead cities and forgotten civilisations seem wonderfully real to me: living—vivid——'

I turned from my contemplation of the sun-bathed Forum, and caught Barbara's eye. She was regarding me with something very like concern. I broke off, my self-conscious self again.

'I'm sorry,' I said huffily. 'I'm afraid my hobby ran away with me: I didn't intend to bore you.' I sulked.

'There is more than a hobby behind this,' said Barbara. 'For two or three minutes just now, Leslie, you were inspired. Do these—experiences—come to you often?'

I thought.

'Not very often,' I said, 'but sometimes. I remember one, particularly. A year ago I was in Panama, passing through the Canal on my way home from Hawaii. I had been reading a lot about Cortez and Drake and the old days of the Spanish Main. We were given a twenty-four hours' run ashore, and I found myself lunching with a fellow-passenger at the International Hotel. I looked out on the streets of Panama City, with their electric tram-cars and cinemas, and said to the old fellow—he was a Spanish-American of some kind, in the cigar business:

""I wonder what this place looked like in the days when it was the rendezvous for the gold trains."'

""This is not the original Panama," he said. "You would like to see it—yes?"'

'I said I would, like a shot; and we hired a car and drove to a place on the coast looking out over the Pacific. It was a desolate enough spot—a square of dry beaten-out earth, perhaps two hundred yards each way, with what looked like a derelict church tower in one corner and a few tumble-down ruins in the other. The sea was lapping away along one side of the square, and semi-tropical growths enclosed the other three.

"This," said my friend, "is the ancient plaza of the city of Panama—Old Panama—the Panama of Cortez and the great days of the Spanish conquest and occupation. It was a city of seven thousand houses, with eight monasteries, two great churches, a governor, and a garrison. And now—look at it!"

'Then I remembered.

"Is this the place that Morgan destroyed?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "it is. Morgan—your English Morgan!"

"To be quite fair," I replied, "he was a Welshman."

'Who was Morgan?' inquired Barbara.

'A pirate—one of the old buccaneers. Blackbeard—Sawkins—L'Ollonais—you may have heard of them. Morgan was the prize tough of the lot, but he must have been a born leader of men. He landed at the mouth of the Chagres river, on the east side, almost where the Panama Canal joins the Caribbean Sea to-day, and led three thousand rascals across the Isthmus to attack Old Panama. Being seafaring men, they made heavy weather of the swamps and savannahs of the Isthmus; and, by the same token, not being accustomed to worry about transport or commissariat, they very nearly died of starvation. They lived on cats and dogs and bits of leather, or anything which the Spaniards and Indians had left behind in their flight; and they took nine days to cover sixty miles. But they got to Old Panama, famished and rampageous, and they captured it from the Spaniards in fair fight. Then, finding that the best part of the loot had been carried away, or shipped off over the horizon, Morgan turned nasty—or rather, nastier than usual—and burned the place down, to the last hut. He did the job thoroughly: he took three weeks over it, and the result of his labour abides to this day.

'I had read the story as a boy, and now that I found myself standing on the very spot where it had happened, the whole thing came back to me—every detail, and more. Something took possession of me. I did not merely recall things: I began to see things—things that I could never have read about. The whole place came to life. I found myself standing in the middle of the great plaza, as it had been three hundred years ago. There was a stone terrace along the water-front, with steps running down to the little blue waves, and people stepping in and out of boats—Dons in steel cuirasses and steel hats with brims to them; and Spanish ladies in lace mantillas, with black hair and high combs; and Genoese traders, and priests, and sailors, and Indian slaves. I saw them all. They didn't simply seem to be there, Barbara; they *were* there. And I lived and moved among them. All round the plaza stood the big buildings of the city—the church of St. Anastasia, with its lofty tower; a great monastery; the Governor's house, all built of cedar; the King's stables; the Treasury; and out on the point, a fort. Behind all these were the streets of the town, with poorer houses built of cane and palm. Behind all that again stretched the Gold Road—the road along which the pack-mules carried the bullion back across the Isthmus to the Atlantic side, to be shipped to Spain.

'Just behind the town, leading away inland, is an old road-bridge—a single arch spanning a stream. Probably more gold has crossed that bridge than any other bridge in the world. I turned and walked towards it, pushing my way out of the crowded plaza. When I reached it, I came suddenly to myself. There was no gold-train, no guards, no muleteers—just the ruins of a tumble-down bridge crossing a narrow gully, and all round me the dusty and desolate savannah.

'I must have said something, for at this point the cigar merchant asserted himself.

"My friend," he said, "you come back with me now, to a shady spot. You have stand too long in the sun." Then he packed me into our Ford—think of it! a rattling, reeking Ford in Old Panama—and drove me back to the hotel, where he gave me two heavenly Trinidad cocktails, and then bundled me on board ship.'

'The old gentleman was very sensible,' said Barbara approvingly. 'But, Leslie, what a queer adventure! Were you all right afterwards?'

'As right as rain; but I had very much the same feeling afterwards as I have now, sitting here in this old Forum. A sort of mental exaltation—a slightly tipsy sensation.'

'I wonder if you are psychic, or whatever the word is,' said Barbara.

'I think the explanation is a bit more prosaic than that. I should call the whole affair a by-product of shell-shock. I never had these gifts before the war—this vivid power of picturing things. You may recollect that in the early days of our acquaintance imagination was not my long suit.'

'You were the most matter-of-fact creature that ever breathed,' said Barbara candidly. 'How you used to exasperate me sometimes! I remember once, when I was about sixteen, pointing out to you a tall church spire, black against a white sky,

and asking you if you didn't think that it looked like the opening of the tent door of heaven. And you said it looked more like the fifth proposition of Euclid. I could have slapped you!

'I expect you did,' I replied. 'Still, it's true I had very little imagination—the imagination that enables one to picture things. I remember reading *Puck of Pook's Hill* when we spent that summer near Hexham, sitting on the ruins of the wall itself, and trying and trying to bring to life all Kipling's characters—Parnesius, and Pertinax, and Maximus, and the Pict, and all those—you remember?'

'Do I not?' murmured Barbara ecstatically. We had read the book together.

'But I could never recreate the Wall as I recreated Old Panama. My faculties have ripened a bit since then.'

I smiled; but Barbara shook her head.

'Leslie,' she said, 'I am not happy about you. You aren't a bit well. I expect it's this shell-shock business, too, that makes you so sensitive and irritable with these tiresome people on the yacht. If it weren't for that, I think I should give you a scolding for behaving like a baby towards them.'

'You wait till you meet them!'

'Never mind about them just now. How is your general health? Do you sleep well?'

'I dream a bit.'

'What about?'

'Various things.'

'Pleasant?'

'Some of them. One vision in particular—and a fairly regular one too!'

Barbara was pleasantly intrigued.

'Tell me!' she said, edging a little closer, in a manner reminiscent of the days when she used to cherish designs on half my apple.

But the time for confidences was gone. Round the corner of the Temple of Apollo appeared a pair of all too familiar figures—Sir James Rumborough and Mrs. Dunham-Massey. They were followed by George Bumpstead and Gwen. All four saw us and bore down upon us, and in the welter of greeting, introduction, and reproof which followed—remember, Barbara had mixed up Naples and Algiers—such thistledown things as dreams and visions vanished shudderingly into space. Vesuvius had had its chance, and had let it go.

Chapter V

The Cave

I

I had little opportunity to discuss my psychic possibilities any further with Barbara, because in the log-book of the steam-yacht *Virginia* the word privacy was unknown. In the operation of the disgusting blend of grandmotherly government and mob law which obtained upon that accursed vessel, one was expected to conform to the general movements of the herd, within very definite limits: that is to say, we were assigned to some particular form of recreation in company with associates appointed by Sir James and Lady Rumborough, and in all cases we were doomed to perform these exercises within sight and hearing of every one else.

Out of consideration for Barbara, I forsook my solitary perch upon the roof of the chart-house, and meekly submitted to the full rigour of ship's discipline. In the course of a single day I bowed my neck to a thousand indignities. I endured a homily from my host upon the imperative necessity of my being dressed and out of my cabin by nine-thirty a.m.: apparently it was his absurd custom to 'inspect ship' every morning at ten o'clock, by which hour every suit of pyjamas had to be folded and every dressing-gown hung upon its appointed hook. I danced the foxtrot with Lila, at her own imperious invitation, which carried with it a tacit understanding that the unpleasantness over the cocktail was at an end. In this I traced the hand of Lila's elder sister. Off Malta I listened for forty minutes to Jubberley on the Knights of the Order of St. John and Jerusalem, with the history of which body he had been priming himself sufficiently thoroughly to be able to misquote it with great fluency. I played deck-quoits in partnership with Gwen, who played indifferently, against Mr. Podmore, who could not play at all, and Arabella Hockley, who cheated whenever an opportunity arose. I engaged, blindfolded and in public, in a humiliating pastime known as 'Are You There?' consisting, for me, mainly in being belaboured over the head by George Bumpstead with a rolled-up newspaper. I played a rubber of bridge with Lady Rumborough as partner, and I enjoyed a *tête-à-tête* of one hour with Mrs. Dunham-Massey.

That delightful woman was profoundly interested in Barbara—especially Barbara's previous history-sheet. Having entirely failed to elicit from Barbara herself any detail of that intriguing document, and having equally failed to get any change out of Barbara's little sister, she fastened on me.

'I had no idea you and Mrs. Hatton were old friends,' she began. 'Has it been going on for long?'

Instead of throwing her overboard, I replied uneasily:

'We used to know one another as children, and all that.'

'As children—ah!' replied Mrs. Dunham-Massey, with obvious satisfaction. 'Then she *is* older than she looks. I thought so! Twenty-eight?' she hazarded hopefully.

'I don't know.'

'But, my dear, you must know. Of course, it's chivalrous of you not to tell, but you can trust me. After all, I'm just a sort of auntie to the dear people on this yacht—old and wrinkled, with an honest, ugly face. I know that's how you all feel about me, isn't it?'

'I wouldn't go quite so far as that,' I answered evasively.

'You mean, I'm ugly but not honest? Well, it would have been kinder not to tell me so; but after all, sincerity *is* everything, isn't it?' Mrs. Dunham-Massey smiled bravely. 'Her husband ill-treated her, didn't he?'

'Whose husband?'

'Mrs. Hatton's, of course.'

'Oh, Mrs. Hatton's! I never knew him.'

'But I thought you had known her since your childhood, and hers.'

'So I did. But she wasn't married in her childhood.'

'Oh, how caustic you are! I'm getting just a little bit frightened of you. But I suppose you knew her well in her early

married days?'

'No. I wasn't there; I wasn't even at the wedding. She married and went to India almost at once. I never saw her husband.'

Mrs. Dunham-Massey regarded me almost benignly.

'That sounds like a frustrated romance,' she said. 'Tell me more about it. Lots of people confide in me: I can't think why. It seems to bring them relief.'

'You're barking up the wrong tree,' I said, with what civility I had left.

Mrs. Dunham-Massey's manner changed at once.

'Please, please, don't think I am asking for information!' she pled. 'Heaven knows, I receive enough confidences without having to grub for them! You don't understand me yet, I can see. Mrs. Hatton is such a sweet woman that one can't help being interested in her a tiny bit—that's all. Even you are, I can see—in spite of Gwen.' She shook a finger at me. 'Poor little Gwennie! You've been neglecting her of late, you know; and the child is feeling it.' (Gwen, at a generous estimate, is twenty-seven.) 'Don't, *please*, be angry with me for speaking like this. It makes me feel so awkward and embarrassed to have to do it, but really, some one had to; so I took my courage in both hands, and—well, I've done it!' Mrs. Dunham-Massey smiled, with misty eyes, and continued:

'Mrs. Hatton's husband died of drink, didn't he?'

'No, he didn't!' I was turkey-red by this time.

'I thought you said you never knew him.'

'No—but I knew about him.'

'If you knew about him you must have known some rather dreadful things, by all accounts. But, of course, men always screen one another.... Oh, if only young girls could be warned against being in too great a hurry! If only there were some one to tell us! But there never is!' Mrs. Dunham-Massey registered emotion.

I was tolerably certain that this last innuendo—this direct suggestion that in her innocent youth she herself had been mated, all unsuspecting, with a heartless roué—was an outrageous slur upon the memory of the late lamented Dunham-Massey. A scrap of conversation between Lila and Gwen drifted back into my memory, Lila speaking:

'He was a profiteer from Bradford, my dear—army blankets, or something like that—and she grabbed him just after the War, before he could spend any of it. He stepped under a motor-'bus two years later, with an eager smile on his face.'

Well, the story may not have been true, but it seemed eminently reasonable.

By this time Mrs. Dunham-Massey had recovered herself.

'Poor Mrs. Hatton!' she said. 'Still, she is comparatively young: perhaps some good man will make her happy yet. George Bumpstead seemed quite attracted by her at dinner last night, didn't you think? Of course, she is one of those women who makes herself attractive to every man she meets. Probably she can't help it: something in the blood. But we needn't talk about her any more: I have performed my little task, and I'm glad. You'll forgive me for being so terribly aboveboard, won't you? Now, run off and find Gwen, you faithless man, and atone for everything!'

I seized this opportunity of escape—and retired to bed, at nine o'clock in the evening.

II

The consequence was that I awoke next morning at five.

I went on deck. It was a cool dawn, with a promise of heat to come. Patches of mist lay here and there upon the calm water. The deck of the yacht was mercifully clear of passengers, but up on the little bridge stood the captain, with binoculars to his eyes, occasionally letting fall a word of direction to the man at the wheel.

Presently he lowered the glasses, and caught sight of me.

'Good morning, sir!' he cried. 'Will you come up?'

I mounted beside him, and looked about me.

We were in a great bay, or bight, more than half surrounded by a hilly coast. Right ahead of us, three miles or so, I could distinguish some white houses on the shore; beyond that, in a break in the hills, a distant shimmering, which I took to be a lake.

'Where are we?' I asked.

'In the Gulf of Tunis, sir. That's Goletta over there'—pointing to the cluster of buildings—'the front-door of Tunis, so to speak. Tunis itself lies at the head of that lake beyond. You can't see it from here: it's another six miles. The lake is salt, not much more than a marsh, with a biggish canal running through it. The canal is banked on each side, which makes two lakes, really. You can travel along one bank on a tram right up from Goletta to the town.'

'And where is Carthage?' I had been interested in Carthage ever since I had been old enough to be a hero-worshipper.

The captain pointed to a hill on our right front, a few miles along the coast from Goletta.

'Carthage used to be somewhere about there, by all accounts,' he said; 'but there's nothing to see now. It's been off the map for a long time.'

I surveyed the eminence which marked the site of the ancient city. It was not much of an eminence: in Scotland they would have described it as a 'law.'

'The Byrsa, I suppose?' I asked.

'I expect you're right,' assented the captain politely.

The Byrsa and the strip of coast at its base were covered thickly with buildings. Along the beach below ran a row of white dots, which looked suspiciously like bathing-boxes. Further to our right the coast swept round to a lofty headland, crowned by a lighthouse.

'Is that Cape Carthage?' I asked.

'I believe it has an Arabic name now, sir—Sidi-Bou-Said, or something like that.'

'Are we going right up to Goletta?'

'I'm not sure that we can. The chart doesn't give us too much water here, except across the Gulf to our left, Korbous way. Most of the mail-steamers lie outside, and use a tender.'

'I see.' I fell into a muse, pondering upon the turns of fate which may alter the fortunes of a city, as of a man. In the days of shallow-draught galleys this great bight must have been a haven indeed. But now Tunis, once the most thriving piratical port in the Mediterranean, lay high and dry; and its outpost Goletta, though right on the beach, was almost high and dry too.

I diverted my attention to Carthage—or rather, to the place where Carthage had once towered, mistress and arbitress of the Mediterranean and the ancient world. Truth to tell, I was a little shocked by the spectacle. Stark desolation—*Carthago deleta*—I was prepared for, but not this pretty-prettiness of Moorish villas and French bathing-huts, as I could now see they were. My gaze travelled disconsolately along until it reached Sidi-Bou-Said, covered with flat-topped houses and an occasional mosque; but I noted that in the increasing daylight more coast-line was now visible beyond—a clean virgin sweep of rocky shore, backed by towering red sandstone bluffs. This was better: it was more in accordance with my preconceived idea of the mysterious and romantic coast of Africa—the Africa from which, according to tradition, something new could always confidently be expected. I must explore that distant shore.

The engine telegraph bells jangled, the engines stopped and reversed, and the cable rattled out. I descended to my cabin for early tea and a shave, excogitating in my mind ways and means whereby I might escape ashore for the day, preferably with Barbara, but in any case without any one else.

III

As so often happens, I had to be content with half a loaf: that is to say, I went ashore with Barbara, Jubberley, and our host and hostess; or rather, we all went ashore in a body, but Barbara and I failed to elude the above-mentioned trio upon landing. Jimmy, Lila, George Bumpstead, and Gwen departed by electric tram along the causeway across the lake to Tunis. Mr. Podmore set off at a brisk walk along the dusty coast-road in the direction of Carthage, under the shade of a white umbrella, followed by the offscourings of Goletta clamouring for *baksheesh*. Evidently they regarded him as the

easiest thing in the party. Little they knew their man: I bet myself a silent half-crown that by sunset he would have dragooned them into a morris-dance. Tagging along amid his howling retinue I observed the uncouth figure of Arabella Hockley, clad in her inevitable Aquascutum, and grasping a fishing-rod and a noisome tin can which I knew well, and which I knew she hoped to bring back replenished with bait.

Mrs. Dunham-Massey had remained on board—to write letters.

'She'll write a lot, I expect,' Lady Rumborough confided to me, in trumpet tones. 'She doesn't often get such a good address to write from.'

The electric tram went rocking and whizzing away along the causeway towards Tunis, and our quintette were left alone to battle with guides, vendors of postcards, and such touts and beggars as Podmore and Arabella had not drawn after them. At the solicitation of a patriarchal old gentleman with a snub nose and a flowing white beard, in a snowy burnous, red tarboosh, no socks, and ammunition boots, we decided to drive to Carthage and back in a dilapidated Panhard car.

'Baedeker,' announced Sir James, consulting the impassioned work in question, 'says that good carriages are to be had at Goletta at two francs per hour; but advises that the fare should be arranged beforehand. A very proper precaution. Let me see: two hours should give us ample time to lunch at Carthage, look round, and return. I will offer this man five francs.' He cleared his throat. 'Er—cocher! Doozor! Combien?'

'Eleventeen bob!' replied the patriarch promptly. 'Hunner franc!'

In the end we paid it, but only after Barbara and I had pointed out:

(1) That Sir James's Baedeker was fourteen years old.

(2) That since it was written there had been a war, which had increased standards of living and affected the rate of exchange.

(3) That a 'carriage' is not a motor-car.

(4) That if we did not pay the hundred francs we should probably have to walk to Carthage, followed by disappointed mendicants throwing imported antiquities at us.

We packed ourselves into the car at length, Jubberley firmly wedged between Barbara and Lady Rumborough on the back seat, with Sir James and myself poised uncertainly upon two auxiliary perches resembling large toadstools, and about as secure. The front seat was occupied by our cicerone, whom I had by this time christened Melchizedek—I seemed to remember a high priest of that name—and his chauffeur, a young man of purely criminal cast of countenance. The latter was a native, we presently learned, of the Belgian Congo—and probably a deportee into the bargain.

I will say one thing for French cars: they can go. The sorriest taxis in Paris—even the one-cylinder Renaults which are reputed to have turned the tide at the Marne by conveying an army corps from the Place de la Concorde to the field of battle—can hit a pace to-day quite sufficient to keep one's heart in one's mouth for the whole length of the Champs Elysées. Our present conveyance, although its body was battered, its mudguards buckled, and every joint in its anatomy shrieking in mortal pain, made it evident from the start that in one respect Lutetia can teach Tunisia nothing.

The retired assassin at the wheel proved, as I had expected, to be entirely without bowels. He whirled round corners, over bumps, and through pot-holes as if Satan were after him—as indeed Satan probably was. He scattered dogs, children, donkeys, and poultry with dispassionate ferocity. His aged employer, who was obviously enjoying the outing more than all the rest of the party put together, sat round in his seat, steadying himself by holding one arm firmly round my neck, thus keeping the other free to point out objects of local and historical interest.

'That the house of Bey of Tunis. Very nice man. Dead twenty years!—is a fair sample.

After a quarter of an hour of nightmare progress through stucco villa colonies and squalid hamlets, we found ourselves at the foot of the hill which I had identified from the sea as the Byrsa: it ran up steeply from the edge of the road. Without any warning whatsoever our charioteer suddenly swung to the left and charged it. When the force of the impact began to die away, he changed down into a shrieking low gear and fell to crawling.

'Where are we going to?' shouted Sir James above the din.

'Hotel St. Louis. Verree jollie! Lunch!' replied Melchizedek, with enormous zest.

Presently the car drew up, with an expiring sigh, before an unpretentious shanty of wood, decorated by a notice-board

which promised us 'Bacon-egg, cocoa, and old Scotch Whisky.'

We entered; and declining these imported dainties, lunched very tolerably upon domestic dishes and the wine of the country. I caught a glimpse of Melchizedek and his accomplice making a gargantuan meal behind a screen, and wondered whether it was included in the 'eleventeen bob.' I thought not.

Finally we sat out upon a terrace backed by ornamental villas reared upon the ancient rubble of Carthage, smoking, and looking down upon what had once been the greatest naval base in the world. All we saw now was a third-rate French watering-place, with Islamic trimmings. The late residence of that very nice man, the deceased Bey of Tunis—if it had been his residence, which I took leave to doubt—was the most conspicuous building. On our left the headland of Sidi-Bou-Said was thickly covered with the houses and mosques of a prosperous Arab suburb.

Inevitably, I began to picture the scene as it must have been—the swarming quays, the noisy dockyards, the arsenal, the baths, the granaries, the great aqueduct running down from the hills, and the Temple of Moloch standing on this very citadel, with its horrid rites and unspeakable sacrifices.

'Come back, Leslie!' said a serene voice in my ear. It was Barbara speaking.

'Where to?' I asked.

'To earth. No visions to-day: they're bad for you.'

'Sorry,' I said. 'I was thinking of my favourite historical character.'

'Who was he?'

'Hannibal. Just about the finest soldier that ever lived, in my humble opinion.'

'I thought it would be a soldier!' smiled Barbara. 'What did he do?'

'He set out from Carthage with an army and fleet to conquer Rome, in the days when Rome was really great. He started from the water-front, right down there at our feet, and sailed to Spain, which was a Roman province in those days. He began by capturing the principal fortress, Saguntum, and then marched over the Pyrenees and along the Riviera. He fought his way across the Rhone into Gaul; then he crossed the Alps—the *Alps!*—with all his transport and forty elephants, and came storming down into Northern Italy. He only had half his army left by that time, but nothing could shake him. He pulled his mercenaries together, and beat the Romans in three pitched battles, and then settled down to conquer Italy. But he never conquered Italy, and he never captured Rome. If he had, the history of the world would have been changed, and you and I might have been sacrificing to Moloch on Sunday mornings instead of dropping three-penny-bits into an offertory bag.'

These superfluous reflections were here cut short by the intervention of Melchizedek, recalled to a sense of duty by the fact that he had finished all there was to eat. Once more he stood before us, indefatigable and affectionate.

'I take you now,' he announced, 'to Arab village. Harem for mesdames: light'ouse for messieurs. Five franc.'

Sir James looked up from Baedeker, reprovingly.

'We have other plans,' he said. 'We have one hour at our disposal. We will devote half of that time to the ruins of Carthage, and the other half to the Musée Lavigerie, where I gather that the yield of the excavations is preserved. Where is the Musée?'

'Right here,' replied the old gentleman, who apparently spoke every language, pointing to an adjacent building. 'In Grand Séminaire. I take you now. Five franc.'

There was a general uprising.

'We must exercise a certain caution,' continued Sir James, still quoting from Baedeker, 'when we visit the ruins: they abound in awkward cavities and fissures, and scorpions lurk under loose stones. However, we will see the Museum first. We can leave the car here.'

Sir James, Lady Rumborough, and Jubberley turned to follow our guide. My own gaze drifted longingly down towards the shore, to where an electric tram was gliding westward—away from Carthage and stuccoed civilisation. My eye caught Barbara's, questioningly. She nodded. We stood stock-still, waiting till our host and hostess had turned the corner and the chantings of Melchizedek had died away. Then we tiptoed off in the opposite direction, past the stertorous carcass of our chauffeur slumbering in the car, and sped down the hill towards the beach.

Half an hour later we alighted at the terminus of the electric railway—a desolate waste of sand-dunes, dotted with a few forlorn bungalows and summer cafés. The surrounding territory was a waste of wire fences and notice-boards which announced that the *propriété* was *privé*, and that it was 'defended to circulate' there. Presently we shook off these shackles of the capitalistic system, and found ourselves upon a great stretch of sandy, rocky beach, backed by red bluffs and running westward towards a distant headland. Sidi-Bou-Said was well behind now, and we were alone: the only human being in sight was a Maltese fisherman, broiling three apparently live fish over a small fire of sticks under the shelter of a rock. Presently he too dropped out of sight.

'Would you mind if I took off my shoes and stockings?' Barbara asked, after we had walked a mile or so.

'I should be honoured by such a mark of intimate friendship.'

We sat on a rock and dabbled our toes in the water, like two children.

'This is more like the Carthaginian coast as I had pictured it,' I said, looking about me.

Barbara held up a warning finger.

'Remember, picturing things is *verboten*,' she said. 'Tell me more about Hannibal. Why did he never conquer Italy?'

Failing, manlike, to realise that Barbara was asking this question more to keep my imagination out of mischief than to test my historical knowledge, I replied at some length.

'Because the skunks whom he had left behind in Carthage let him down. They left him to fight for his life in Italy, while they went on with their trading, and corn-chandling, and political wire-pulling, and their fat prosperity. They never sent him a man, or a horse, or a javelin: they left him where he was, marooned. Without reinforcements he couldn't attack, and without ships he couldn't get home. He had lost an eye through some kind of swamp fever, and all his elephants were dead but one; but nothing could defeat him. For fifteen years he ranged up and down Italy like a hungry wolf, with his tatterdemalion army at his heels, and not a Roman dog ever dared put his nose outside his kennel when he passed by. Fifteen years! What a pill for a great military nation! Think what it would mean if we had a German army loose in England for fifteen years to-day, calling in at Birmingham and Manchester whenever they wanted supplies, while we sat on Sydenham Hill wishing they would go away! What a pill for imperial England! Fifteen years! Stout fellow!'

'Where was his wife all this time?' asked Barbara, characteristically. 'I suppose he had one.'

'Yes, I expect he had one; but I don't remember her name.'

'Wasn't it Dido?'

'Oh no. Dido was a much earlier vintage. She was the foundress of Carthage. She came from Phœnicia—Tyre, I think. She is chiefly known to fame for her affair with Æneas, who dropped in, upon his wanderings after the fall of Troy, and stayed for a year or two. I suppose he found her a bit of a bore in the end; for he suddenly developed a premonition that he had to go to Italy to found a city there—Rome, in fact—and he left Carthage without saying good-bye.'

'And what did Dido do then, poor thing?'

'She watched his ship out of sight, from that cape over there where the lighthouse is now; then went home, made a bonfire of all her palace furniture, and laid herself on the top. My Vergil's a bit rusty, but I think that's how she ended.'

'Poor soul!'

'I wouldn't waste much sympathy on her, if I were you. I expect she was a bit of a dragon; and in any case I don't really think she ever existed.'

'I can't help feeling that she did,' said Barbara. 'She sounds a very real sort of person.'

At this moment a clump of seaweed, attached to a stone, and thrown with considerable force, landed squarely in the back of my neck. Arabella Hockley, who, for all her clumsiness, could move remarkably softly when she liked, was standing behind us, grinning complacently.

'Hallo, you two!' she said. 'I thought I'd startle you!'

'You did,' I agreed, rubbing my neck.

'Arabella, you are a horrible child,' said Barbara. 'Go away!'

'We've beed baking a discovery,' announced Arabella, unabashed. 'It's a cave—ad edorbous affair. Mr. Podbore will tell

you. Here he is.'

We turned and looked. Mr. Podmore was visible, making his way down from the rocks above the beach. Presently he joined us, in a flutter of mild excitement.

'We have discovered a most remarkable cavern,' he announced; 'remarkable because, although I imagine its existence must be known to the inhabitants, it exhibits no signs of present occupation or use.'

'Perhaps the people prefer to live in houses,' suggested practical Barbara, drying her feet with my handkerchief.

'Your surmise is probably correct,' said Mr. Podmore. 'Although some of the earliest cave-dwellers in history lived in this district and in the mountains behind—the original Troglodytes, in fact—their more civilised descendants would naturally prefer the comforts of a modern dwelling. On the other hand, it seems strange that such a commodious cave as this should not be put to practical use. Its present isolation must be due to some local superstition—some form of *tabu*. The thought is intriguing: I should like to explore it further.'

'The cave?' I asked.

'No; the possibilities of the thought. Forgive me for my ambiguity.'

We forgave him freely, and Barbara said:

'All the same, why shouldn't we explore the cave too?'

'Carried unanimously!' I replied; and we followed Mr. Podmore up the beach.

IV

The entrance to the cave gave no hint of the size of the interior, being merely a perpendicular cleft in a cliff, with an apparent depth of a few yards. But if, having penetrated thus far, you squeezed round to your right and then round to your left again, you found yourself in a great rocky chamber, floored with clean white sand, and lit by openings which pierced the lofty walls.

The shape was roughly semicircular. From the flat wall opposite the entrance which formed the chord of the arc, a platform of rock, perhaps six feet high, jutted out some ten feet or so. Before this, in the sandy floor, lay a low, flat rectangular slab of stone, about the size of an ordinary bed. Over the entrance to the cave projected a broad ledge, with an opening behind it commanding a view of the beach. This ledge was reached by a natural staircase of rock.

The atmosphere was clean and fresh, and shafts of light from the afternoon sun penetrated the slits in the western wall, illuminating the rocky face above the platform with vivid yellow patches. At the back of the platform an arched opening led to some inner chamber of the cave. There were other openings round the walls, leading presumably to similar chambers.

Of course, I did not take in all these details at once. I had ample opportunity for studying them later. It is sufficient to say here that the mere revelation of the existence of this spacious and perfectly proportioned cavern (which had plainly been extended and improved by the hand of some long-forgotten architect) was in itself a sufficiently surprising and improbable adventure, even upon the mysterious and romantic shores of Northern Africa.

Little though we suspected it, the cave was destined to be the scene for us of adventures more surprising and more improbable still.

Meanwhile, Barbara expressed the opinion that it would be a lovely place for a picnic.

Chapter VI

The Cracking Point

I

Lila greeted us as we stepped on board. She was already dressed for dinner—a distracting vision of gold stockings and gold-tipped cigarette, with a handful of chiffon intervening.

'You two are for it,' she warned Barbara and me.

'From whom—for what?' I asked.

'From Mutt, or Jeff, or both—for creeping out of the Museum party.'

'Never mind,' said Barbara: 'we have a lovely discovery to report, by way of reparation.' And she told her sister about the cave.

Lila, needless to say, was devastated, or else divinely thrilled. I forget which; but the present generation is always either one or the other.

'We'll go there for the day,' she announced; 'and bathe, and dance, and explore. I wonder if the Lady Mutt would let us sleep ashore, on the sand.'

'Don't forget the harmless necessary chaperon!' smiled Barbara.

'Oh, I meant the whole bunch: I should be bored stiff with Jimmy alone. By the way, I clicked with a perfectly adorable Frenchman.'

'Where, dear?'

'In Tunis. We were looking for a place to sit down and have an *apéritif* before lunch, and we found what we wanted in the Boulevard Jules Ferry. It was the usual thing, with a striped awning and little tables out on the pavement, only quite too wonderfully *chic*-looking. Everything clean and new: there were officers in uniform sitting about, too. We four sat down: nobody took the slightest notice of us. George, of course, began to bluster and bang on the table; but that didn't do any good. Then I spotted that the waiters were all in uniform too, and suddenly I felt a clammy feeling up my spine. Something told me to look round, and I did. My dear, there on the wall was a brass plate, which said, "Cercle Militaire"! I nearly swooned. I whispered to the others to crawl out on all-fours. We had nearly done it, when a perfectly adorable young officer got up from his little table, and saluted, and asked us to be his guests. George, of course, looked perfectly *blah*, and Jimmy turned puce all over; but Gwen Gowlland and I said we would be charmed; so he gave us a grenadine. He had the longest eyelashes I ever saw.'

'What were his regiment and rank?' I inquired.

'I don't know. His moustache——'

'What was he wearing on his head?'

'Let me think. A lovely red plush *kepi*, with gold lines round it.'

'How many?'

'Two. What does that mean?'

'A doctor—lieutenant.'

Lila made a face.

'And I thought he was a battle-scarred veteran of the Foreign Legion at least,' she said. 'It's a gloat for Jimmy. Never mind! Then we went for a drive round La Marsa, or whatever the place is called. We were shown over somebody's stables. My dears, you never *saw* such a collection of carriages! There was an old victoria, and a governess-cart, and a perambulator—and a hearse! Think of the coachman getting his orders in the morning! "James, send round the governess-cart and pram at ten, for the children. And James, master's looking a bit chippy this morning: send round the hearse about eleven, on the off chance." Now, you two had better go and report yourselves, and get it over. Hallo, here is Jimmy.'

Jimmy, have you fixed up the *séance*?'

'Yes, in the after-saloon, about ten o'clock this evening. The Podmore person is arranging chairs now, madly excited. Oh, I forgot, I'm not talking to you, Lila.'

'It's all right, Jimmy dear. He was only the regimental Pill, after all, so you needn't have been so madly jealous. Don't sulk any more. Give me a smile, and I'll let you walk round the deck with me.'

She took the arm of the brooding James, and the pair passed out of sight, still wrangling. Barbara looked after them.

'Heaven bless you both, my dears,' she said, with a little sigh, 'and give you sense! What was that about a *séance*, Leslie?'

'I fancy Podmore is going to break out in a fresh place,' I replied. 'This spiritualistic entertainment has been threatening for some time.'

'Well, something tells me that neither you nor I will be present: we are going to be sent to bed without our supper. Come along and kiss the rod. "The sooner it's over the sooner to sleep"!'

We got off surprisingly lightly. What our judges required, we soon discovered, was not so much a criminal as an audience. Judges do not seem to vary much as a class.

'Your absence, Colonel Miles,' announced Jubberley, who surpassed all the others in the insistence with which he treated me as honorary unpaid courier to the expedition, 'was responsible for a regrettable *contretemps* this evening, just before we re-embarked.'

'I'm sorry. What happened?'

'There was a fracas on the quay at Goletta——'

'Was that dear old gentleman mixed up in it?' asked Barbara.

'The elderly native?'

'Yes.'

'He was. Sir James paid him the hundred francs, with a most handsome *pourboire*, in addition, of ten francs——'

'You will have to pay your share of that, you know,' interpolated Lady Rumborough at this point, 'even if you did slip away.'

'A deplorable scene then took place,' resumed Jubberley. 'The man you refer to handed the ten francs to the driver of the car, and hurriedly thrust the hundred-franc note down the inside of his own——that is, he concealed it about his person. The driver of the car, observing this, emitted a piercing yell, apparently of protest, and committed a violent assault upon his companion. They actually rolled upon the ground, biting and scratching one another, and employing language which fortunately we were unable to understand.'

Here Sir James cut in.

'Needless to say,' he complained, 'the police were nowhere to be found. So different from our own well-ordered——'

'Ultimately,' announced Jubberley, getting the inside berth again, 'a gendarme arrived, just as we were beginning to entertain serious fears for the elder man.'

'He had got his head pushed through the spokes,' explained Lady Rumborough, with her usual lucidity.

'He separated them,' continued her husband, 'and we held a brief inquiry——so far as any one could in the middle of the large mob which had now assembled. Then the truth came out. The old man was not the owner of the car at all: he was nothing more than an intruder—a mere excrescence, in fact——'

'An audacious impostor,' added Jubberley, summing up. 'To-morrow I shall lodge a formal complaint with the British Vice-Consul at Tunis.'

'Whom did the car belong to?' I asked.

'To the man who was driving it, of course. The other man had attached himself to the party quite uninvited. In the end we succeeded, with considerable difficulty, owing to the absence of our official interpreter'—here Sir James favoured me with a vinegary smile—'in compelling him to disgorge; and the money was distributed in a more equitable manner.'

'How did the old gentleman like that?' asked Barbara.

'When we left him he was literally weeping with rage, and threatening to follow us on board. He will certainly be waiting for us when we land to-morrow: I am afraid there will be another most unpleasant scene. You see, Colonel Miles——'

'I've got a plan to suggest,' said Barbara, 'which will make everything all right. We've discovered a deserted strip of sandy beach much further along the coast, right under some tall cliffs, and a really beautiful cave, where we might picnic to-morrow. Why not land there instead?'

'What's the cave like?' inquired Lady Rumborough.

We told her.

'We'll have lunch there,' announced her ladyship promptly, 'and a rubber afterwards. I don't want to go to Tunis. All foreign towns are alike—nothing but foreigners and smells. We'll take supper ashore too: there's no sort of elbow-room in the saloon. Something tinned will do. James, tell the captain to move the yacht.'

II

We dropped anchor in our new berth just as dinner ended, and came on deck to find ourselves lying less than a mile from the beach—Barbara's beach—which was now illuminated by a most majestic moon.

My shipmates were in a particularly obnoxious mood. I had failed, as usual, to get next to Barbara at dinner, and had been compelled to endure the languishings of Gwen Gowlland on one side and the faint aroma of fish-scales which appeared to be inseparable from the person of Arabella Hockley, even in festal attire, on the other. We had now adjourned to the shelter of the awning on deck. The usual bridge rubber was in progress. Sir James was drawing up to-morrow's time-table, with the assistance of Barbara and Gwen, who had been pressed into the service. Mr. Podmore was engaged upon his new mystery below stairs. Arabella was laying night lines. Close by, Lila was dancing with Jimmy. To me, as the unemployed member of the party, had been allotted the task of tending the gramophone—probably the most degrading form of human bondage yet conceived.

'At two bells,' I heard Sir James say, as I mechanically pushed over the needle of my instrument to enable it to reiterate the fallacious intelligence that it was Never Going to Rain No More—from the port gangway. Dress, stout boots, walking-sticks, and sun-helmets: we may feel disposed to explore the *hinterland*. Luncheon will be served at eight-and-a-half bells: supper will be the subject of a subsequent special order. In the event of the party scattering, the rendezvous will be at the point of debarkation, not later than eight bells in the evening watch. I shall require three copies of that, Mrs. Hatton. Kindly post one in the after-saloon, one in the forward-lounge, and retain the third for filing purposes.'

'Yes, Sir James,' said Barbara meekly, the corners of her mouth twitching. I wished I possessed Barbara's faculty for extracting humour from unlikely material.

'Now for the provision boat, Miss Gowlland. It will leave the starboard gangway an hour sooner than the shore party, and will be in charge of the chief steward. He will take with him Colonel Miles's valet, to wait at luncheon, thus permitting the steward himself to return on board at once. (He checks the inventory of the plate and glass on Thursdays.) The first hamper will contain knives, forks, spoons, and enamelled mugs for twelve persons——'

And so on. From the bridge table came the voice of George Bumpstead, who included among his many engaging social accomplishments the not uncommon trick of referring to individual playing-cards by mysterious and monotonous nicknames:

'The Curse of Scotland! Is that the best you can do, Jubberley? It's nah-poo anyway, because I've got jolly old Mossy Face waiting for it!' He slapped down a card, and roared with laughter. 'Why didn't you put up The Bullet? You'd have pipped his nibs: he's a singleton.' And honest George roared again.

Gwen caught my eye, and gave me a melting look, obviously intended to imply that we were fellow-sufferers, and that it was up to me to create a diversion. But I was saved the trouble: Mr. Podmore appeared on deck.

'All is in readiness,' he announced, rubbing his hands.

'What's that?' inquired Lady Rumborough, with a readiness which seemed to indicate that some one had dealt her a yarborough.

'The *séance*,' explained Podmore.

'Oh, that? All right, we'll come. We'll finish this rubber another time,' replied her ladyship, dexterously tearing up the score-sheet. 'Run along, everybody!'

I stopped the gramophone and approached Barbara.

'Are you coming to the *séance*?' I asked.

'Have we finished, Sir James?' inquired Barbara.

'You will have finished when you have completed three copies of to-morrow's orders, Mrs. Hatton,' replied our host precisely.

'I shan't be five minutes, Leslie,' said Barbara.

'Good: I'll wait for you.'

I strolled away, to find myself face to face with Gwen. Needless to say she had abandoned her clerical duties, and was now too obviously waiting to be escorted to the *séance*.

'Hallo, Gwen!' I said lamely.

'Leslie dear, why couldn't you come and rescue me from that bondage?' she inquired, in tones of tender reproach.

'I'm sorry: I thought you were busy.'

'Yes, I suppose slaves are always busy. But couldn't you have come and freed just one little slave—taken her up on the bridge for a breath of air, or something?'

'Sorry!' I said again. Apologising to Gwen becomes a rather mechanical business. But Gwen was inexorable.

'Don't you think that a really devoted cavalier,' she pursued, 'would have *forced* his way into the thick of the battle, and *carried* his lady off?'

This was getting beyond all human endurance. I stopped in my tracks, and said, in sudden desperation:

'Gwen, listen to me a minute. I can't express things properly; but really I *must* say something to you. I've been trying to say it for a long time——'

'Oh, Leslie dear!' murmured Gwen, dropping her eyelashes coyly.

'No, no!' I cried, horror-struck. 'What I mean is this. You and I have been the best of friends, and all that; but I'm not very fit just now; and I—simply—can't——' I squirmed helplessly.

A jovial hand crashed upon my shoulder. Providence had come to my rescue, in the altogether effective disguise of George Bumpstead.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' he bawled. 'What are we doing, Miles, old son—reciting? That's not the way to entertain the girls. Gwen, you come along with me, and I'll show you. We'll go up on the bridge, and look at the moon, and I'll make love to you; and we'll leave this young elocutionist to talk to himself. Bye-bye, Miles.' He took Gwen's arm, and marched her off, protesting feebly:

'George dear, don't be so rough with me!'

'You like it!' said George simply, and bore her away.

Thankful for small mercies, but unreasonably incensed at having any woman carried off from under my guns by such a lout as George Bumpstead, I drifted back, fuming, towards the Chinese lanterns in the stern. An obscene shape suddenly obtruded itself between me and their soft radiance. It was Jubberley.

'Colonel Miles,' he said, 'will you favour me with your company for five minutes?'

Dazed by this fresh evidence of my popularity, I assented woodenly.

Jubberley conducted me to a quiet part of the deck, on the side of the ship remote from the moon, planted me squarely in an angle between the chart-house and a mast, cleared his throat, and began. I immediately realised the correctness of Mrs. Dunham-Massey's statement that Jubberley stood too close to people when he talked. His finger was in my buttonhole, and his overwarm presence seemed to envelop me.

'Perhaps, Colonel, you will not take it amiss from me, as an older man than yourself, if I drop you a friendly hint.'

'Quite!' I answered, as amiably as I could. 'But would you mind dropping it to-morrow, instead? I have to go below now.' And I made a futile attempt to sidle out of my corner.

Jubberley merely crowded closer: his convex white waistcoat was now touching mine, which was concave.

'Certainly, if you wish it. But what I have to say will not take a moment. I was merely about to point out that in the proffering and receipt of hospitality certain very sacred obligations rest upon both host and guest.'

'Yes, I know. Now, do you mind if I——'

'The main duty of a host, of course, is to be—ah—hospitable.'

'How true!' With a dexterous waltzing movement I got out of my corner, and put Jubberley there. 'You express yourself most pointedly.' I took a step back.

'That was my intention. But "pointedly" is hardly the word: one has no desire to arouse resentment. Shall we say "bluntly"? That is a good, honest, English——'

'Bluntly? Capital! Ha, ha—capital!' I continued to walk backwards across the deck, but Jubberley was sticking to me as closely as a flapper in a foxtrot.

'On the other hand,' he resumed, 'the duties—you will stop me if I offend you?'

'All right.'

'On the other hand, the duties incumbent upon the guest are no less sacred. In the first place, he should conform to his host's arrangements for his entertainment, without comment or criticism; in the second, he should associate freely with his fellow-guests——'

I was now in worse case than ever, being pinned firmly against the rail at the side of the ship, half deafened, wholly dazed.

'In the third'—here three warm fingers tapped me in the middle of my shirt front—that association must be maintained upon terms of general and indiscriminating cordiality. In other words, a guest must not indulge in likes and dislikes! And it is for that reason that I have taken upon myself the not entirely grateful task of addressing to you a few words of—ah—friendly remonstrance.'

I began to feel slightly hysterical. Jubberley's fat, fatuous, glistening face was within six inches of mine. Dimly I wondered why I did not hit it; and suddenly I realised that it was because I was a poor creature, cursed with a fatal detachment of mind which compelled me to see things from other people's point of view and not my own. I had just realised that the old fellow was right, dead right. I would apologise—or should I jump overboard? Or should I scream? I felt more like that than anything else.

A shadow fell between us—or would have fallen if there had been room.

'Everybody is waitig for you id the salood,' announced a hoarse voice. It was Arabella Hockley: Providence had come to my aid for a second time, again in most improbable shape.

I wrenched myself from under my incubus, and greeted Arabella with quite unnecessary cordiality.

'Hallo,' I cried; 'how good of you to come for me! I'm so sorry, Jubberley. Now then, Arabella!' I almost took her arm.

We reached the head of the gangway. Arabella paused, and surveyed me archly.

'I could tell you subthig,' she announced.

But I had received enough confidences for that night.

'We mustn't keep the others waiting,' I said. 'Come along down!'

III

The preliminaries to the *séance* were humdrum enough. First, Podmore arranged us round the table, which nearly filled the small after-saloon. He had spread a steamer rug over the skylight above our heads, to exclude the moon. I sat

between Barbara and Arabella: other students of the occult in attendance were Jimmy, Lila, and Mrs. Dunham-Massey. Gwen and George Bumpstead were absent, presumably communing with Nature upon the bridge.

Our actual session was inaugurated with an address from Mr. Podmore—earnest, comprehensive, and entirely thrown away upon his audience, some of whom were inclined to be frivolous. It was full of references to trance-addresses, controls, helpful vibrations, and other equally absorbing and incomprehensible matters. After he had held forth for ten minutes or so, Jimmy Rumborough inquired:

'What about putting in a trunk call?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Can't we ring up a spook?'

'I hardly think,' replied Mr. Podmore reproachfully, 'that we shall achieve success if we approach our task in any spirit of levity.'

'Cut it out, Jimmy,' commanded Lila.

'All right!' replied James in an injured voice. 'Do things your own way.'

'We mean to. How shall we start, Mr. Podmore?'

'We will start,' replied Mr. Podmore, with renewed enthusiasm, 'by endeavouring to create an atmosphere favourable to psychic vibrations. I therefore suggest that we sit in the dark for a few minutes, with hands linked, thus forming a closed ring favourable to concentration.'

It was practically inviting a riot, but we did it. I turned out the light, being nearest the switch, took Barbara's slim fingers in my left hand and Arabella's clammy paw in my right, and composed myself to meditation. There was much whispering and scuffling at the other side of the table, but presently it died away and comparative silence reigned.

'Well, what about it?' inquired Jimmy's voice at last.

'Please be patient,' said Mr. Podmore. 'When I feel that a presence is building up for the purpose of communicating with us, I will instantly report. If any of you become conscious of similar phenomena—after all, some of you may be more mediumistic than I—will you kindly indicate the fact?'

Silence lay upon us once more—more heavily this time. Suddenly the table gave a disturbing creak: three resounding bumps followed. There were startled exclamations in the darkness.

'Is some one present?' inquired Mr. Podmore, his voice trembling with eagerness.

The reply was immediate, and was conveyed, not by conventional rappings, but by a muffled falsetto voice, proceeding apparently from under the table.

'I am the spirit,' it squeaked, 'of the late Martha Podmore, deceased wife of Ernest Podmore. Is my Ernie around?'

'I am a bachelor,' replied Mr. Podmore hurriedly. 'Possibly you seek some other earth-dweller, similarly named.'

'No, Ern: it's you I want,' insisted the voice. (Another bump, much louder.) 'Damn!'

'If you can't be funnier than that, Jimmy dear,' interpolated the clear voice of Lila, 'you'd better stop. Turn up the light, Leslie. As a mirthmaker this lad is a total loss.'

I complied, and Jimmy Rumborough, looking a trifle sheepish, crawled out from under the table, rubbing his head.

'I gave my head the most filthy bump,' he complained.

Mr. Podmore rose to his feet.

'I hardly think it is worth while continuing the *séance*,' he said mournfully.

'Pay no attention to Jimmy, Mr. Podmore,' urged Barbara. 'He'll be good now—won't you, Jimmy?'

'If you mean, will I risk cracking my skull again,' grumbled our humorist, 'I certainly won't!'

'I'll control him,' said Lila. 'Please go ahead, Mr. Podmore: I was just beginning to feel divinely creepy.'

Podmore, always easily mollified, resumed his seat.

'I have a further suggestion to make,' he announced. 'Spirits which *desire* to be manifested usually present themselves to the medium—myself, we will say—at once, and the medium transmits their message to the individuals most directly concerned. But sometimes the spirits are not in a responsive mood, and decline to make use of the medium. In that case, it is usually more profitable for the whole company to select some particular spirit, and invoke its presence by collective concentration.'

'That's a good idea,' said Lila. 'Who shall we start with? Would you like us to concentrate on your late husband, Mrs. Dunham-Massey?'

'No, thank you, dear,' replied Mrs. Dunham-Massey—a trifle hastily, I thought. 'One rather shrinks——'

'What about——?' Jimmy suggested a gentleman who had recently been hanged, to the entire absorption of our popular press.

'I do not think it would be advisable to invoke the spirit of a notorious homicide,' said Mr. Podmore mildly: 'his presence might exercise a deterrent and dispersive effect upon other spirits.'

'Suppose we try people who used to live near here,' said Barbara, 'people who are likely to haunt this district.'

'Patronise home industries, eh? A sound scheme.' This, of course, from Jimmy. 'Who shall be the lucky fellow?'

Barbara turned to me.

'What about one of those historical characters you were telling me about this morning, Leslie?'

'Hannibal?'

'Yes. Perhaps a woman would be more interesting, though.'

'Dido, then?'

'Yes, Dido.'

'That is, if she ever existed.'

'This will give us a chance to find out.'

'Very well. Mr. Podmore, could we concentrate upon Queen Dido of Carthage, do you think?'

'It would be a most interesting experiment,' replied Podmore, 'and I think feasible. The essential vibrations should be easy to procure, considering the short distance at which we find ourselves from the site of Queen Dido's ancient capital. Are we all ready?'

I turned out the light, and we closed the ring again. We were growing interested now, and this time real silence reigned. I closed my eyes in the warm darkness, and let my imagination run. I pictured the scene of our day's wanderings—the coast of ancient Carthage, the Byrsa, the sites of vanished palaces, the cave....

Presently Podmore spoke again, in a low, respectful voice.

'Is the spirit of Queen Dido of Carthage present?' he asked. There was a tense silence; then came a faint but perceptible sound—a gentle rustling and scratching, which in a more normal atmosphere would have suggested mice behind a panel.

'James, my child,' remarked Lila, 'you are boring us.'

'I'm not doing anything,' replied Jimmy indignantly. 'It's Arabella.'

'T'b dot doig adythig!'

'Then, by golly——!'

'*Hush!*'

We sat silent again. The darkness was overpowering: the ring was firmly closed: our nerves were taut.

Suddenly—inexplicably—unmistakably—I became conscious of—I knew not what. A gentle wind seemed to stir my hair; something moved behind me; I could have sworn that a ghostly hand passed over my brow. Was a presence 'building up,' as Podmore had suggested? I did not know; but there was something there, and whatever was there was there for me. I do not know how I knew, but I knew. The skin of my scalp tightened; my heart seemed to slow down; I felt myself suddenly sinking—sinking...

With a tremendous effort I shook off the spell that bound me, and released the hands of my neighbours. Then, almost instinctively, I leaned back and jerked on the light. Every one sat up and blinked.

'Hallo,' said Jimmy, 'what was that for? I was concentrating like smoke.'

'I gave no directions, Colonel Miles——' began Podmore mildly.

'I say, observe our Leslie!' piped Lila.

Every one complied. Barbara rose to her feet.

'Leslie,' she said, 'you're looking ghastly. This cabin is too hot for you: come on deck.'

'I rather think I will,' I replied.

At the same moment footsteps were heard approaching along the deck above our heads; the rug which covered the skylight was plucked off, and George Bumpstead stood revealed to us, boisterously demanding admittance for himself and Gwen, whom he described as 'Ghostly Gertie.' The pair were bidden to come down and take our places, and in the turmoil inseparable from George Bumpstead's arrival anywhere I thankfully followed Barbara on deck.

IV

'It must have been an eerie feeling, Leslie. I expect you're a natural medium, without knowing it.'

Barbara was speaking. We were still on deck, though it was nearly midnight. My head throbbed, but in other respects I was myself again.

'I don't believe much in mediums,' I replied. 'I put the feeling down to some kind of self-hypnotism, due to my own state of health and the torment of my present company. Not yours, of course!'

I described my last interviews with Gwen and Jubberley.

'I seem to have lost my grip altogether,' I lamented. 'Professionally, I have a comfortably rough side to my tongue: my reputation in that direction, both in the mess and on the barrack square, used to be that of an artist of high standing. But before the people on this yacht I'm dumb—helpless and dumb. I'm a worm in their brazen presence, and they know it. All I can do is to sit about in corners, muttering to myself and devising tortures for them.'

Barbara smiled.

'Do you still do that? I remember you used to, as a little boy.'

'Rather! Do you know what I would do to a man who slaps people on the back unexpectedly?'

'Like George Bumpstead?'

'Yes. I should put him with his face up against a wall, with long spikes sticking out of it, and then I should slap *him* on the back till all the spikes worked right through. Then I should have him picked off and rested. After that I should replace him in position, only upside down this time, and repeat the motions in quick time. Then, as for Jubberley—oh, *Jubberley!*' I wriggled convulsively.

Barbara was regarding me with serious eyes.

'Leslie,' she inquired, 'how are you sleeping?'

'Not too well. I dream perpetually on this ship, and that's a thing I haven't done since hospital days. That infernal gramophone may be responsible. It reminds me of the overworked instrument which did duty in the ward next to mine. It had two records and one needle. I can sometimes hear *The Home Fires Burning* now—with a long-drawn metallic screech where you Turn the Lining Inside Out. Wow!'

'You were telling me about your dreams the other afternoon,' said Barbara; 'but some one interrupted us.'

'You surprise me! What was I telling you?'

'Something about a vision. Was it a nice one?'

'Ah, yes! Very. It was a beautiful lady. She used to sit at the foot of my cot.'

'What was she like?'

'Now I come to think of it, she was rather like you. Differently dressed, of course.'

'Adequately, I trust!'

'Oh yes; she was an apparition one could have introduced anywhere. She was you in a sort of former state—you as you would have looked if you had been Helen of Troy, or Cleopatra, or somebody like that.'

'And she used to sit on the end of your cot?'

'Yes. She just sat there and smiled at me, and then faded away.'

'Like the Cheshire cat? I had no idea you were such a ladies' man, Leslie.'

'The only places where I meet ladies these days are in dreams,' I said. 'The other kind have put me on the shelf.'

Barbara shook her head. 'The only time we ever go on the shelf,' she said, 'is when we climb up and put ourselves there. I advise you to climb down again before it's too late, my friend.'

'What do you mean by too late?' I asked dejectedly.

'I mean, before you find that you—can't get down, stupid! Now you must go to bed. What *would* Mrs. Dunham-Massey say if she saw us here!'

We stood together for a moment, gazing across the moonlit waters towards the towering silhouette of North Africa.

'What a lovely night!' murmured Barbara. 'And how warm and soft the breeze is! As caressing as a velvet cloak about one's shoulders.'

'It's the land breeze,' I said. 'It springs up about this time, and blows out to sea. It comes down from those mountains over there. Grim-looking old fellows, what?'

'I wonder what lies behind them.'

'Some of the oldest secrets in the world,' I said soberly.

Barbara shivered slightly.

'You're tired,' I said: 'it's after midnight. What about a little folding of the hands to sleep?'

We tiptoed down the companion-stair, hand in hand, like two naughty children. Presently we arrived outside Barbara's cabin. She held my hand a moment longer.

'We have had an instructive conversation, my dear,' she said. 'To-morrow I shall talk to you like a mother; but here are three pieces of advice to go on with. First, get Rorison to bring you a nice whisky-and-soda; secondly, go to sleep and don't dream; thirdly, always greet your tormentors with a smile—but hit back! Good-night.'

Her door closed, and I walked to my cabin. Here I found Rorison waiting for me.

'Rorison,' I said, 'get me a whisky-and-soda.'

'Yes, sirr.'

'And I was particularly instructed to tell you that it must be a nice one.'

Rorison observed that all whiskies-and-sodas are nice.

'I presume that what was meant on this occasion was a stiff one. Bring it up on deck: I think I shall sleep there: this cabin is stifling.'

Rorison disappeared upon his errand of mercy, and I substituted a dressing-gown for my dinner-jacket. Then I returned to the deck, carrying a couple of blankets and a pillow, where I found my Ganymede waiting with a sizzling tumbler on a salver. I dismissed him to his own bed, and made myself comfortable in a long bamboo chair under the awning.

After that I drank the whisky-and-soda—I noticed that Rorison had taken no chances about its not being nice—and settled down to sleep. But sleep was long in coming. The night was very still, except for the balmy land breeze; and dark, for the moon had set. Away forward the riding-light of the yacht hung twinkling on the forestay; over my head glowed a single electric bulb. Otherwise, the darkness and the stillness were complete.

I tried counting sheep and other well-tried inducements to slumber—including a patent one of my own, which consists in selecting some familiar golf-course and playing an imaginary round on it, visualising the exact lie of the ball after each stroke—but all in vain. Then, gradually, I awoke to the realisation that I was lying flat on my back, breathing heavily, and blinking at the electric light above me. No wonder I could not sleep: I would turn it out.

Easier said than done. I rose and experimented with a row of switches situated at the head of the companionway, without success. Well, electric lights can always be extinguished by removing the bulbs. Unfortunately this bulb was just out of my reach, suspended from the boom which supported the awning. I tried standing on the skylight below it, but came short by six inches.

I looked round. A Moorish tea-table stood on the deck beside my bamboo couch. Having laid my pillow on the skylight, to protect the glass, I set this table on the pillow; then, balancing myself precariously, essayed to remove the bulb.

I succeeded: it broke in my hand. The light went out; a sharp electric shock ran up my arm: I swayed, toppled, crashed—and found repose at last.



Slowly I opened my eyes. It may have been five minutes later, or as many hours; but it was still dark, except for a certain fluorescent radiance from the sea.

I was lying, half-dazed, upon a heap of cushions beside my couch, which had probably broken my fall. Before me, irradiated by the pale light of sea and sky, stood a tall, slender, white-clad female figure.



Chapter VII

Ex Africa, Semper!

I sat up, leaned forward, and surveyed my visitor mechanically. My eyes, blinking painfully, travelled slowly upward, and finally rested upon her face.

'Hallo, Barbara,' I remarked feebly.

Then I realised that this was not Barbara. It was some one else—some one associated in my mind with iodoform and a wheezy gramophone playing *Tipperary* or *Home Fires Burning* in the next ward. I put my hand to my aching head.

My visitor spoke, in a deep melodious voice.

'I am not the Barbara of whom you speak,' she said.

'I beg your pardon,' I replied. 'I was confusing you with some one whom you strongly resemble. I recognise you now. We first met in Number One General Hospital at Wimereux, years ago. I was pretty bad that night, wasn't I?'

'You were nigh death.'

'I suppose I was. Anyhow, I was extremely glad to see you. You cheered me up, I can tell you.'

'I had come thither to strengthen you.'

'And you certainly did, every time you came. I remember we saw quite a lot of one another during my convalescence; and even after that you used to look in occasionally. It was charming of you.' I knew I was talking inconsequent nonsense, but I could not stop. 'I was describing you to some one only this evening.'

'I heard you,' replied my visitor, a little unexpectedly.

'Oh, did you?' I replied, staggered. 'Might I ask who you are?'

'I was Dido, Queen of Carthage, whose ruins lie round yonder headland.'

Merciful Heavens! I sat up sharply, and a stabbing pain shot through my head. With a gracious gesture my august visitant motioned to me to lie down upon the couch. I did so: I was extremely glad to do so.

'Queen Dido?' I murmured. 'We were asking for you down below just now.'

'I was present,' replied Her Majesty, 'though I could not reveal myself, for lack of a bodily envelope. But I was well pleased that my name should have lingered in the hearts of men.'

'You've been dead—I mean, you used to live a considerable time ago, didn't you?' I inquired, groping for my exact bearings.

'Three thousand years, and more.'

I nodded politely. 'But you visit Earth now and then?'

'Continually. The shades of the great are permitted to do so.'

'Of course, in your position you could always wangle a bit of leave.' I sat up again, suddenly aware that my mode of address bordered on the colloquial. 'Why, O Queen? With what intent?'

'That we may watch over those in whom our hearts are interested.'

'I see. But why pick on—that is to say, why should I, of all men, be so honoured?'

'Because you resemble one whom I loved long since.'

Her Majesty sighed deeply, and came a step nearer. I was more or less myself again now, and I decided that it was high time to direct the conversation into other channels.

'Talking of resemblances,' I said, 'you are very like a great friend of mine, Mrs. Hatton—Barbara. Do you know her at all?'

'It is her body that you now behold,' replied Dido calmly.

'What?'

'Do you not comprehend?'

'No. Of course, I notice an extraordinary resemblance; but——'

'Being but disembodied spirits ourselves,' continued my visitor, who was obviously one of those fortunate people who are impervious to interruption, 'we needs must seek some corporeal habitation when we visit Earth.'

'And you have selected Barbara? And very nice too! That is, I applaud your choice, O Queen. But what is Barbara doing at the present moment, may I ask, without her——'

'She sleeps. Should she awaken, I should be compelled to relinquish her body.'

'Naturally,' I replied—though I did not mean it. 'You've never heard of Box and Cox, I suppose? No, probably not. (Don't talk drivel, old man! All right: I'll try not to. Here goes, again.) O Queen, will you deign to inform me why you have visited me to-night?'

'I came to grant you your heart's desire.'

'I am truly grateful, O Queen; but what exactly——?' I was all at sea again.

Dido drew a great gold ring from her finger.

'Take this,' she said.

I received the gift doubtfully. It is never wise to accept wedding rings from strange females, however exalted.

'Place it upon your finger.'

I slipped it into my waistcoat pocket, instead. I felt less irrevocably wedded to Her Majesty's plans for my future with it there. She continued:

'Guard it well, and hearken. From this moment until sunset to-morrow this ring will bestow upon you such power as few mortals have possessed, and which you of all men have often most sorely needed. During that time you may wreak vengeance upon your foes. Your will shall be inflexible; your purpose shall be of iron; your spirit shall cease for this space of time to shrink from conflict with others. None shall be able to cause you suffering, but you may cause suffering to any, at will.'

'Good God!' I laughed rather light-headedly. I had just realised what that meant. I really could push spikes through Bumpstead now, if I wanted to. I could make Arabella Hockey walk the plank. I could——

'What happens after sunset?' I asked.

'The charm expires. But within that period you should be able to establish lasting supremacy.'

'I'll have a good bang at it, anyhow,' I said. Then a disconcerting thing happened. Queen Dido suddenly went out—or rather out and in, two or three times, like a faulty electric light. First she was there; then she was gone; then she was back again. I gaped helplessly. Then she steadied herself again.

'The soul of the Lady Barbara stirs in its sleep,' she announced. 'I must leave you. Guard well the ring. Should you lose it, or cast it from you, I should recover it; but I could never visit you again.'

'I should just think you wouldn't!' I replied, 'after such discourtesy! And where will you be all to-morrow, while I am putting it across—during my period of supremacy?'

'I shall be about you; but you will not always see me. I will appear to you whenever possible. Should you urgently require assistance at any time, clap your hands—thus.'

'Once?'

'Yes; unless you are in dire distress. Then clap them many times.'

I giggled childishly.

'May I try now?' I asked.

'Assuredly.'

I sat up, and clapped my hands once. Instantly I was conscious, within a few feet of me, of the figure of a Phœnician warrior, armed to the teeth, and standing stiffly to attention.

'Go away!' I said to him. 'I will summon you later!'

'Varra good, sirr,' replied the apparition, and promptly evaporated.

I turned a dazed and inquiring eye towards the Queen. But I was too late. Even as I looked she went out again—this time for good. Evidently Barbara's soul had sat up and was groping for its body.

Feeling the situation completely beyond me, I lay down and slept.

Chapter VIII

My Hour

I

I was awakened next morning by the men swabbing the decks not far from my couch. I arose, and stretched myself. My head was clear, my body alert, my spirits high. It is a grand thing to sleep in the open air.

My recollections of Podmore's *séance* had assumed their proper proportions now. I had been foolish to subject myself to nervous excitement while still suffering from the after-effects of war strain. Luckily I was none the worse. As for my interesting but rather idiotic dream about Queen Dido, it was already beginning to slip from my thoughts. Barbara would be amused to hear such portions of it as I could remember.

I looked over the side. The water was tempting to a hearty and vigorous man. Two minutes later I was swimming round the yacht, to the respectful concern of the ship's boy, who was not of an age to appreciate the pleasures of total immersion. Then I climbed on board again, commandeered a cup of coffee and a biscuit from the galley, where the Ethiopian assistant cook was preparing the crew's breakfast, and returned below to my cabin. It was only six o'clock. Pleasantly relaxed after my swim, I went properly to bed, and fell asleep.

I was awakened by a hammering upon my door and the irruption into my presence of Jimmy Rumborough, smoking a noisome cigarette.

'I say, Colonel,' he exclaimed, 'you were warned for parade at nine o'clock; and here you are still hogging it at nine-fifteen! The old man is going to put you in irons!'

I sat up in my bed and addressed the intruder.

'Jimmy, my lad,' I said, 'you are young and unsophisticated, so I will use no hard words. But if ever you burst into my cabin like this again, in fancy dress and with a smelly little cigarette in your mouth, I shall take you by the seat of your ridiculous trousers and drop you overboard. As for my esteemed host, your parent, advise him to refrain, if possible, for five minutes from fussing like an old maid.'

To say that Master Jimmy was taken aback would be a very mild statement of the case. He simply gaped. I continued, gently:

'Now, you miserable little worm, I hope you understand. Go and tell your father to take his entire school-treat ashore with him, double quick, and leave a gentleman to enjoy his beauty sleep in peace.'

And I turned my face to the wall, stretching luxuriously. I heard the door close softly, and the sound of rapidly receding footsteps. I was dozing off again when I was aroused by a colloquy outside.

'He's tight, I think,' said the voice of Jimmy; 'but go in and find out for yourself.'

'I shall certainly investigate the meaning of this extraordinary——' There came a sharp rapping.

I began to feel a trifle aggrieved: this was no way to treat a guest. I bounded out of bed and across the cabin, and opened the door with a flourish. Sir James was standing outside, in full shore-going kit. His mouth was pursed up, and he wore his *pince-nez* at a most magisterial angle.

'Good morning!' I remarked. But my host was in no humour for the common courtesies of life.

'Discipline, discipline, Colonel!' he snapped. 'The shore party is waiting, and you are not even dressed.'

'The shore party need not wait,' I replied. 'In fact, I shall be thankful to be rid of the whole boiling of them for an hour or two—including yourself, in your Margate-beach suit—and have the ship to myself. I may come ashore about lunch-time: I want to talk to Barbara Hatton: but the less I see of the rest of you, the more I shall like you. Good-bye, and again good-bye!' I slammed the door, without heat, in his face, and went back to bed.

II

I awoke about eleven, and rang for Rorison. Instead, the ship's boy appeared.

'Where is my man?' I asked.

'E went ashore with the party, sir—to wait at lunch.'

'And who the devil said he was to wait at lunch?'

'Is Nibs—the ole man—Sir James, sir—I think! Leastways, it's on the orders put up in the drorin'-room.'

I got out of bed.

'Get me some breakfast,' I said, 'and I'll go ashore. This sort of thing has got to stop. And get a move on, my lad! I've noticed you a lot lately: you are inclined to try things on. If you value your miserable skin, don't try anything on with me!'

'Yessir!' squeaked the wretched youth, and fled.

'That,' I announced to my reflection in the mirror, 'is the stuff to give the troops.'

By noon I was ready for the shore, and ordered a boat.

'I'll tell a man to take you over in the dinghy, sir,' said the chief officer, who was in charge of the deck.

'Don't trouble,' I said. 'I'll take it myself; and I'll send Rorison back with it, right away.'

I paddled to the beach, at a point where the provision boat was moored to a natural jetty of rock. Here I found Rorison discharging cargo, in the shape of Apollinaris water.

'Rorison,' I said, 'take this dinghy and convey yourself on board again.'

'I was warned for tae wait on the lunch party, sirr.'

'Well, you're now warned to get on board, *pronto*—and the warning will not be repeated. The lunch party shall wait on itself.'

'Varra good, sirr,' replied Rorison, with his usual *sangfroid*.

He pushed off, and I turned my face landward. Few of my shipmates were visible. Upon a distant rock I discerned a shapeless silhouette which I took to be Arabella Hockley, fishing. On a flat strip of sand Lila and Jimmy, who had been bathing, were drying themselves by dancing to the music of the inevitable gramophone, which was 'resting on a rock, conveniently low'—like the Walrus or the Carpenter, I forget which. Otherwise the beach was a solitude.

Presently I came to the great cleft which marked the entrance to the cave.

'I fancy I shall find the gang here,' I said to myself. 'I wonder if lunch is ready.'

'Leslie dear!' said a plaintive voice.

I looked up. In an arched opening in the rock, situated about ten feet above my head, and connecting, I remembered now, with the broad ledge over the entrance inside, I beheld a disconsolate vision in a diaphanous white frock and a big tulle hat. It was Gwen, registering silent and uncomplaining martyrdom.

I knew that attitude well; and twenty-four hours ago I should have quailed before it. It meant first of all that Gwen was suffering, and secondly that somebody else had got to suffer too.

Gwen possesses a curious but not unusual faculty. When she is not enjoying herself, she sees to it, in a quivering, self-effacing sort of way, that no fellow-creature in her neighbourhood enjoys himself either. In some uncanny fashion of her own she creates an impression that it would be positively indecent to be happy in the presence of such suffering—like giggling during an interment, or mocking at the flutterings of a wounded bird. Many a time has she brought me to heel by this trick.

It was quite plain what had happened now: she had been left out of something, or neglected in some way, and had

instantly switched on her most devastating record. Unfortunately, her companions of the morning happened to be persons singularly insensible to the sufferings of others. Consequently, Gwen had been reduced to solitary moping, solacing herself by a gentle but adamant resolution to take it out of somebody—probably me—at the earliest opportunity.

'Hallo!' I said. 'Is lunch ready?'

It was an unfeeling remark, and was received as I expected.

'Leslie, poor little Gwen's frightened! She climbed up here all by herself, and can't get down. Leslie come up and save?'

'Go back the way you came, and don't be helpless,' I replied shortly, and entered the cave.

Luncheon was spread upon a trestle-table which some one, probably Rorison, had set out upon the rocky platform at the back. Below, near the stone slab in the centre, Jubberley, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and George Bumpstead were seated round an inverted packing-case, which was being employed as a bridge table. The fourth seat, an up-ended provision box, was vacant, and as I entered the cave that pocket martinet, our host, was commanding Barbara to occupy it.

'My wife has gone to mix the salad,' he announced, indicating one of the rocky chambers. 'Mrs. Hatton, you will kindly take her place. Luncheon will be served in a quarter of an hour: I must go and find Podmore, or he will certainly be unpunctual.'

Barbara cast a longing look shoreward.

'I had thought of joining the children in a bathe,' she said. 'There's just time.'

Sir James held up a peremptory finger. He had not seen me.

'Now, now,' he said, 'no desertion! No absence when warned for duty!'

'You've jolly well got to play,' explained George Bumpstead courteously, 'because there's nobody else. Cut!'

'Nonsense!' I said briskly.

Perhaps I spoke louder than I imagined, for I noticed that every one jumped. Sir James jumped a little higher than any one else; possibly because he had not forgotten the words which I had been compelled to address to him outside my cabin door.

'Barbara would far sooner enjoy herself with Lila on the beach,' I announced. 'Run along, Barbara. Gwen will play bridge instead of you.'

There was dead silence. Then Gwen, who by this time had accepted my advice and regained the floor of the cave under her own steam, inquired:

'Were you saying something about me, Leslie?'

'Yes. You are to play bridge with these three till lunch-time.'

Gwen's eyes and mouth were all O's, at once.

'But, Leslie dear,' she wailed, 'I'm much too nervous to play with these experts: they'll storm at me, and frighten me to death. Besides, I think I ought to go and help Lady Rumborough with the salad.'

'She doesn't need you,' I said. 'But do you really want to help?'

'You know I do, Leslie.'

'Then you can wash up after lunch. Now sit down. Off you go, Barbara, and have a good swim!'

'I must get my bathing things first,' said Barbara. 'They're in a little place down that passage at the back of the platform.'

This was too much for Sir James—as I had rather hoped it would be.

'But this is rank insubordination!' he spluttered.

Jubberley rose to second the motion.

'Colonel Miles,' he began, 'with the best will in the world——'

'Silence!' I commanded.

Silence was instantly forthcoming—a sudden, shocked, and most flattering silence, except for the cavernous echoes of my own voice. Filled with a comfortable sense of elation, I conducted Barbara to the platform.

'Au revoir, Barbara,' I said, patting her on the shoulder.

Barbara gave me an odd look, then disappeared. I turned to the rest of the company. I was smiling: I am not sure that I was not purring. What a fool I had been ever to let these people get the whip hand of me! I looked them over—Gwen, with her silly, insipid face, equipped with a reproachful smile which yesterday would have brought me to the depths of abysmal apology; Sir James, with his absurd little whiskers and enormous white sun-helmet; Bumpstead, with his fish's features and fat cigar; Mrs. Dunham-Massey, white through her make-up, and obviously anxious to say something appropriate to the occasion, yet not quite daring; Jubberley, snorting like a marine monster, and prepared to embark upon a philippic at any moment. Well, these people must be disciplined.

'Rumborough!' I said sharply.

'Yes, my dear fellow?' replied my host, with a certain nervous geniality.

'Go and fetch your wife!'

This was a little too peremptory for Sir James, even in his present rattled condition.

'A command,' he protested—'to your commanding officer?'

'Stop talking rot, and fetch your wife!'

'But, Colonel Miles, I am your host, and your superior officer——'

I began to feel annoyed with this fatuous little pedant, as any sane person would; so I took him by the collar and projected him—quite inoffensively, I hope—into the rock chamber wherein his lady wife was presumably concocting the salad.

'You go too, Mrs. Massey,' I said. 'I shall not require you at present.'

For once the truthful one had no pearl of sincerity to offer. She simply rose and hurried out, without a word. She seemed pleased to go.

I turned to observe the effect of my action upon the remaining three. Gwen and George Bumpstead were considerably impressed; I could see that. But not Jubberley. Nothing, I realised, would ever impress Jubberley but a definite object lesson, with Jubberley as the object. I should have to put on my thinking-cap about Jubberley. Even now he was approaching me, with forefinger outstretched and dignified remonstrance in every curve of him.

'Colonel Miles——' he began.

'Well, what is it now?' I replied, civilly enough.

Jubberley gave his celebrated imitation of a sea-lion before lunch, and continued:

'Colonel Miles, a joke is a joke; but I feel bound, in all friendliness——'

He was at point-blank range by this time. I kept admirable control of myself.

'Jubberley,' I said, 'you are an old man——'

Jubberley bridled.

'I am fifty-six——'

'Don't interrupt! You are an old man, and only a few years now stand between you and a long-overdue and dishonoured grave. I should therefore like to spare you the scene which is going to be enacted in this cave directly.' I pointed to the entrance. 'Go! And take that goggle-eyed girl with you.'

Instead of obeying me, the unfortunate man actually placed a hand upon my shoulder.

'My dear Colonel Miles,' he said earnestly, 'pray compose yourself!'

He got no further. Emitting my best roar to date, I proceeded to hound and hustle Jubberley across the sandy floor and out on to the beach, where I left him blowing like a stranded walrus and bereft of all powers of utterance. Gwen, I was pleased to observe, followed of her own accord; or rather, I think she preceded us. She did not even say 'Poor little

Gwen!

Having cleared the ground of Jubberley, I was now free to deal with Bumpstead, who was standing in the middle of the cave with his mouth open. I approached him.

'Take off your coat!' I said, and began to take off my own.

'What the devil are you jabbering about?' he inquired, without much assurance. 'Are you drunk?'

'Bumpstead,' I repeated, 'take off your coat!'

This time he obeyed: I suppose there was something hypnotic in my eye. Anyhow, the coat came off; and Bumpstead stood there, grinning sheepishly, and trying to pretend that we were playing some new kind of round game together.

'Bumpstead,' I continued, 'I am now going to insult you—so far as any one possibly can——'

'Not at all, old man!' he replied cordially.

'However, I'll do my best. Here goes! You are a boor, a braggart, and a monumental liar. Your sense of humour is that of a yokel at a fair, and your manners are those of a Prussian subaltern in a beer-hall. As an explorer, I don't believe you could find your way from the elevator to the platform of an ordinary Tube station. Regarding your big-game exploits, it is my belief that the biggest game you have ever hunted are the larks in the pudding at the Cheshire Cheese. That's the sort of celebrity you are, Bumpstead. I can't think of anything more to say to you at present, but I may return to the subject later. You can put on your coat again: I only took mine off to see if it would frighten you; and I observe that it did, as I knew it would. On with it!'

Bumpstead began to struggle into the garment.

'Of course, old chap,' he said soothingly—'of course I will! Hot sun to-day, isn't there?'

'Don't make idiotic conversation,' I replied. 'Go and tell the others to come in to lunch.'

George hailed this order with positive gratitude.

'Righto, old boy!' he said. Still smiling, he edged his way out of the cave, and vanished.

I sat down on a deck chair, recently occupied by Lady Rumborough, with my feet on the bridge table, and lit my pipe. I wanted to make plans. I felt full of ideas and energy—a physical and mental giant. One of the most curious phenomena of human life is the completeness with which a new mood can envelop us. At moments of elation we feel that we have never known any other state of mind: life has always been one grand sweet song. At moments of depression we feel that we have always been like this and always will be. This circumstance does not help to lighten our darker hours, but it certainly maintains the glamour of our hours of exaltation. To-day I had not a care in the world: I feared nothing and nobody, and I could not picture myself ever having at any time feared anything or anybody, or see myself doing so in future. Hurrah for Life!

But first of all I must take certain humdrum disciplinary measures. As a beginning——

At this moment I became conscious of a tickling sensation upon the top of my head, in the region of that growing bald spot which warns so many of us in our early thirties that the hairs of our head are numbered, and so are our years. I put up my hand idly, and encountered a cold, slimy, wriggling resistance. An imbecile giggle discharged itself into my right ear.

I sprang to my feet, and found myself confronted by Arabella Hockley, dangling a moribund and unpleasant-looking fish by the tail.

'That bade you jump a little bit, didn't it?' she inquired archly.

Well, I might as well settle with this one now.

'Arabella,' I said, 'far be it from me to lay hands upon a woman, especially a creature as lovely as yourself——'

Arabella looked puzzled. Here was a new and unfamiliar form of invective.

'—save in the way of kindness. But I warn you that if ever you do anything like that again, I shall inflict the most hideous punishment upon you.'

Arabella sniggered, and sat down upon the slab of rock.

'You are id a temper this bordig, aren't you?' she said. After which she produced some yellowish garbage from the pocket of her Aquascutum, and began to chew it.

'What are you eating?' I asked.

'Badada.'

'What else have you in those pockets?'

'Bait.'

'Come here!'

Arabella did not move: why should she? She had had her will of me since the outset of our acquaintance. I stepped across to her, picked her up by the scruff of her neck, and set her upon her feet.

'Arabella,' I said, 'I give you half an hour. At the end of that time you will report to me here—washed, combed, and with your pockets cleared out and your general fishy aroma as completely abated as present circumstances will permit.'

With a sudden wriggle Arabella broke from my grasp, and scrambled up the staircase to the ledge over the entrance. From this eminence she addressed me.

'I could tell you subthig fuddy,' she announced, 'about Gwed and George Bumpstead; but I shan't, dow!'

In Gwen and George I took not the faintest interest; but insubordination was another matter. I mounted the stairway three steps at a time, took the squealing Arabella in my arms, carried her to the rocky window overlooking the beach, and dropped her on to the soft sand below. She scuttled away sideways, like a frightened crab.

III

I descended the staircase into the empty cave, whistling; then stopped, suddenly. The cave was not empty. Upon the rocky platform opposite to me stood a tall, slender female figure, robed in white.

'Hail, O Queen!' I said, bowing low despite myself.

'Isn't that rather effusive?' replied the lady addressed, descending from the platform and sitting by the bridge table. In the not too bright light of the cave I now realised that she was wearing a white wrapper over her bathing dress.

'Barbara!'

'Yes. Whom else were you expecting?'

'I don't know,' I said confusedly. 'At least, I do know. Seeing you dressed like that has just reminded me of something—of a dream I had last night. It has all come back, with a bang. Great heavens! can *that* be why I've been so infernally _____'

'Bossy?' suggested Barbara.

'That's the word. I've been going it a bit since I came ashore, haven't I?'

'And before that, by all accounts. What did you say to Jimmy and his father when they woke you up this morning?'

'Nothing more than what any Christian gentleman would say at having his rest disturbed. Did they appear surprised?'

Barbara bubbled joyously.

'They did,' she said. 'But tell me about your dream.'

I described to her the apparition of last night—everything had come back to me now, to the last detail—and Dido's promise to me of twenty-four hours of aggressive disposition and thick skin.

'I suppose I've been unconsciously reacting to the suggestion of the dream,' I concluded. 'But there may be more in it than that: North Africa's an eerie place. The ancient Romans had a proverb on the subject. "Always something unexpected

from Africa," they used to say. Now I look at you, there *is* more than that. Listen to this bit: it concerns you.'

And I broke to Barbara, as tactfully as possible, the news of the liberties which Dido had recently taken with her outward covering.

But Barbara declined to show concern over this revelation. In fact, she was disposed to be facetious over the whole business. Possibly she was aware that ridicule is fatal to the most pretentious hallucinations.

'Are you expecting any further visits from your lady friend?' she asked.

'She gave me to understand that she would be constantly in attendance.'

'And when she came, she would be wearing my skin and bones?'

'Your "bodily envelope," she called it.'

'H'm!' said Barbara. 'I'm a reasonable woman, I hope, and I admit that when I am asleep my body can be of no possible use to me. Still, you know, one doesn't altogether relish the idea of lending it to a stranger. Think of the things she might do with it! Think how she might dress it!'

'Think how she might feed it!' I suggested feelingly.

'She might even dye my hair henna colour, or shingle it,' continued Barbara. 'No, one must never entrust strangers with things which are essentially one's own. You know how it is when you let your flat to people. It's never the same flat again.'

'Especially when it's a nicely furnished flat.'

'Exactly. That's how I regard my body—as a nicely furnished flat.'

'Nicely furnished, certainly; but not flat—not by no means. Look at your arms!'

'Leslie,' said Barbara severely, 'this is no time for fatuous compliments. I don't like the liberties your friend is proposing to take with me, and I warn you solemnly that if I get my face back one morning with a red nose on it I shall hold you personally responsible.'

'You'll get it back in perfect order, I'm sure.'

'How can one be sure? Why, there's no guarantee that I shall get it back at all! Suppose Dido were to get drowned, or run over by a chariot, with my body on—what would happen to my poor little soul, I should like to know?'

'I suppose it would have to lurk among these rocks, like a hermit crab that's lost its shell.'

Barbara rose to her feet, smiling indulgently.

'We're talking like a pair of imbeciles,' she said, 'and if I go on any longer I shall end by believing what I'm saying. I think I'll collect my faculties by taking a dip in the sea. I wonder if there'll be time before lunch?'

'There shall be time,' I replied magnificently, rising to my feet. 'I will switch my hypnotic eye upon any one who objects.' Lady Rumborough, looking incredibly gaunt and forbidding, had just emerged from the salad-mixing annexe, evidently bent upon my castigation. Behind her, at a discreet distance, I observed the figures of her husband and Mrs. Dunham-Massey.

'Colonel Miles——' she began, in the voice of a hanging judge.

I cut her short.

'Lady Rumborough,' I said, 'I am going down to the beach with Mrs. Hatton, while she bathes. I had intended to lunch immediately, but you may now postpone the meal for twenty minutes. Get the others together, so that I shall not be kept waiting. And kindly inform your young whelp of a son that if he pollutes the atmosphere by smoking cigarettes at the table before the meal begins I shall wring his neck for him. Come along, Barbara!'

Chapter IX

Rough Stuff

I

At luncheon it was evident from the start that I was to be humoured, as one afflicted by Heaven; and the key-word was obviously 'sunstroke.' Not that such a malady was mentioned: the company were unusually silent; but whenever I made a remark—and I made a good many—some one hastened to agree with me, and then resumed the uneasy contemplation of the end of his own nose. At first I was mildly amused, but presently I found myself growing a little irritable. Due deference is good, but it becomes boring to be treated like a congenital idiot, especially *by* congenital idiots—such as Arabella Hockley—so I decided to show my companions that I was not to be put off with indulgent smiles and soothing nods. As soon as the meal was over I addressed them.

'I want to hear everybody's plans for the afternoon,' I said.

'You can't hear Podmore's: he's dot here,' Arabella pointed out.

I had not noticed Podmore's absence.

'Where is he?' I asked.

'He said something about fraternising with the natives,' replied Jimmy. 'I expect he's in a mosque in La Marsa by this time, teaching them to sing *Hail, Smiling Morn!*'

'I will attend to Podmore as soon as he comes back,' I said. 'Meanwhile, I can deal with present company. I'll take you as you sit. Lila, what are you going to do this afternoon?'

'Jimmy and I thought we should like to bathe again, Leslie,' replied Lila, with unusual meekness.

'You shall. But if I hear a single note from the gramophone, I shall destroy it.'

'Yes, Leslie.' Lila's elbow slid with a warning nudge into the ribs of Jimmy, who was obviously anxious to volunteer a comment here. I passed on to our hostess.

'Lady Rumborough, what are you going to do?'

'I am going to play bridge,' replied her ladyship. 'Have you any objection?' she added truculently.

'None whatever, to decently conducted bridge. You, Sir James, Bumpstead, Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and Jubberley shall cut out; and if I feel like it I'll give you all a lesson. That accounts for five more. Capital!'

I saw Jubberley take a deep breath; but George Bumpstead laid a hurried hand upon his arm, and he slowly deflated himself.

'Gwen?' I continued.

Gwen was all wistful appeal at once.

'Leslie dear, please don't——'

'I forgot: you're arranged for: you're going to wash up. I have sent Rorison back to the ship, so you will be single-handed. If Podmore comes back in time, he can wipe while you wash.'

Gwen gave a faint moan, followed by a wan smile.

'You needn't begin right away,' I added.

'Thank you, Leslie,' she murmured, and turned to George Bumpstead.

'Have you a cigarette, George dear?' she asked.

'Yes, thanks,' replied George, taking one out and lighting it. I rapped sharply on the table.

'Give her a cigarette, you cad!' I said.

I spoke quietly, but I think George caught something in my tone, for he smirked uneasily and hurriedly handed Gwen his

entire case.

'No more Lower School humour in my presence, Bumpstead,' I mentioned, and passed on to Arabella Hockley.

'Arabella,' I said, 'do you remember what I instructed you to do before lunch?'

Arabella shook her unkempt head.

'I told you to have yourself cleaned and deodorised. I see the time has come to take steps about you.' I rose and lit my pipe. 'What are you going to do, Barbara?'

'With your gracious permission,' replied Barbara, in mock humility, 'I am going to take a nap in my private cell down the passage behind the platform. I'm still struggling with sleep.'

'Good idea,' I said.

'After that,' Barbara continued, turning in the archway and throwing a certain note of emphasis into her voice, 'I shall collect you, my friend, and take you to sit in some nice, cool, shady spot until supper-time.'

She disappeared, and I turned quickly upon the others. A faint grin faded from the faces of Jimmy and Lila as I did so.

'I feel like a siesta myself,' I announced. 'Report to me, all of you here, in half an hour exactly. Till then you can do what you like.'

I mounted the little rocky staircase over the entrance, and, reclining comfortably in the embrasure, smoked my pipe and looked out over the blue Mediterranean. Once or twice I nodded: it was very restful up there, and I had had a disturbed night.

Presently I became conscious of a subdued gabble in the cave behind me—the sound, one might say, of an indignation meeting of white mice. The voice of Jubberley was distinguishable.

'How does the law stand in the matter?' he was asking. 'To what lengths——'

'The law,' replied Sir James, 'permits us to put him——'

'What terrifies me,' interpolated Mrs. Dunham-Massey, 'is the way he sits gloating over us—almost cooing. One feels that he is going to pounce at any moment.'

'Margot dear, don't!' bleated Gwen.

George Bumpstead broke in.

'I had to take a pretty stiff line with him before lunch,' he said. 'At one time I thought I should have to use physical force with the fellow. He's as mad as a coot: we'd better get the captain to put him in irons as soon as he goes on board.'

'But what won't he do before he goes on board?' boomed Lady Rumborough.

What indeed? I chuckled again: I was minded to do a good many things. Well, I might as well get to work now. I knocked out my pipe, rose to my feet, and sauntered down into the cave again. My appearance was the signal for the dissolution of the indignation meeting, which silently melted away down passages and through archways. George Bumpstead and Gwen were the first to go, then Mrs. Dunham-Massey. Lady Rumborough, I think, would have liked to stay and give battle, but Sir James placed her arm in his and towed her out of sight. Jubberley alone was left. I realised that, with characteristic inability to let well alone, Jubberley had decided to provoke an encounter with me. Well, I had tried clemency with Jubberley before luncheon, and clemency, it seemed, had failed. I must take a stiff line, like George Bumpstead.

'Colonel Miles,' began Jubberley, advancing to within the usual point-blank range, 'could I have a word with you for five minutes or so?'

I stepped back a pace, and sat down upon one of the improvised seats at the bridge table.

'There are hundreds of persons, Jubberley,' I announced, 'walking this earth to-day, who live from hour to hour in danger of summary assassination. You are one of them; in fact, you are high up on the list.'

As I had anticipated, Jubberley swelled like a frog.

'Are you aware, sir,' he demanded, 'that I am a Member of Parliament, and an Honorary Vice-President of no less than fourteen societies dedicated to the betterment of——'

'Yes,' I replied; 'but that doesn't really account for it. I have known men who were all these things, yet died in their beds, with their boots off. The simple truth, Jubberley, is that you are a bore. What is more, you are an aggressive, offensive bore; what is more, you are a close-range, hard-breathing bore. Men have gone to the thumbscrew and the rack before now for lesser crimes than the crime you daily commit in continuing to exist.' I crossed my legs, and filled another pipe. 'Well, that's all about you. The question is, what am I to do to you, or with you? I'm sick of the sight of your foolish face, and the sound of your foolish voice.' I pondered, then looked up. 'I know! Why didn't I think of that before? We'll call up Dido.'

I clapped my hands once—I had just remembered the Queen's parting injunction—and waited to see if anything would really happen.

It did. I was suddenly aware of the martial presence of my Phœnician friend with the Glasgow accent, standing to attention within six feet of us.

'My lorrdd?' inquired the apparition.

'My God!' added Jubberley, not altogether inexcusably.

'Take this gentleman,' I continued, 'and keep him somewhere—in discomfort if possible, but somewhere handy—until I want him.'

'Varra good, my lorrdd.'

Rorison—for it was indubitably Rorison's mortal envelope—took his bemused charge by the elbow and led him to the rectangular slab of rock in the centre of the cave.

'Step you up here,' he ordered. Jubberley obeyed mechanically, and Rorison, taking his stand beside him, rapped sharply upon the rock with the butt of his spear. Instantly the rock began to sink, as smoothly as a hydraulic lift. Simultaneously, Jubberley realised what was happening.

'Colonel Miles,' he bellowed, 'I protest! I shall appeal to the British Consul at Tunis! The London Press shall ring with ——— Help!'

Nothing but his head was now visible. I heard a startled exclamation behind me, and turned. Sir James and Lady Rumborough had re-entered the cave, followed by Mrs. Dunham-Massey. Bumpstead, needless to say, came last. I greeted them with a smile.

'Come in,' I said: 'I want to show you something. Look!'

I turned again, but Jubberley was gone—*spurlös versenkt*—and the slab of rock was back in its place. I went and sat down upon it jauntily, and blew a smoke-ring.

'Colonel Miles,' gasped Mrs. Dunham-Massey, pointing with trembling finger, 'was that Mr. Jubberley?'

'Going down—*there?*' added Lady Rumborough.

'It was. But never mind Jubberley at present: I've got him where I want him. My business is with you. Come here.'

'Humour him!' counselled an earnest voice in the rear of the group.

I rose briskly, and walked to the improvised bridge table, and spread out the cards of one of the packs.

'Now for a bridge lesson,' I said cheerfully. 'You will first of all cut for partners, and then take your seats in an orderly fashion.'

The quartette moved forward obediently: plainly, I had them well in hand. Lady Rumborough exhibited a little less alacrity than the others, but time would cure that. A thought occurred to me.

'Jubberley must be in this,' I said; 'then I can kill five birds with one stone.' I leaned over and rapped upon the rocky slab with my pipe. It sank forthwith, to reappear a few minutes later bearing Rorison and Jubberley. Jubberley, I noticed, was now gagged with his own pocket-handkerchief, a circumstance which did not surprise me in the least.

'Remove the gag,' I said. Rorison obeyed, and Jubberley began at once.

'Colonel Miles, I shall communicate with the Foreign Office direct——'

'Replace the gag,' I said.

'No, no!' spluttered Jubberley. 'I renounce my intention.'

'That's better. I am arranging a bridge four, and you may as well cut in. Come along!'

Jubberley shambled to the table and turned up a card. It was an ace.

'Now for the rest of you,' I said. They obeyed, except Lady Rumborough; so I cut a card for her myself. Bumpstead drew a king.

'That lets you out until the second rubber,' I said to him; 'but don't go away: I want you to listen. Sit down, you others. Jubberley, you are playing with Sir James. Lady Rumborough, you will now cut the cards to Jubberley.'

'I will now what?' inquired Lady Rumborough, in a voice which intimated pretty plainly that she had decided to stick her toes in and chance the consequences.

'I beg your pardon.'

'It's about time!' she retorted.

'I was forgetting your infirmity. Guard!'

'My lorr'd?'

'Bring me an attendant with a penetrating voice.'

Rorison sloped his spear, turned sharp left, and disappeared through an archway, emerging a minute later followed by an enormous Nubian warrior (he bore a most uncanny resemblance to the cook's mate on board the yacht) armed with a species of battle-axe. At a sign from Rorison, he took his place by Lady Rumborough's side.

'If this lady should fail to hear anything at any time,' I said to him, 'you will——'

Lady Rumborough subsided hastily on to her appointed camp-stool.

'All right: I'll cut,' she said.

She did so, and Jubberley dealt the cards with quivering hand.

'Before you begin to play,' I continued, 'I want you all to listen to me. Rumborough, you will refrain from directing operations or fussing in any way whatsoever through the game. Lady Rumborough, you will carefully avoid giving information to your partner, either by innuendo, deliberate hesitation, or direct statement. Mrs. Dunham-Massey, you are on no account to say patronising things if you win, or imply by the tone of your voice that your opponents have cheated if you lose. Bumpstead, you will name all cards by their right names and avoid all reference to such monstrosities as "The Curse of Scotland," "Old Mossy Face," or "The Bullet." All of you, as soon as a hand has been played, will proceed to the next without post-mortems or recriminations of any description. In your case, Jubberley, I will go a step further: you will remain absolutely silent throughout the rubber.'

'But, sir,' replied Jubberley meekly, 'how can I name my suit?'

'You must employ the ancient art of pantomime.'

Jubberley, utterly demoralised, bowed his head, and, having examined his cards, rolled a furtive eye at his partner; then put his hand upon his heart and held up one finger.

II

As soon as the bridge four were well under way, I turned to George.

'Bumpstead!' I barked.

'Yes, old man?'

'Go and fetch a couple of buckets of water and a towel from somewhere, and then find Gwen. It's time she started washing up.'

'Great idea!'

'You can give her a hand until it's time for you to cut in.'

'Certainly, old chap.' George hurried off: he seemed really anxious to help.

'If you aren't back in five minutes,' I called after him, 'with the buckets and Gwen, I shall come and fetch you.' Then I turned with a contented smile towards a furtive and tousled figure lurking behind a rock in a corner of the cave.

'Is that you, Arabella?' I said.

'Yes.'

'Come here.' She came, at a snail's pace, dragging her feet.

'Have you carried out my orders?'

Arabella gave a defiant sniff, and wriggled.

'Guard,' I said, 'fetch me a capable woman, with a cake of soap and some scouring flannel.'

Rorison made his usual exit, and returned with a grim-looking female who in her earthly days might have been the wardress of a dungeon.

'Take this creature,' I said to her, pointing to the now cringing Arabella, 'and scrub her. Then array her in clean clothing, and let her loose.'

'Assuredly, my lord.' A hand of iron descended upon Arabella's shoulder, and she was conducted, unresisting, out of my presence. I turned to Rorison.

'I shan't want you any more just now,' I said.

'Varra good, my lord,' replied my familiar—and vanished like a puff of smoke. The bridge-players, dutifully intent upon their game, failed to note this interesting phenomenon. It was a pity, for it would have caused them to revise their sunstroke theory—or at least extend it.

I glanced at my wrist-watch: the five minutes were up. I strolled to the archway through which George Bumpstead had disappeared, and uttered a roar.

'Just coming, old boy!' cried a reassuring voice, and George hastened into view. He carried two buckets of water and wore dish-clouts round his neck, and was followed by Gwen, whose look of suffering was obviously genuine, for once.

'Now then, get to work,' I said to her. 'Setting you to wash dishes for Rorison is a crude and obvious form of penance; but it is appropriate enough. You have spent your life vamping other people into doing things for you that you ought to have done for yourself, so now we'll reverse the motions. Put those buckets on the platform, George, beside the luncheon table, and stand by with the towel. Get down to it, Gwen!'

I had thrown a slight parade-ground rasp into my voice. Gwen took up a plate from the table, plunged it viciously into a bucket, and thrust it dripping into George's hand. If she had not been thoroughly scared, I think she would have liked to bite a piece out of the plate—or George's hand. Anything that was nearest, in fact.

'When Podmore comes in, he can take your place, Bumpstead,' I said. 'You'll be wanted presently for the second rubber. Jubberley, what are you waving your elbows for?'

'I was endeavouring to reproduce the motions of digging, Colonel,' said Jubberley, not without a certain solemn pride, 'in order to indicate that I wished to declare a spade.'

'Oh, sorry! Go ahead. How does the game stand? Hallo! what's that?' I cocked my ears. From the beach outside came the sound of raucous and epileptic music.

'Carry on, everybody!' I commanded. Then I turned to the Ethiopian with the battle-axe. 'Come with me,' I said, and hurried out of the cave.

The gramophone was set on a rock near the sea, in full blast, and Lila and Jimmy, clad in dressing-gowns, were practising a new and intricate step together in its immediate neighbourhood. Lila caught sight of me first, over Jimmy's shoulder, and faltered. Jimmy, evidently warned by her, looked round in my direction, then proceeded to dance with increased determination. I approached, and halted a few yards away.

'Stop that!' I said.

They obeyed. Lila, wide-eyed and a little frightened, gazed apprehensively at the battle-axe; but her cavalier was

inclined to be bellicose.

'Who's your friend?' he asked. 'Where's his big drum?'

I turned to the gentleman indicated.

'Destroy that accursed thunder-box,' I said.

Without a word the giant strode to the rock, and, raising his axe aloft, brought it down with a crash, cleaving the gramophone into two identical halves. Then, moving round a quarter of a circle, he repeated the operation, and neatly quartered the instrument. The music stopped with a jerk, and uncoiled springs, chips of wood, and fragments of ebonite record filled the air.

'Thank you,' I said. 'You may go now to the place you came from, and wait until I send for you again.'

My henchman saluted and marched away, leaving me face to face with my two young nuisances. Lila was obviously impressed: her habitual pertness had completely evaporated. Her lips were parted, and she gazed at me fearfully. But Master Jimmy was in a warlike mood. Having availed himself of a heaven-sent opportunity of putting his arm round Lila's waist, he addressed me:

'Colonel,' he announced, 'you're a damned cad! Come along, Lila!'

He turned and walked away towards the cave, giving more than adequate support to the drooping form of his companion.

I sat down upon the rock, amid the fragments of the gramophone, and pondered. I was conscious of two nascent and novel sensations: one, the conviction that I had been making an egregious ass of myself; the other, a distinct and entirely unprecedented feeling of respect for Jimmy Rumborough.

Chapter X

Revelation

I continued to ponder, seated on a rock in the warm afternoon sunshine. Plainly I had been in danger of overdoing things. I had hit back, and hit hard, but—to what effect? True, I had enjoyed myself in a certain schoolboy fashion for an hour or two, but all I had really achieved was the considerable feat of bringing myself down to the level of people like Jubberley and George Bumpstead. I had been as verbose as the one and as boorish as the other. Dido's gift, the rare and refreshing fruit of Reprisal, was in danger of turning to ashes in my mouth.

I had something else on my mind, too, something which I could not quite define. What was it? I was conscious of its existence, but at present it neither oppressed me nor elated me: all I realised was that it was something very big and momentous. What could it be? I rose, and set out for a ramble along the beach, trying to discover. Soon the cave was far behind me. I had lost all interest in the bridge four, and in my plans for the future reformation of my shipmates. I had worked out quite a considerable scheme for making the yacht a fit place for decent people to live in—a place, in fact, where objectionable noises would be *tabu*, and where no one would be allowed to intrude upon my privacy or speak unless he was spoken to. But now, I found, I did not much mind what these people did.

After all, I mused, we could ignore them. We had each other: we were a pair apart; the very air we breathed would decline to support such organisms as Jubberley and Mrs. Dunham-Massey. They would sink to a lower, grosser altitude, and leave us to ourselves...

What on earth was I talking about? We—each other—a pair apart? Why had I suddenly taken to thinking in the plural? Why was I prancing along the beach like a boy of twenty instead of a battered wreck of thirty-four? Why was I waving my hat to un-introduced seagulls? Why was I whistling? Why——

Then—suddenly—at last—the answer came to me. Barbara! Just that, Barbara! And I had been so obsessed by my own selfish ailments and pettifogging little dislikes that I had entirely overlooked the overwhelming alleviation that was lying within my very grasp. Barbara! As if anything else mattered! What a fool I had been!—as foolish as the shipwrecked men on the raft in Jules Verne's story, dying of thirst when they need not. (I wondered if Barbara had read the story. Probably not: I would tell it to her, and she would smile—that slow, entrancing, humorous smile that I had loved ever since I was a schoolboy—and tell me that I was too old and crabbed now to be setting up as a courtier. But she wouldn't mean it: bless her, she wouldn't mean it!) I realised now what had been in her mind last night when she had spoken about people who laid themselves upon the shelf of their own accord. Her words had conveyed a message for me, if I were not too grossly self-centred to read it. I saw the light at last. She and I had missed our first chance years ago, and by the glorious goodness of Providence we had been given a second. Barbara!

I swung impulsively round upon my toes, and set off towards the cave again, uplifted by a great vision and soothed by a great peace. I felt kindly disposed towards all men.

'Hang it all,' I even said to myself, 'Arabella can be a bridesmaid if she likes—Aquascutum and everything!' The fact that the said Arabella was even now probably undergoing compulsory ablution at my behest had entirely faded from my recollection. All I could think of was the future—in other words, Barbara. I must have speech with her at once. Had she awakened from her siesta, I wondered? If so, she had promised—nay, offered—to sit with me somewhere and talk, and charm me back to my old self. Well, I had come to myself without her presence—but it was not quite my old self, and never would be, thank God!

Then suddenly, as I rounded a promontory of rock, walking on air, I found myself face to face with my Lady—white-robed, clear-eyed, with her long golden mane rippling in the breeze.

'Barbara!' I cried exultantly.

'Nay, my lord,' replied the vision composedly.

Horror! It was Dido again! Too late, I realised the extent of the complications which may arise from thoughtless association with disembodied spirits—especially the spirits of romantically minded and imperious females.

Chapter XI

Hobnobbing with Royalty

I

'She has succumbed at last, my lord,' announced the Queen, with every appearance of gratification. 'It was a hard struggle, else would I have been with you sooner, this glad day.'

'Hard struggle—with whom?' I asked.

'With the Lady Barbara, in sooth. Since noon have I striven to render her drowsy.' (So that was why poor Barbara had been so heavy-headed.) 'At last she has yielded, and her mortal frame is mine again. Are you not rejoiced to be with me once more?'

'I am quite overwhelmed,' I replied truthfully.

'I too am not displeased,' remarked Her Majesty coyly. 'Will you walk with me?'

Being in no position to decline the honour, I complied. We turned, and paced along the beach together, leaving the cave behind us. I was entirely obfuscated, and no wonder. Here was I, a lover, in a lover's potential paradise, alone with my love and with all the omens favourable, yet debarred from achieving any tangible result owing to the incredible and idiotic circumstance that the body of my beloved was occupied for the moment by the spirit of some one else. Every time I looked into Dido's face my heart swelled and beat, every time I listened to her conversation it shrank and sank. The situation was intolerable: I must do something about it. First and foremost I must discover:

(1) Why I had been marked out as a recipient of royal favour.

(2) How long this sort of thing was likely to go on.

On the first point I received enlightenment almost immediately.

'Do you recall yonder headland, my lord?' inquired Dido, pointing eastward.

'I can't say I do,' I replied. 'This is my first visit to your kingdom.'

The Queen turned her blue eyes full upon me, and sighed in a manner which sent a chill of alarm down my spine.

'Not so,' she said. 'Three thousand years may have dimmed your recollection, but assuredly you have been here before.' She sighed again. 'Do you recollect nothing?'

'Nothing whatever,' I replied doggedly. Light was beginning to break in upon me, but only to reveal the quicksands which encompassed me.

'You have passed through many shapes since then,' continued Dido. 'You have lived and loved in many centuries, many countries. Still, I had hoped that you would remember me.' Her voice quivered.

It was here that I ought to have been firm. I should have continued to maintain an appearance of complete oblivion—if necessary, of complete indifference—to the past, until Dido gave me up as a bad job. But—hang it all!—she was gazing at me with Barbara's eyes, and it was Barbara's mouth that was trembling so pitifully. I began to weaken.

'You can recall nothing at all?' she murmured again.

'Perhaps,' I said pusillanimously, 'if you would help me, O Queen——'

Dido cheered up at once.

'That will I do right gladly,' she said. 'In what manner can I help?'

'Well, what was my name?'

'Thy name? Æneas! Æneas of Troy!'

'Oh—was it?'

Of course, I had suspected this all along. It had been clear for some time that Dido regarded me as a reincarnation of

somebody or other, and Æneas seemed to be indicated. Let me see, what sort of fellow had he been? Pious Æneas, he was called. That was reassuring, anyhow. What else? Father Æneas, somewhere. That, in my present situation, was all to the good too; it introduced a reassuringly paternal note into our relations. Memories of my youthful struggles with Vergil began to stir within me: lines and phrases which had stuck through all the years. Various episodes of my putative past came back.

'Do you remember now?' inquired an anxious voice in my ear.

'I begin to remember,' I said cautiously. 'Æneas came to Carthage from Troy, didn't he?'

'You did come from Troy to Carthage, my lord!'

'All right, have it your own—I mean, be it as you will, O Queen. I came with my ship——'

'With many ships—a noble argosy.'

'With many ships, then; and you—er—did me great honour.'

'Your presence was itself an honour. Do you recall how at the banquet with which I celebrated your arrival you did recite to us the tale of the Wooden Horse and the grievous fall of Troy?'

Æneid, Books Two and Three—the longest after-dinner speech on record! I remembered it well: I had had to learn whole pages of it by heart, for 'rep.'

'Yes, I remember.'

'And the days and nights that followed?' pursued Dido.

'Some of them,' I said cautiously.

'And the hunting, and the feasting, and the tale you did tell me of your great love——'

'My memories are still misty,' I hastened to remind her.

'They will clear anon. You say you do not recognise yonder headland?'

'No; I can't say I do.'

'It was from there that I watched your sails sink below the horizon, that fatal morn. Why did you leave me, my lord?'

We had come suddenly and stunningly to point-blank range. But I was ready for her this time.

'We are not masters of our own fate,' I remarked solemnly. 'Who was I to disobey the gods? Such potent gods as—h'm—I mean, who was I to disobey them? Rome had to be founded, and I had been chosen.'

'Then you did not leave me willingly?'

'Certainly not. That is—I had suddenly realised the insidious nature of the question—'where Fate is concerned there can be no question of willingness or unwillingness.'

'Your words are wise, my lord,' replied the Queen; and I marvelled that any one could apply any kind of approbation to such drivel. 'But the Rome that you did found has been dust for centuries. Rome is not; Carthage is not. Their day is past. But we—we two—we are free spirits—free and royal. The future is all our own.'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' I admitted apprehensively.

'Could not we establish a new kingdom, in some new country, and reign together?' suggested Her Majesty coyly.

Obviously this notion must be discouraged at once. I decided to apply a little cold common sense.

'We shouldn't see much of one another when Barbara happened to be awake,' I pointed out.

The Queen did not appear to be impressed by this argument. She merely goggled at me—so far as Barbara's eyes were capable of goggling—like a sentimental flapper.

'I can always behold you, my lord,' she replied, 'whether I am visible or not. As for my tenancy of the body of the Lady Barbara, there is a way to render that permanent, which I would reveal to you—if you were willing!'

I began to feel thoroughly scared: this inexorable female seemed to have thought of everything. I must go very carefully.

'Give me a little time, O Queen,' I said earnestly, 'to accustom my vision to the radiance of your condescension.' (I really was getting rather good at the stuff.)

'Assuredly time shall be given you,' replied Her Majesty graciously. 'What is time to me? Have I not waited centuries for you?'

This seemed a line of thought to be encouraged; so I said:

'Yes, indeed, O Queen. What, after all, is Time? What are a few years to us— or a few centuries, for that matter? Anyhow, I think it would be a sound plan to postpone definite action until that poisonous mob—that is, my present associates— return to their own country.' Dido's eyes flashed.

'Perhaps they will *not* return,' she said. 'I am minded to teach them a lesson. Already they chafe beneath your mild rule _____'

'How do you know?'

'Have I not moved among them myself, unseen, and heard them? This very afternoon, when you had dismissed their guard and left them, bidding them merely to be of good behaviour during your absence, they called a council.'

'I bet I know who took the chair,' I said.

'It was the gross man with the quivering jowl and the unceasing tongue, who waves his right arm when he speaks.'

'That's Jubberley, all right. And what did they take counsel about?'

'First of all, touching the identity of the guards and attendants whom I conjured up for your service, my lord.'

'The man with the battle-axe, and so on? Well, what did they make of them?'

'They consulted another of their number, the man with the bird-like head, who is for ever importuning others to sing and dance.'

'Oh, Podmore? So he has come back, has he? What did he say?'

'He did hazard the guess that these slaves and warriors of mine were Subjective Phenomena, or some such incomprehensibility. But 'twas of you they spoke chiefly, my lord. They think you are mad, and they would bind you with cords.'

'Oh, would they? And who is going to do it?'

'The gross man was of opinion that if he and the other four were to fall upon you unawares they could achieve their purpose jointly.'

'I'm not so sure about that: I'm full of fight to-day.'

'So said another of the conspirators—the man with the face of a fish, who boasts.'

'Oh, George Bumpstead? He said that, did he?'

'Yes; and he would have dissuaded them from their purpose——'

'I can believe that, without any difficulty whatever.'

'—saying that the mariners should be summoned from the pleasure-ship to make the undertaking certain. But the others, especially the small man in white raiment, deterred him, saying that the boat from the ship was not due until the rise of the moon, and that unless you were placed under duress forthwith the settled order of the day would be deranged past recall.'

'Aha! The time-table for ever!'

'And in this decision he was supported by his son, who feared lest you should do an injury to the young maiden who accompanies him so constantly.'

'Little Lila? I wouldn't hurt her for the world. But what did they decide to do in the end?'

'That I know not; for on that instant I found that I could render myself visible at will, and I realised that the Lady Barbara had at last succumbed to sleep in her cavern. So, eager to enjoy so fair an opportunity to appear to you, I hastened hither, my dear lord.' Her Majesty favoured me with an affectionate but unnerving smirk. 'And that,' she concluded, 'is why I

would fain read them a lesson.'

'What sort of lesson do you propose to administer?' I inquired, not without anxiety.

'Would death be too severe a penalty, think you? Death by torture?' Her voice dropped to a coo of gentle entreaty.

'What kind of torture?' I spoke carelessly, for I knew Dido was just the sort of person to react strongly to opposition.

'Why do you ask me?'

'Because torture is getting a little old-fashioned now, you know. What variety had you in mind?'

'Torture by fire, such as was practised by the priests of Moloch and Tainit when I reigned in Carthage. The outstretched hands of Moloch are heated red-hot, and the victims are laid thereon, one by one——'

'I think that would be rather overdoing it,' I said judicially. 'I mean, the day for such methods is past, O Queen.'

'Then will we revive the past!' replied Dido proudly. 'When night falls, and sleep comes to the dwellers upon this coast, I will summon the spirits of my departed priests and warriors, and they shall occupy the bodies of such slumberers as they may require, and join us in the cave, where we will constitute first a Court of Justice, and thereafter a Temple of Expiation, that execution may follow sentence without unnecessary delay.'

I began to feel really alarmed: Dido was taking this retaliation business much too seriously. So far as I was concerned, my account with my shipmates had been more than settled by my exceedingly enjoyable afternoon. Even the knowledge that they were now conspiring to bind me with cords failed to rouse anything more than a faint feeling of resentment in my mind. But my royal companion, it seemed, was only just settling into her stride. I coughed throatily.

'You are a lady of initiative and resource, O Queen,' I began; 'but——'

'You speak truth.' She was off again. 'In the days when I was Queen, Carthage was indeed a queenly city; and Carthage was my own creation. When I landed upon these shores I was an exile, and almost alone. My father, King Mutto, I had left behind me in Tyre; my husband——'

'*What* was your father's name?' I asked incredulously.

'King Mutto. Do you not recognise the name?'

'It seems vaguely familiar. And your husband—was he called Jeffo, by any chance?'

'Nay; his name was Sychæus. He was slain by my brother Pygmalion; and to escape the doom which would assuredly fall upon Pygmalion, and mayhap myself, I fled to Cyprus, and thence to Africa. Here I purchased ground from the chieftain Iarbas—that tale, too, will bear telling, but not now—and founded the city which for nearly five hundred years ruled the world; whose sons penetrated beyond the Pillars of Hercules to the Tin Islands in the north and to the Land of the Baboons in the south. And all this was my doing, mine! for it was I who made Carthage great. The Temples were my work; the Granaries and the Reservoirs were my work; the ships were my work; the priests and the people were my children, to direct as I would!' Queen Dido drew herself up to her full height, looking very majestic indeed. She might be old-fashioned in some of her ideas, but as her own press-agent she stood in no need, I realised, of modern assistance.

'To-night,' she concluded, 'I will call these to life again, or such members thereof as may best serve your needs, my dear lord. Then will we deal faithfully with these miscreants. That done, you and I will be left alone together. Alone—*together!*' Her Majesty came closer, practically inviting me to grasp my opportunities.

But I had been thinking hard.

'You say you can't summon your priests and warriors until nightfall?' I asked.

'Not until sleep has liberated the bodies of others for their use.'

I thought of my Scoto-Phœnician guardsman of the cook's mate with the battle-axe, of the prehistoric prison wardress; and pictured them reinforced by the riff-raff of the Tunisian coast and let loose upon Jubberley and party.

I glanced westward: the sun was not far above the horizon. I still had an hour or two.

'Do you mind if we stroll back towards the cave?' I asked, with forced calm.

'Assuredly,' said Dido graciously.

II

Once more we were outside the cave, in the declining rays of the evening sun. I glanced up into the embrasure over the entrance, and thought I saw a figure move; but when I looked again it was gone.

The problem now arose of what to do with Dido. I realised that it would be quite impossible to pass her off to the others as Barbara, even if I wished to. In any case, I wanted five minutes alone with my shipmates, to warn them of their impending danger and urge them to re-embark with all speed.

'With your permission, O Queen,' I said, 'I will go forward unaccompanied and see if my companions are within. The majesty of your presence might alarm them.'

'That is true,' said Dido complacently. 'But there is no need for you to go alone: I will render myself invisible. Come!' In a twinkling she had disappeared from my sight.

'I am with you,' said her voice reassuringly.

Feeling thoroughly helpless and getting really frightened, I advanced to the mouth of the cave, and entered. Having penetrated the tortuous opening, I paused and looked about me, to accustom my eyes to the failing light within.

Almost simultaneously there came a shout from above, and a heavy body—eleven stone ten, to be precise—projected itself from the ledge over the entrance on to the top of me. I went down like a ninepin, and my forehead encountered a round stone lying half buried in the sand.

'It's all right,' announced the clarion voice of Jimmy Rumborough. 'I've got him! Bring the rope, Jubberley!'

'There'll be a *devil* of a row about this,' I reflected, and sank into unconsciousness.

Chapter XII

I obtain Ecclesiastical Preferment

I do not know how long I lay insensible, but it must have been for a considerable time. When I had entered the cave the world was bathed, as already recorded, in the slanting rays of the setting sun; when next I found myself in a condition to notice anything at all, night had fallen and complete darkness reigned.

Not that I was aware of this fact at the time: indeed, to my aching vision there appeared to be a great deal too much light everywhere—or rather, lights. The cave was full of people, and nearly every one present seemed to be carrying a flaming, tossing torch. There were torches round the walls, too, and a pair of blazing cressets up on the stone platform. Full consciousness came later: for the moment, all I realised was that I was lying upon a couch of some kind in a corner of the cave, and that a round white arm supported my throbbing head, while slim white fingers held a massive cup, with a metallic tang about the flavour of it, to my lips. Long fair hair, with a faint and pleasant perfume, brushed against my face.

The liquid within the cup was cool and refreshing, and I helped myself to a liberal draught. Then I said weakly:

'Thank you, Barbara.'

'He lives! My lord lives!' exclaimed an all too familiar voice, and the arm beneath my head was deftly removed to enable the owner to strike an attitude of dignified rapture.

'He lives! He lives! Our lord lives!' There came a mighty shout and a crash of brass, and my head felt as if it had been riven asunder.

'For Heaven's sake——!' I groaned.

'Peace!' cried Dido. 'He is still faint and sick from his hurt. Your tumult irks him. Keep silent!'

Silence promptly fell: evidently Her Majesty was no mean disciplinarian.

I now sat up, and endeavoured to take stock of my surroundings—with but little success.

'I am blind,' I announced resentfully. My temperature was up, and I was inclined to be fractious.

'Not so, my lord.' Dido's cool hand removed a wet bandage which was swathing my forehead and obscuring my vision; and I opened my eyes once more. I closed them again immediately, not without reason.

The rocky walls of the cave had disappeared under rich hangings of Tyrian purple, and the recesses opening out of the cave were each marked by an archway composed of two mighty elephant tusks. The stone platform was draped and carpeted, and upon it stood what looked like three golden armchairs. The platform was unoccupied; but there were people everywhere else, both men and women—all standing very still, and all with their faces turned towards me.

I took the cup from Dido—it was of gold, with a great ruby embedded in the bottom—and finished my medicine. I felt that I might need it. Then I devoted further attention to the silent throng confronting me.

They were a strange, barbaric assembly. There were warriors, armed to the teeth; there were young women in long white robes, their temples bound by golden fillets. In the smoky background I could discern coal-black torch-bearers and a row of trumpeters. There was another white-robed contingent—bearded priests—standing in a group apart from the rest. At their head I observed a venerable figure, clothed in the gorgeous insignia of what I took to be a Phœnician pontiff. His features were oddly familiar, but in my present bemused condition I took no immediate note of the fact. I surveyed the scene dreamily, blinked once or twice, and turned to Dido, who was standing by my couch, with a retinue of alluring damsels behind her.

'Who are these ladies and gentlemen?' I inquired.

'Subjects all, my lord—mine and thine!'

'You mean spoo—ghosts?'

'Not so. Their spirits are of the world beyond, but their bodies are true flesh and blood, being recruited from among the sleeping populace of this coast.'

'Sleeping? What time is it?'

'It is now the second hour of the night, my lord. The world about us is wrapped in slumber: we have mortal envelopes and to spare. If more are needed, I shall summon them.'

'I think we have enough to be going on with—I mean, sufficient unto our needs. But I had no idea it was so late: I must have been knocked out for quite a while.'

'You have been senseless these many hours, my lord.'

'But I'm quite sensible now, you know,' I retorted, not quite relishing the implication.

'I am indeed rejoiced to hear it, my lord,' said Dido. Then she uplifted her voice—Barbara's pleasant contralto—and chanted:

'My lord is himself again!'

The company responded by another shout, accompanied by a clash of weapons against shields which nearly brought about a relapse in the object of their solicitude. However, I gripped the edges of the couch and weathered the storm.

'What are they all here for?' I asked, when the echoes had died away.

'In the first place, my lord, to do you honour. Will you now be invested?'

Befogged but docile, I smiled mechanically, and bowed my head.

'All ri—assuredly!' I said. To myself I added, in a husky whisper: 'This investment sounds like a bit of a speculation, old man!' and giggled at my own feeble joke.

Dido promptly clapped her hands. Trumpets blared, and the group of priests detached themselves from the main body and advanced towards us. Instinctively I rose to my feet and came to the salute. It was a military crime of the first magnitude, for I had nothing on my head but my hair; but the solemnity of the occasion seemed to call for some kind of demonstration, however irregular. The priests responded by raising their hands heavenwards, and then dropping them slowly to their sides in a manner quaintly suggestive of an elementary Swedish breathing exercise. All but their leader, that is: he took up a position facing me, and stood bolt upright, being evidently too exalted to salute any one. I found myself gazing straight into his face—the face of a patriarchal old gentleman with a snub nose and a flowing white beard—a face associated indelibly in my mind with a red tarboosh and a too sociable joy-ride from Goletta to Carthage.

'Great Scott—Melchizedek!' I exclaimed.

He made no sign of recognition, which was perhaps not altogether surprising, but I realised that here at least was the material form of our self-appointed cicerone of the previous day, doing a little overtime as the temporary habitation of the spirit of some long-dead High Priest of Moloch. Certainly he made a majestic and imposing figure, and his robes at least were clean. I gave him an especially smart salute, at which he unbent to the extent of a stately inclination of the head.

'Array my lord for the ceremony,' continued the voice of Dido.

Next moment, to my unutterable embarrassment, I found myself in the hands of a bevy of young priestesses, who with seamed brows and preoccupied air proceeded to swathe me in many yards of clinging white material. This they finished off with a species of ecclesiastical cope, stiff with embroidery and jewels. Dido herself gave the crowning touch by cramming down over my contused and aching brow a circlet of some unyielding metallic substance which shone like gold and felt like lead.

A procession of temporarily embodied spirits was now formed, and, looking like an unsuccessful compromise between the Queen of the May and a candidate for promotion in some spurious order of Masonry, I was conducted, amid the clash of arms and the braying of trumpets, up a carpeted slope to the platform, where I was bidden to sit upon the right-hand throne. Dido took her seat in the centre, with Melchizedek on her left. Behind me, as immovable as ever, I was somewhat comforted to note the presence of Rorison, or at any rate his *alter ego*. Could he be of help in delivering me from my present predicament, I wondered? How far was he substance and how far shadow, so to speak? There could be no harm in asking him—assuming that he knew. I was about to do so, when Dido rose to her feet.

'Bring forth the captives!' she commanded.

Straightway through one of the arches of elephant tusks filed a dolorous procession—the male members of the yachting

party, and escort. Sir James came first; then Jubberley, Jimmy, and Podmore: Bumpstead was last. All were dishevelled and dirty, and I was interested to note that each wore round his neck what appeared to be an iron collar, with a chain attached, the end of which in each case was held by a gigantic negro clad in a leopard skin. Jimmy appeared to have been engaged in a battle of some magnitude, and to have lost it.

The quintette stumbled along, dazed or defiant, according to their dispositions, until brought up by their leading-strings and jerked into a line facing the platform. They looked about them in bewildered fashion: it was quite obvious that they failed to recognise, in the overdressed and self-conscious figure of fun seated upon the right of the Chair, their late shipmate and butt, Leslie Miles.

They had hardly been herded into position when they were joined by the lady members of the party, who entered from the opposite archway in charge of my friend the prehistoric wardress. They were not wearing iron collars, however. Lady Rumborough came first: her hat was awry, but her spirit was plainly unbroken. Gwen, Ophelia-like and appealing, lost no time in making eyes at the nearest guard. Mrs. Dunham-Massey was obviously too frightened to do anything at all, except totter to her appointed place in the line. Lila looked like a little ghost, but her face lit up when she saw Jimmy. She took her place beside him, and I saw her hand slip into his.

At the tail of the procession shuffled a strange and barely recognisable figure—a young girl with rippling brown hair and shining face, clad in virgin white. With a start I recognised her: it was Arabella Hockley, whom I myself had condemned a few hours ago to be washed, combed, and deodorised. Well, whoever had undertaken the duty had made a most creditable job of it.

Presently all were in place. The captive ladies were grouped on one side of the stone slab in the centre of the floor, the men on the other. At a sign from Melchizedek, a single note was blown upon a trumpet, after which deep silence fell. It was an uncanny scene. Behind me, a few feet away, rose a flat and curtained wall of rock. On my right stood a group of young priestesses: these were balanced, upon the left, beyond the old gentleman, by a party of priests. At my feet, upon the floor of the cave, stood my host, hostess, and messmates, looking absurd and incongruous in their European clothes. Jubberley in particular, with his scarlet cummerbund and Panama hat, was a blot upon the entire scene. Beyond these stood a solid wall of armed and helmeted men—men with swarthy complexions and curly black beards, looking as I have always imagined Hannibal himself must have looked. These were flanked on either side by heralds and trumpeters. All round the cave blazed great torches, each held aloft by a gigantic, motionless Nubian slave. Beyond all came the arched embrasure over the doorway, framing a patch of starry sky. Certainly our august Mistress of Ceremonies had a pretty taste in stage-management.

Chapter XIII

Legal Proceedings

The silence still continued—tense and rather terrifying. Presently the Queen, who was seated again now, turned to me.

'What course shall justice take, my lord?' she inquired graciously. The sound of her voice had an electric effect. The prisoners looked up with one accord.

'*Barbara!*' cried Lila.

'Mrs. Hatton!' explained Sir James to the others. 'It's Mrs. Hatton!'

Jubberley advanced a step, and cleared his throat ominously.

'My dear lady,' he began, 'as a matter of common justice——'

The Queen raised her hand. There came a roar of trumpets; then silence again.

'I am not the Lady Barbara,' the Queen announced haughtily.

'It *is* Barbara,' I heard Jimmy murmur; 'only she's gone potty too. What a climate!'

Dido turned to me again.

'And now, my lord, how shall we proceed?'

'What mean you, O Queen?' I replied—less because I wished to know than to gain time. My head was aching infernally, and my wits were still wandering. I seemed to be acting a part in a dream, and for the life of me I could not tell whether I was asleep or awake.

But the sound of my voice created a fresh sensation: the prisoners were fairly galvanised this time. There was a startled squeak from Arabella.

'It's Leslie!' she exclaimed.

'His Nibs!' gasped Bumpstead.

'He's wearing the tablecloth!' added Lady Rumborough, in a reverberating undertone. A warning spear-butt crashed upon the floor of the cave, within an inch of her ladyship's toes, and there was silence again. The Queen resumed.

'I mean, my lord, shall we judge them all together, or severally?'

Instinctively I snatched at the opportunity for delay.

'Severally, most certainly,' I replied. 'But first of all, O Queen, I crave a boon.'

'It is granted,' replied Dido graciously.

'Then release me that maiden,' I said, pointing to Lila. 'She has had no part or lot in my torments. Moreover, she is the sister of the Lady Barbara.'

Dido frowned: apparently neither Barbara nor Barbara's relations appealed to her much. In fact, in so far as Royalty can be susceptible to such weaknesses, it was growing increasingly apparent that Her Majesty was just a little jealous of Barbara.

'Having promised,' observed Dido coldly, 'I will grant you your wish, my lord. But ask no favours for the others.'

'You can do what you like with the others,' I said. I did not quite mean this; but plainly here was an occasion when a good loud bark might save serious bites later.

'Then the maiden is free to depart,' said Dido.

'I shan't!' announced Lila unexpectedly. 'Not without Jimmy! He was nearly killed trying to rescue me just now, and I won't leave him.'

'You love this youth?' inquired the Queen, with her usual directness.

Twenty-four hours ago Lila, I am tolerably certain, would have died rather than admit that any young man of her

acquaintance was anything more than 'rather a lamb.' But now she looked up into the Queen's face and said, quite simply: 'Yes, I do.'

The Queen looked a little disconcerted, as frequently happens when people speak the truth. I interposed.

'Lila,' I said, 'come up by me: you'll do more good here than down there.' Without a word the child mounted the platform and came to me. I motioned to her to be seated, and she curled up on the floor beside my chair, quaking.

The Queen rose to her feet, and advanced majestically to the edge of the platform. I saw we were in for a real speech this time, and in a confused way I felt sorry that Dido had not taken a fancy to Jubberley instead of to me: then we could have committed Jubberley to her permanent keeping and sailed away, leaving the pair to preach one another to death.

'Listen,' she began. 'I, Dido, daughter of King Mutto of Tyre, foundress and Queen of Carthage, have summoned this assembly—divers spirits from the world of the departed—to aid me in executing judgment upon these people, who have offended my lord here—the spirit, be it known, of my lord Æneas, once of Troy, now housed in the body of a comely barbarian.'

There was a perceptible sensation among the company—due either to the Queen's interesting revelation of my identity, or to her somewhat ambiguous reference to my personal charms.

'You know me,' she continued, warming to her theme. 'You have known me through centuries. You know that I was never one to be easily outwitted; but rather that it was I who was wont to get the better of my enemies.'

'More press-agent stuff!' I groaned softly to myself, and eased my diadem from off my throbbing forehead.

'Have I related to you the tale of how I overreached Iarbas, in the matter of the soil upon which Carthage was to be reared?' continued the Queen.

'I bet she has!' I murmured to Lila. But old Melchizedek answered most gallantly:

'Never, O Queen.'

'Well, then, it happened thus. That rapacious chieftain would have denied me the smallest tract of land whereon to build my city. At length, after long chaffering, we made a bargain that I might take as much ground as a single ox-skin would cover. The old fox! But I humbled him, I humbled him!'

'In what fashion, O Queen?' inquired the old gentleman, taking up an obvious cue.

'I took the skin of an ox, as required, and I cut it into strips so fine that I was able to fashion therefrom a raw-hide string many hundreds of cubits in length, with which I contrived to encompass a space of ground ample for my purpose, whereon to build my citadel, my Byrsa! Was that not good measure for a single ox-skin?'

There was laughter at this—genuine, appreciative, Semitic laughter.

'And now,' continued Dido, evidently much pleased with the reception of this improbable anecdote, 'to the matter in hand—the punishment of these malefactors. Their crime lies in this, that they have vexed my lord here in divers ways, not by direct injury or bodily onset, but by the foulness of their nature and the irritation of their presence. As my father King Mutto once most wisely observed, the sting of an ant is less easily avoided than the thrust of a javelin. My lord here is a warrior of renown; no javelin could touch him, for his right arm would turn it aside. But no right arm, however lusty, can avert the wearisome tale, the vacant laugh, the shrewish tongue. To you and such as you my father's words mean nothing, for your hides are thick and your spirits gross. But my lord, whose skin is tender and whose spirit is rare—he knows! He comprehends—for he has suffered!'

I was conscious of a sudden increase in my respect for Her Majesty's intelligence. She swept on, in a fearsome access of wrath.

'Who are you, then, any of you, that your noisome shadows should fall athwart his path? Each of you offends him in a different fashion. None is exempt. You, Heavy Jowl, with your interminable babble, are a windy pestilence.' (I must say her taste in epithets amounted practically to a gift.) 'You, Fish Face, are a boaster and a craven combined. You, Little Greybeard, are but a dwarf of a man; and like most dwarfs, vain and over fond of authority. You, Ship's Beak'—this to Podmore, who stood brooding, with his long neck thrust forward, as if plunged in psychological meditation—'are but a poor witless zany, a child in man's apparel—or half apparel!' ('That's one for his knickerbockers!' I reflected.) 'You, Stripling'—Jimmy reddened—'have yet to acquire the first virtue of Youth, Humility. Until that is achieved, you will

remain what you are, an offence and an irritation to grown men. You, Old Hag!—Her Majesty turned upon Lady Rumborough— 'are mean and miserly, even to the cozening of your fellows at games of skill or chance.'

Lady Rumborough looked up.

'Is she talking to me?' she inquired.

'Did you not comprehend me?' said Dido, obviously a little annoyed that any of her good things should be wasted.

'She is an old woman, O Queen, and hard of hearing,' I mentioned, not without malice.

'I thank thee, my lord. Let two slaves raise her up and hold her nearer to me.'

'I heard!' shouted Lady Rumborough hurriedly.

'It is well.' Her Majesty turned to Mrs. Dunham-Massey.

'You are a liar,' she announced simply, 'employing the truth only when it is unsavoury, or painful to others. Your face is painted and your hair is false, thus resembling your heart. As for you!—she had reached Gwen now—'you are a poor thing, given entirely to the exercise of woman's arts, yet failing miserably. You seek to entice, to beguile, to ensnare, by every agelong device; yet true men shrink from you, and only the uncouth or the senile are allured.'

This was too much for Gwen.

'Oh, Barbara *darling*,' she moaned, 'don't be brutal! Poor little——'

'I am not the Lady Barbara,' replied the Queen, in a tone of real annoyance this time.

'No, dear, of course you're not,' said Gwen abjectly, and turned what can best be described as an S.O.S. eye upon Bumpstead. But Bumpstead obviously had no sympathy to spare for any one but himself.

'And keep silent!' commanded Dido. 'If men can hold their peace when rebuked, why not women?' And with this perfectly reasonable query she turned upon the last remaining member of the group, the cowering Arabella.

'You,' she observed briefly, 'are but a little pigling, rooting in the earth for beechnuts.' Then she raised her hand aloft. 'Finally, all of you, hear this. My lord, your master, is a man among men, a man of rare and lofty spirit; but he lacks the assurance, or the inclination, to be for ever rebuking insolence or answering folly. Such men are made at times to appear at a disadvantage in the presence of noisy or arrogant fools. So it is with my lord: he has long suffered you, because you are not worthy to be answered; but now the time for suffering is past and the time of retribution approaches!—she swung a terrifying finger down the line—'for you, and you, and you, and you!'

'Oh, what an awful tell'n-off!' murmured a hoarse voice behind me. It summed up the situation admirably.

'Leslie, it *isn't* Barbara!' whispered Lila fearfully in my ear.

'No, dear, of course it isn't. She's only using Barbara's—— Oh, Lord, she's off again!'

'And so,' pursued Dido, with stately gusto, 'in that you are worthless dogs, ungrateful for benefits received, and for ever disturbing the peace of your master's spirit, my sentence is that you do now die—— all of you—in great torment!'

I had anticipated some such announcement as this, so I was not greatly surprised to hear it. But it gave the party round the slab something to think about. They looked at one another; then up at Dido; then broke into angry or fearful remonstrances. But the Queen held up a commanding hand, and silence reigned in a moment.

'This shall be the manner of your death,' she announced. 'Beneath this cave lies another cave, which was in the days of old a hidden temple, dedicated to the observance of the most secret and sacred rights of Moloch—Moloch the Mighty!'

There came a great clash of arms and a shout, evidently the local equivalent for 'Hoch der Kaiser!'—or, under a more recent civilisation, 'Attaboy, Moloch!'

'Beneath our feet at this moment,' continued the Queen impressively, 'the ancient fires have been rekindled, and the god waits, with brazen hands outstretched and newly heated, in readiness to receive his rightful offerings. Behold!'

As she spoke, the great slab of rock in the centre of the cave sank down out of sight, and through the rectangular opening now revealed streamed a red glowing light, accompanied by the sound of chanting and something suspiciously resembling the roar of flames. The prisoners started back, with the ready acquiescence of their custodians—who, in fact, headed the retirement.

Jubberley alone stood fast. With massive deliberation he adjusted his *pince-nez* and peered down into the glowing chamber beneath. What he saw I do not know, for I myself was out of the line of sight; but, after a careful scrutiny, he removed his *pince-nez* and looked up at the Queen.

'This,' he announced, with simple dignity, 'is an international outrage.'

But at this moment, in obedience to a signal from the Queen, Jubberley's escort gave a savage tug at his chain, and Jubberley shot rearward, in the manner of a too enterprising monkey summoned back to its organ. But from that moment I conceived a sneaking affection for Jubberley: he was at least consistent, and consistency sometimes means pluck.

The situation was obviously critical. The heat of the furnace rose into the cave: the atmosphere was growing oppressive. Dido had resumed her seat, and was engaged in earnest consultation with old Melchizedek, presenting me only with her right shoulder. My eyes fell upon Lila, crouching wide-eyed beside me; and suddenly into my confused and aching head came inspiration—a way of escape—the only way I could think of.

'Lila,' I whispered rapidly, 'listen to me. Where is Barbara—the real Barbara?'

'I haven't seen her since lunch. But she said she was going to sleep.'

'Where?'

'In a sort of cell down that passage'—Lila indicated an opening in the rock directly behind us, half veiled by purple hangings—'quite a long way from here. We found it this morning: she said it looked a lovely place for a nap.'

'Very well, then. Now listen. The first chance you get, slip away and streak down that passage as hard as you can——'

'It's so dark, Leslie!' said Lila, slipping a froggy little hand into mine.

'Here are my matches. Find Barbara; and whatever you do, wake her! Shake her, beat her, pour water on her; but wake her up, and see that she doesn't go to sleep again! It's our only—— No! Stop! Great heavens, that's no use! You won't be able to see her! She's not there: at least, her body isn't, unless a body can be in two places at—— Her soul's there, of course; but I don't know whether a soul's visible or—— No, I'm not potty, Lila: I'm just up against it. I'll explain later. I have it! Go down the passage and shout! Scream! Make a noise! Can you whistle on two fingers?'

'I used to.'

'Then go and *do* it! Don't ask me to explain now, but go quickly! Everything depends on you! I can't get away yet: I have to handle this crowd here. But I'll come after you as soon as I possibly can.'

'Righto!' said Lila, squeezing my hand.

'Brave kid!' I turned to the Caledonian spectre behind me. 'Rorison!' I said.

'Sirr!'

'I have a job for you.'

'Varra good, sirr.' Thank Heaven, the Scot still triumphed over the Phœnician.

'Then listen. Get out of here as quickly as you can, and go down to the beach. There you will find the boats, waiting to take us back to the yacht. Tell one of the crews to take you on board at once. When you get there, tell the captain from me to sound his siren—fire off that little gun on the bridge-deck—send up rockets—make all the hullabaloo he can—and keep on doing it for at least five minutes! You understand?'

'No, sirr.'

'Never mind: I didn't think you would. But do it!'

'Varra good, sirr.' Rorison sloped his spear smartly, clicked his heels together, and turned about.

'And when you get out of this cave,' I added, 'throw away as much of that kit of yours as you can: it may save explanations at the boats.'

'Varra good, sirr. Make way there, you boys!'

Next moment he had shouldered his way through his ghostly comrades and was gone.

I turned to Lila.

'Well, that's that!' I said.

But Lila was gone too.

'Well done, little Lila!' I murmured, and turned my attention again to the proceedings in the cave. I was just in time.

Chapter XIV

Réveillé

'Stop!' I thundered.

I suppose I must have sounded impressive, because they stopped. It was just as well for George Bumpstead that they did so. By 'they,' I mean two massive Ethiopians who were swinging him, in a fashion reminiscent of the infant pastime of Honeypots, over the glowing aperture in the floor, apparently with the immediate intention of contributing him as a preliminary offering to the sacrificial orgies in progress below. Needless to say, our noted explorer, big-game hunter, pioneer, and mimic was bawling for mercy.

'Stop!' I repeated, 'and put that man back where you found him.'

At a sign from the Queen, George was unceremoniously dumped upon the floor of the cave, where he remained with his eyes shut and his mouth wide open, not sure, as yet, that he was not already in the arms of Moloch. Dido turned to me.

'Have I displeased you, my lord?' she inquired, with a note of implied reproach in her voice. 'Would you have the victims offered in some other order? The women first, mayhap?' She eyed Gwen, lingeringly.

I thought, furiously. Obviously my only hope was to play for time. Our one chance of salvation from the crazy, incredible predicament in which we found ourselves rested upon the fact that our present custodians were themselves but temporary custodians of their own bodies and equipment. If we could only keep them in play until the lease expired, as it were, we might yet find ourselves back in the yacht, and the sinister, mysterious coast of Africa hull down upon the horizon—for ever, so far as I was concerned.

I bowed low to Dido—so low that my crown nearly fell off.

'Forgive me, O Queen,' I said, 'for my hasty interposition just now; but——'

'You would not surely spare that one?' demanded Dido incredulously, indicating the grovelling George.

'Heavens, no!'

Dido was all smiles again.

'You would set him aside, mayhap, until the last,' she suggested, 'to be submitted to a more lingering torture, as being the most vile?'

'That is exactly my purpose,' I replied, untruthfully but gratefully; for Dido had given me an idea. 'With your gracious permission we will now make out the order of going in—that is, arrange these captives in a certain sequence of guilt; after which we will proceed to sacrifice them one by one, commencing with those of lesser importance and concluding with the most pois——culpable.' I spoke in full consciousness of the fact that to publish a list of one's friends in their correct order of undesirability is apt to be an invidious business, and would recoil upon me heavily if any of us lived to look back upon this day. But the operation ought to be good for a quarter of an hour's waste of time, at least.

And so it proved. Amid the respectful silence of all present, Dido and I now embarked upon a lengthy discussion of the exact sequence in which our victims should be presented to Moloch—an exercise not without a certain piquancy of its own, conducted as it was in the full hearing of those chiefly interested in the result. The following was our final decision. The choice was really Dido's, for I had made a point, after consuming a reasonable amount of time in argument, of acquiescing in her more obvious preferences. If I had had a free hand in the matter, Jubberley for one would have had a higher place on the list. However, here is the complete roster, with my own mental comments appended:

1. Gwen. (*Evidently considered more of a rival in my affections than Her Majesty cares to admit.*)
2. Lady Rumborough. (*That's what comes of pretending to be deaf, your Ladyship!*)
3. Arabella Hockley. (*Arabella, Dido is jealous even of you! You see what a wash and brush-up can do for the meanest of us.*)
4. Mrs. Dunham-Massey. (*She's evidently here because she's a woman, and therefore comes before any of the men. But it's not much of a compliment to be last on any list of one's sex.*)

5. George Bumpstead. (*Carried unanimously.*)

6. Jimmy. (*He's here because he resisted the Carthaginian police in the execution of their duty, I fancy.*)

7. Podmore. (*Surprisingly high on the list. I should have called him the least offensive of the lot—if I hadn't known him.*)

8. Sir James. (*Ought to be higher.*)

9. Jubberley. (*Ought to be much higher. However, his position here entitles him to open the innings to Moloch's bowling; so that's all right.*)

'And now,' commanded Dido, with renewed enthusiasm, 'seize the prisoners, and set them in one row, in the appointed order of sacrifice.'

The convention was showing an unpleasant tendency to become executive again; but I had another shot in my locker.

'I have a humble suggestion to make. O Queen,' I said.

'Humility is not for one so exalted,' replied the Queen. Evidently she was in a high good temper again. 'What is your suggestion, my lord? You have but to utter it and it shall be fulfilled. Speak!'

I bowed, more cautiously this time, and inclined an anxious ear towards the rocky arch behind me. I was rewarded. Down the tortuous passage, muffled but distinct, came the sound of a whistle—a street urchin's two-fingered whistle. Well done, Lila! I must persevere at all costs now.

'It is not meet,' I said, raising my eyes to the Queen's again, 'that these victims should go to Moloch dishevelled, unkempt, and fasting. It is therefore my suggestion, O Queen, that they be supplied with food, drink, and suitable apparel; after which they shall sing and dance for the edification of the company. In this manner their hearts will be attuned to the greatness of the occasion, and they will participate in the final ceremony with the requisite degree of zest and enthusiasm.'

I ceased, and waited, with my heart in my mouth. But Dido nodded, approvingly.

'Well spoken!' she cried. 'Let meat and drink be brought; and let the Temple maidens array these barbarians for their final revels.'

Five minutes later the young ladies from the Trying-on Department, through whose hands I had so recently passed, were busy at their duties again—fitting a saffron-coloured bandeau round Jubberley's head, swathing Lady Rumborough in clinging draperies, and equipping George Bumpstead with a species of tambourine. Slaves entered, with roasted meats and flagons of wine, of which the party were commanded to partake. They appeared to have little appetite for solid food, though I noticed that the gentlemen drained all the goblets within reach.

'They do eat but sparingly, my lord,' observed the Queen, in the tones of a disappointed suburban hostess.

'I will exhort them,' I said, availing myself of an opportunity for which I had long been waiting; and stepped down into the arena.

'Dogs! Offal! Vermin!' I began genially, 'would you disdain Her Majesty's bounty? Eat! Stuff! Gorge yourselves!' (Then, under my breath, 'Go on! Pretend to eat, and take as long over it as you can!') The Great God Moloch is minded to receive you; and to Moloch you shall go! But you shall not go fasting nor lamenting: you shall go well primed, singing and dancing, and with cheerful countenances! (Go on, Podmore; take a bone, and gnaw it! I dare say you are a vegetarian; but it's better to be carnivorous than dead!) Eat! Drink! Be merry! In other words, get on with it! And you, O Bride of Moloch, rejoice! (I'm talking to you, Mrs. Massey. What? Yes, I know it's goat; but the more you eat the longer you'll live. Wash it down with some of this wine: it isn't half bad.) Ho, slaves! another slice of roasted flesh for this nobleman! (Slip into it, George! If you stop eating they'll give you to Moloch right away!) Drink up, all of you! Drink to Her Majesty, Queen Dido of Carthage, and your better acquaintance with the God Moloch! Hoch! Hoch! Hoch! Yoicks! (Come on; back me up! Play for time; we're all in the same boat!)

And so, shouting, swaggering, whispering, prompting, I passed from one to another, scattering instruction and

encouragement as best I could. It was an uphill business, but I succeeded in this fashion in eking out another five minutes. Then I turned to the platform again, and addressed Dido.

'And now, O Queen,' I cried, 'these thrice fortunate ones, ere they pass below, shall sing and dance for you, if it please you.'

'It does please me indeed,' replied Dido graciously. 'What will they sing?'

Swiftly in my mind I ran over the repertoire of my talented troupe. To my recollection came the accursed memory of a certain raucous part-song, conducted by Podmore and rendered by a full choir just outside my cabin door, at some unearthly morning hour, only two days previously.

'They will sing,' I announced, 'a Hymn to the Dawn—an Ode to the Rising Sun—as is their invariable custom at the break of day in their distant, smiling land. For the last time shall they sing it, before entering into the everlasting sunshine of Moloch's presence. And furthermore, while they sing they shall dance—one of the stately, mystic, symbolic interpretations of their own religious beliefs. I myself will direct their movements.'

I turned, and snatched Podmore's white umbrella from his hand.

'I'll beat time with this,' I said. 'And all of you,' I added, in a low voice, 'if you value your skins, back me up and keep the flag flying! It's up to you! I've sent for a rescue party, and you've got to carry on until they arrive. So,' I concluded hysterically, 'mix yourselves up in it!'

Grasping my improvised *bâton* firmly in my right hand, I remounted the platform, and, after directing towards Dido the superb obeisance of an eminent *chef d'orchestre*, rapped sharply upon the arm of my throne, which stood conveniently adjacent.

'Now,' I said, 'one, two, three.—!'

Next moment Jubberley and Lady Rumborough were leading the ladies of the party in a morris-dance, to an accompaniment supplied by a male quartette consisting of Podmore, Bumpstead, Jimmy, and Sir James, united in a frenzied and *sforzando* rendering of *Hail, Smiling Morn!*

The ensuing five minutes I shall never forget. Even now, at this distant date, I sometimes throw back my head and dissolve into helpless laughter at the very recollection of the scene. (I did so in the middle of the *Te Deum* in church only last Sunday, to the open shame of my wife.) I do not know which intrigued me most—the glistening foreheads, wide-open mouths, and tightly closed eyes of the glee party, conscientiously yelling themselves hoarse, or the baleful glare and reluctant sprightliness of Lady Rumborough, or the tearful abandon of Gwen and Mrs. Dunham-Massey, or the panic-stricken pirouettes of Jubberley. Each was pure joy, and each will remain with me while I live.

Frantically I swung my umbrella: hoarsely I exhorted the performers. The cave rang with our cries; the rocky floor shook beneath our feet—beneath Jubberley's, anyhow. Dido and her Court looked on motionless and fascinated, as well they might; but I paid no heed to them. My attention was focussed on hearing rather than seeing.

At last—suddenly, faintly, but distinctly—above the sound of our most lamentable revelry, I heard the boom of a gun. Directly afterwards followed the long-drawn howl of the ship's siren. At the same moment the black darkness in the embrasure above the doorway, directly in front of me, was illuminated by a greenish flare, as a star-shell burst in the sky. My heart leaped: the inestimable Rorison had reached the yacht and delivered my message. We had a fighting chance now.

I glanced hastily round the cave. Already gaps were observable here and there in the ranks of Dido's supporters. Thank Heaven for light sleepers! Even as I gazed, a burly Nubian faded slowly from my sight, and a slave-girl went out like the flame of a candle.

Had the others noticed? Feverishly I scanned their faces. No, apparently not: their attention was focussed upon the unearthly cabaret show which my poor friends were giving on the floor. It must not be allowed to relax.

'Come on!' I shouted, redoubling my antics. 'Step out, Jubberley, my lad; put some ginger into it! Point your toe, Lady Rumborough; and kick up a bit more behind! Wave your little handkerchiefs, Gwen! Arabella, if I have to come down to you with this umbrella—that's better, my girl! Sing up, Bumpstead! Open your mouth and roar it a bit more! Jimmy, give him a kick on the shins! That's better, Bumpstead; that's nearly an octave higher! Fine! Capital! Splendid!' (Our Carthaginian friends were still thinning out, for pandemonium reigned in the bay outside. I slid a furtive eye round in Dido's direction, hoping against hope; but no, there she sat, as massive as ever, brooding majestically over the revels. I

wondered what luck Lila was having.) 'Now, then, you Glee Club, do it all over again! Unanimous encore, by request! Get down to it! "Hail, Smiling Morn, Smiling Mor-hor-hor-hor-horn!" Sing up, you four dumb-bells—sing the roof off—or Moloch'll get you to a certainty!'

I stormed on, for another few minutes. There was a mere handful of guards left now. Practically all the temple maidens had disappeared; girls are wakeful creatures, I suppose. I glanced over my shoulder again: I was rewarded by the spectacle of old Melchizedek suddenly turning translucent before my eyes, and then evaporating to nothing, like a 'fade-out' in the movies. Unfortunately Dido, sitting elbow to elbow with him, observed his disappearance too. She sprang to her feet, gave a scared glance round the cave, and rushed to the edge of the platform.

'Cease!' she cried. 'Cease these senseless prancings! To your duty, guards! To Moloch with these steaming Corybants!'

She turned to me, and pointing out, through the opening opposite to us, to a remarkably decorative shower of Mr. Brock's best Golden Rain which was descending from the heavens at the moment, shrieked excitedly:

'Look, my lord! Look and listen! This is devil's work! The sky is ablaze, and the noises of hell are let loose. The gods have frowned upon our love! The whole coast-line will be awake ere long; and then—what? See, my guards fade away from me, one by one! Even I am not secure. Supposing the Lady Barbara——' Dido clasped her hands frantically. 'But no, it shall not be! My myrmidons may go from me, but I myself will remain—I *must* remain—with you, my lord! I know what must be done: there is no time to waste. Come quick!' She seized my hand and began to drag me towards the rocky passage leading to Barbara's cell.

'What are we going to do?' I asked.

'Do?' she panted. 'We go to render my tenancy of the Lady Barbara's fair body final and complete. I know an infallible means whereby to prolong her slumber——'

'No, by Jove, you don't!' I shouted, grabbing her wrist, and endeavouring to pull her back. 'You just stay here, O Queen, and leave Barbara alone. Don't be silly! The idea! Do you think I'm going to let you touch a hair of her beautiful head?' I turned to my exhausted and bewildered companions on the floor. 'Come on, you fellows; don't stand gaping there. Come and give me a hand, or Barbara's for it!'

But my words were enough. Dido suddenly ceased struggling, and stood confronting me with a ferocious glare.

'You love the Lady Barbara?' she hissed.

'Love her? Of course I do,' I said, 'better than anything in this world!'

It was a tactless avowal, I admit. Dido promptly stepped back three paces, and levelled a forefinger straight at my eyes.

'I knew it! Then shall she die!' she announced, through set teeth. 'As for you, my lord—stand fast upon that very spot, till I return for you!'

'Not on your life!' I plunged forward to stop her. As I did so, I was conscious of a tremendous shock—a shock such as a man might receive through touching a third rail or a giant Leyden jar. Next moment Dido had disappeared down the passage, and I found myself fixed, rooted, helpless, immovable, staring impotently after her. Stir a foot I could not: I seemed to have been turned to a statue. Still, my tongue was free.

'Come on, you poops!' I yelled to my friends. 'Jimmy—Bumpstead—somebody—get after her! She's going to do Barbara in!... No, by Jove, she's back again!'

The purple hangings were gone, and the figure of Dido was visible once more, framed in the rocky opening. But, oh joy! her expression had softened. Her lips were parted in a smile: her eyes were shining and dewy, as of a child refreshed with sleep. I felt my stiffened limbs relax; I held out appealing arms.

'Relent, O Queen!' I cried. 'Relent, and spare her! Kill me, if you like, but——' I rocked on my feet, and my voice shook.

'Why, Leslie,' asked Barbara, coming to me and putting a supporting arm round me, 'what's the matter? Lila told me you wanted me, so I came as quickly as I could. Lean on me, old boy, and I'll find you somewhere to lie down.'

I saved her the trouble by sliding to the floor in a nerveless heap. I had been a delirious man all evening, and this was the end.

Barbara supported my head with her arm. I opened my eyes and looked mistily about me. Outside utter silence and darkness reigned once more. Within, the golden chairs had dissolved, the purple hangings were gone; the stone slab was

back in its place; and the cave was empty, save for the presence of my late concert party, gazing at us in unspeakable obfuscation from the floor.

'Keep awake till Christmas, if you can, Barbara,' I croaked: 'at least, until we can get out of this!'

Barbara laughed unsteadily, and patted my hand.

'All right, old fellow. Go to sleep now,' she said.

'I knew it was Mrs. Hatton all the time!' boomed the voice of Lady Rumborough triumphantly. That was the last thing I remember.



Chapter XV

Podmore on Poltergeists

I came to myself in my own bed, in my own cabin, on board the yacht. The sun was shining brightly outside; a pleasant breeze stirred the little curtains at my window; and the motion of the vessel made it clear that we were at sea again.

I opened my eyes sleepily, for the purpose of taking in my bearings. Having accomplished this end, I closed them again, and proceeded, as well as I could, to appreciate the situation, as they say in the army. It was not too easy, for my mind was a welter of confused recollections and tangled emotions.

First of all, how many of my recent experiences were genuine? Had I dreamed the whole thing? If so, how long had the dream lasted? What day was it now? If it was the day which I thought was yesterday, we were all warned for a shore excursion at nine a.m. But here we were at sea: what about that? It was all very confusing.

I put my hand to my forehead, which was throbbing a little, and encountered a protuberance about the size of a pigeon's egg. The discovery clarified the situation marvellously. It awoke my recollections, as it were, with a cold sponge; and the whole jumbled story sprang into coherent and continuous shape. Everything came back to me; or nearly everything—the vigorous and somewhat original measures I had taken to discipline my companions; my involuntary and embarrassing partnership with Dido; Jimmy's counter-attack, and the subsequent damage to my occiput. Finally, the mobilisation of Dido's ghostly bodyguard, and the incredible ceremony which had concluded the evening's adventures.

Had these things happened, or had I dreamed them? Some of them must have happened; the pigeon's egg was a guarantee of that. In any case the tale was incomplete: it had no ending. I remembered sending Lila to look for Barbara, and Rorison to rouse the yacht. What next, what next? Had Barbara appeared? had Rorison——?

At this moment my cabin door opened cautiously, and the granite features of Rorison, softened by a certain unaccustomed solicitude, were discernible in the aperture.

'Good morning, Rorison,' I said.

'Good afternoon, sirr.'

'Oh, it's as bad as that, is it?'

'Yes, sirr.' My henchman entered delicately, carrying a can of hot water and a cup of tea. 'Are you feeling any better, sirr?' he inquired, in the voice which he keeps for funerals.

'I am feeling all right,' I replied irritably, 'except for a buzzing in the head. Why?'

'Do you not mind last night, sirr?'

'I remember some of it. By the way, when did I come on board? And—how did I come on board?'

'With the others, sirr, about midnight: you were being carrit on a boat's grating. They was all varra quiet like, but the young leddy told me you had had a dunt on the heid from a stane. You were pitten to bed by Mrs. Hatton, and she told me just to let you sleep. She said this coast was a grand place for sleep.'

'She ought to know,' I remarked thoughtfully.

'I was terrible sleepy myself,' continued Rorison, conversationally. 'Yesterday efternoon, when you sent me back on board, I was that heavy in the heid that I went to my bunk, and I never stirred until I heard the siren blawin', aboot the back of eleven o'clock, and fireworks gaun' off.'

'I hope you got your body back in good shape,' I said.

'I beg your pardon, sirr?'

'Nothing: I'm not quite awake yet. What time is it?'

'Goin' on for twa o'clock, sirr. The pairty is just sitting doon tae their lunches. They was all varra late this morning, and they've only just gotten thegither.'

'Lunch, eh! In that case I'll take a turn on deck while there's room. Get me a bath, while I shave.'

'Are you not for any lunch, sirr?'

'No, thanks. I want to go somewhere quiet, to think. Tea and a biscuit will do.'

'Varra good, sirr.'

'By the way, have you seen Mrs. Hatton this morning?'

'No, sirr; but I heard the young leddy tell'n her leddyship that Mrs. Hatton was not coming on the deck until the efternoon. She was feelin' kin' of tired.'

Tired? After the double life Barbara had been leading, no wonder!

'All right,' I said, and proceeded to my toilet.

Twenty minutes later I was entrenched in my favourite refuge, on the top of the chart-house, basking in the sun with my back against a coil of spare hawser, and reviewing the events of the past twenty-four hours—placidly on the whole, and gratefully. I was placid because the coast of Africa had sunk from sight, and we were, I devoutly hoped, by this time well beyond the radius of Dido's ghostly influence. Moreover, I was shortly going to see Barbara. I wanted to compare notes with her; I wanted to know if she had received her body back intact, or whether she was feeling any the worse for Dido's exertions. Presumably she was, or she would have been on deck by this time. But, late or early, in whatever shape she came, I was all on fire to see her again; for my recent adventures, if they had done nothing else, had awakened me once and for all to the realisation of what Barbara meant to me. That was why I felt grateful.

About the rest of the ship's company I thought very little, although I was fully conscious by this time that my temporary lease of a thick skin and an aggressive disposition had expired, and that when next I encountered the gang I should be as complete a worm in their presence as ever; so I was in no hurry to encounter any of them. All I wanted was Barbara, Barbara, Barbara. If she and I could only enter into a mutually protective alliance——

There came a babble of voices from the companionway, and the lunchers swarmed upon deck, followed by Rorison carrying tinkling coffee-cups on a tray.

'Serve the coffee here, Rorison, out of the wind,' commanded the voice of Lady Rumborough; 'and tell the sailors to bring more chairs.'

'Varra good, mem.'

I peered down from my eyrie. To my extreme annoyance, the entire party had selected the lee of the chart-house for their post-prandial symposium, which experience told me would be a lengthy and boring affair. However, they would at least have a new topic to discuss.

And so it proved. Escape being impossible, I lay back with closed eyes, and smoked.

'Thank Heaven,' remarked the deep bass voice of Lady Rumborough, 'for a Christian luncheon once more!'

'If you were to ask me,' commented Jimmy, 'I should describe the function as a first-class funeral. It was almost as bad as the one in the cave.'

'No one said a word,' added Lila.

'We were all feeling a bit chippy—what?' This from George Bumpstead.

'We had much to occupy our thoughts,' remarked Podmore, in gentle but portentous tones.

'That is all over now,' chirped Sir James—'quite over! There is something extraordinarily healthy and reassuring about finding one's self upon one's own quarter-deck again.' He snuffed the gentle breeze, audibly. 'After all, a home on the rolling deep is the only normal——'

'A wet sheet and a flowing sea, as it were?' suggested Jubberley helpfully.

'Precisely. We are ourselves once more. Four bells, and a fair breeze from the——that is,' said Sir James abruptly, as if his custodian of last night had suddenly tweaked his chain, 'it has just struck two o'clock, and the weather is most—er—clement.'

'Still,' continued Lady Rumborough, who as usual had not allowed her train of thought to be interrupted by the conversation of others, 'I can't help wondering where he hired them all from, and how they disappeared so suddenly.'

'Them, mother?' inquired Jimmy's voice. 'Who?'

'That crowd of natives, all dressed up as something. Where did they all go to?'

'Now I think of it,' added the voice of George Bumpstead, strangely subdued, 'they did disappear rather funnily. Sort of clicked out.'

There was an impressive silence: evidently the company were recollecting things.

'But it's all so silly!' broke in Jimmy Rumborough's voice again. 'I mean—they couldn't have, could they?'

'What do you mean—couldn't have?'

'Couldn't have—done the things they did. I saw a great fat priest simply go pop, like a balloon, and disappear!'

'Oh, shut up, Jimmy!' said Bumpstead earnestly.

'But I *did*. Didn't you, Gwen?'

'Jimmy, don't tease me any more. I'm feeling dreadful!'

'Well, then—Jubberley?'

'I was too deeply preoccupied,' replied Jubberley, 'with the outrageous treatment to which we were being subjected—supplemented as it was by personal discomfort and indignity of the most unpardonable character—to take any particular note of the actual personnel of the——'

Jimmy interrupted him.

'Here's my idea,' he said. 'I believe they were all a bunch of cinema people, doing a film about a Sheikh, or something; and Leslie came across them and hired them for the day. What do you think, Mr. Podmore?'

There was another silence, and then Mr. Podmore's reedy voice was uplifted, in subdued and solemn rapture.

'Do you think they were there at all,' he asked—'in a physical sense?'

'Of course they were!' Lady Rumborough was speaking again, with justifiable impatience. 'Didn't we all see them—Leslie Miles dressed up in a tablecloth and behaving like a madman; and Barbara in a bath-robe, walking in her sleep, or pretending to?'

'Yes, we saw them,' admitted Mr. Podmore. 'But'—with a deferential little cough—'were they actually *there*, in what is usually termed the flesh? Perhaps you are not interested in the investigation of spiritualistic manifestations, Lady Rumborough?'

'No, I'm not,' replied her ladyship frankly.

'Are you suggesting, Mr. Podmore,' inquired Mr. Jubberley, in majestic reproof, 'that our experiences last night can only be attributed to the activities of some supernatural agency?'

'Much has been revealed to earnest investigators within recent years,' replied Podmore, in a voice of respectful awe. 'A devoted succession of psychic pioneers—Crookes, Myers, Lodge, Doyle, and many others—have demonstrated by patient research and sane investigation that we are more closely in touch with other worlds than most people imagine. And we are getting closer!'

There was another silence. Evidently Mr. Podmore, to employ a convenient American idiom, had started something.

'You mean,' observed Jubberley presently, with the air of one throwing off a happy impromptu, 'that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in one's—er—philosophy?'

'Precisely,' replied Podmore, warming to his work. 'Consider our environment last night. A semi-tropical atmosphere; a cave probably once employed as a place of worship, in close proximity to the ruins of one of the greatest cities of antiquity, the very centre of a long-forgotten civilisation. In other words, a psychic area likely to be frequented by thousands of—what shall we say?'

'Willy-Wallies?' suggested Lila helpfully.

'I should prefer,' remarked Mr. Podmore, in a slightly pained voice, 'to describe them as Entities, or Induced Phenomena.'

As no one raised any objection to this audacious flight, Mr. Podmore continued:

'Consider the special circumstances. Our friend Colonel Miles was undoubtedly rendered mediumistic by his physical condition, aggravated by a touch of the sun and the fact that he had recently participated in—shall we say?—a bout of fisticuffs. He was thus rendered acutely sensitive to the occult influences about him; and in my belief he communicated his abnormal condition, by some form of unconscious hypnotic suggestion, to Mrs. Hatton, with whom he is undoubtedly in the closest psychic sympathy.'

'Mind your own business!' I murmured.

Podmore ploughed on, to a now deeply interested audience.

'Thus the presence, not merely of one highly receptive medium, but of two, in this densely populated spiritualistic atmosphere—an atmosphere, moreover, obviously hostile to and resentful of our presence—precipitated the inevitable *Poltergeist*.'

'Inevitable *what*?' asked several people's voices at once.

'Poltergeist,' explained Podmore, 'is a German expression, and may be rendered "Rackety Spirit."'

'That's a pretty sound description!' observed Jimmy.

'Instances of the occurrence of these phenomena,' continued Podmore, who had now settled down to his regular platform voice, 'are numerous throughout spiritualistic history. There was the case of the Wesley family, in the year——'

'But what happens at a Poltergeist, or whatever you call it?' interposed Lila. 'What does a Poltergeist *do*?'

'Roughly speaking,' replied Podmore, 'a Poltergeist is a spiritualistic demonstration of hostility to the intrusion of an unwelcome person or persons into a particular locality or habitation. The protests of the Entities take visible form. Furniture becomes animated; unseen hands employ domestic objects as missiles. The same conditions apply to a cave as to an ordinary dwelling, in some cases to an intensified extent. A few years ago, in the south of England, a householder attempted to construct in his garden a dug-out, as a shelter against air raids. For this purpose he decided to enlarge an already existing cavity in the side of a hill, which had obviously been employed at some previous time as a human habitation. His efforts were attended by most violent spiritualistic opposition. Portions of rock fell from the roof, and upon two occasions, as he approached the mouth of the cavity, stones were actually thrown at him from within.'

'I see,' said Jimmy. 'And that crowd we saw last night objected to us using their cave?'

'Precisely. And they signified their disapproval and resentment by the customary psychic manifestations.'

'I should jolly well think they did!' remarked Bumpstead, with feeling. Obviously, he was thinking of his share in the game of Honeypots.

'But,' continued Podmore, in a voice trembling with humble exultation, 'last night's manifestations were such as mortal investigators have never yet been privileged to witness! My friends, my colleagues—if I may call you my colleagues—we have penetrated together to a point further than any yet reached. In our Poltergeist we not only evoked the usual symptoms of hostility to our presence, but we materialised the actual agents concerned—their very forms and faces. It was a triumph! If only I had had my camera! A psychograph of that manifestation—what a stir it would have made in the psychic world!'

There was a very long silence this time. Then Lady Rumborough rose to her feet.

'Well,' she said, 'I'm going to put the whole business out of my head. Whatever it was, it's over, and I'm glad; and we'll do ourselves no good by remembering it.'

'You're right, Mum,' said Jimmy, 'dead right!'

'I entirely concur,' said Jubberley. 'These matters are best left in the—er—dim underworld in which they—er—live, and move, and have their——'

But Podmore declined to acknowledge defeat.

'I see your difficulty,' he said. 'You cannot credit the evidence of your own senses, much though you would like to. Natural enough! Similar instances have occurred. In the Wesley case, the entire manifestation was described by an unconvinced commentator as "a contagious epidemic hallucination of witnesses." That is what has happened to you. But

we must have faith; we must have vision; we must have——'

It was left to Lady Rumborough to convey to our psychic enthusiast the general sense of the meeting.

'Mr. Podmore,' she said, in tones of relentless finality, 'we have all been suffering from a sort of—sort of—bad dream, among ourselves——'

'A species of co-operative nightmare,' confirmed Sir James.

'—and we mean to forget it—especially when we meet Leslie Miles! Tea at four-thirty, everybody!'



But for my part, I felt grateful to Mr. Podmore. In deep waters, one rather likes to have something to hold on to.



Chapter XVI

Pygmies and Pyramids

I

At tea-time I made my re-entrance into society. The company's agreement to regard last night's manifestations as though they had never been was faithfully observed; but it was a constrained meal, and I soon discovered that there is no appreciable difference between being regarded as one mentally afflicted and as one recently cured of mental affliction.

As I had anticipated, my valorous mood of yesterday had entirely evaporated. I was suffering badly from reaction: a child could have bullied me to death. But no one present attempted to do anything of the kind: evidently the memory of my recent disciplinary measures had not entirely faded from the minds of my pupils. Sir James and his lady were strangely unautocratic: for the time being I appeared to have made the yacht safe for Democracy. Bumpstead was positively unobtrusive: that he had ever given imitations of Biff Burbidge seemed incredible: Jubberley was deferential and ill at ease: I distinctly saw him half hold up his hand, like a schoolboy, and then jerk it down again, before asking some one to pass the sugar. Arabella was spotlessly clean, and less bronchial than formerly. Gwen was nowhere to be seen, which puzzled me a little. Mrs. Dunham-Massey smiled upon me, sweetly but ominously: it was clear even to my comprehension that, like the Bourbons after the French Revolution, she had learned nothing and forgotten nothing, and was merely keeping her powder dry. As for Mr. Podmore, he gazed continuously upon me with the tender and reverent affection of a humble entomologist who has been privileged to capture an insect of incredible rarity and present it to his local museum. Only Jimmy and Lila, furtively holding hands behind the cake-stand and sharing one cigarette, appeared entirely oblivious to my presence—or to that of any one else, for that matter.

Barbara was not visible; but shortly after tea she sent me a message by Lila to say that she would like to see me in her cabin.

'She is just the least bit whacked by recent events,' murmured my small companion, as she led the way below. 'Be nice to her.'

'I will do my very best,' I replied solemnly.

'Righto! Excuse me now: I have a date with the infant James.'

'Make him shave off those little side-whiskers, will you?' I called after her.

'They are already on the agenda. So long!' and Lila fluttered away, to contend with her new responsibilities.

I found Barbara tired, but otherwise her beautiful and companionable self.

'Is there any place on this ship where one can have privacy and fresh air?' she asked me.

'Yes—if you don't mind climbing an iron ladder.'

'I will climb the mast, if necessary,' said Barbara.

Five minutes later she was lying snugly curled up inside a great coil of spare hawser on the roof of the chart-house, while I sat perched upon the edge thereof, looking contentedly down upon her.

'Why did you send for me?' I asked.

'I wanted to know exactly what happened yesterday.'

'I'll tell you, if you like. But I may as well warn you that the topic is barred throughout the ship, for ever.'

'So it is with me, after to-day; but I must know what went on in that cave during my absence.'

I chuckled.

'You weren't absent—not by a long chalk! However, you shall hear.' And I told Barbara the whole story, down to the moment of her own dramatic and timely appearance.

'Then she really did occupy my body?' said Barbara, with wondering eyes.

'Most certainly. It was you, all right, that I spent the afternoon with. And it was you who took the chair at the cabaret show. By the way, what roused you in the end?'

'The noise that Lila was making. I woke up, and hurried out of my little cell into the passage, and asked her what was happening. She said you wanted me, so I came.'

'You must have brushed past Dido on the way,' I remarked thoughtfully, 'or what was left of her!... Heigho! it's an "unco" business, as Rorison would say. Let's forget it.'

'I mean to,' said Barbara sincerely, 'from now on. By the way, how are you feeling this afternoon, Leslie dear?'

'I? I am feeling ashamed—ashamed and disillusioned.'

'Meaning——?'

'I have just realised the utter futility of trying to pay off old scores by making other people uncomfortable. Proverbs are always wrong: the very last way to defeat your adversary is to fight him with his own weapons. Would one fight a skunk, or a Camembert cheese, with its own weapons? I think not! Win or lose, a man must fight his battles with such equipment as God has given him; and I'm vain enough to believe that the equipment of a skunk is not one of my attributes. Yet what did I do yesterday? I was given a chance to show myself a bigger man than Rumborough, or Jubberley, or Podmore, or Bumpstead; and all I accomplished was to show myself a more pettifogging tyrant than Rumborough, a greater bore than Jubberley, a worse nuisance than Podmore, and a more resilient bounder than Bumpstead.'

Barbara slipped her hand into mine. 'Go on talking,' she said: 'it's doing us both good.' Gratefully accepting this generous view of the case, I ploughed on.

'And on the other hand, it hasn't done them a particle of good either. Listen!'

We listened. Beneath the awning over the after-deck we could hear the bridge quartette tuning up for its evening entertainment. First a stately recitative from Jubberley.

'Before we proceed to the next hand, may I animadvert, Bumpstead, in all friendliness, upon your omission to return my very palpable call last time? I led the King of Spades, in order to indicate to you that I was in possession——'

'Oh, hire a hall, Jubberley, old man! Nobody knows what any of your leads mean. What did you go and do the time before the last? Put up Old Mossy Face, and got him slain by The Bullet right off; after which you went to bed with the nine of——'

'Does anybody know what trumps are?' boomed an all too familiar voice.

'One no trump, Charlotte dear.'

'What?'

'One no trump!'

'All right: you needn't shout. Let me see, there's a convention about that, isn't there? If I make two diamonds, that'll mean that I want my partner to double no trumps, won't it? Or is it the other way about? As a matter of fact——'

'*Tempus* is fugeing! Declare something, or pass!'

'George, don't try to be funny. Well, Margot, since you seem to want them, I shall go two diamonds; but I warn you I've only got——'

'Dear lady, to indicate the nature of your hand so openly——'

'Mrs. Massey, for the love of Mike declare something, and put Jubberley out of his pain! Two no trumps? That'll do the trick, I expect. Lead away, Jubberley, old sport! Lay out your dead, your ladyship!' And so on.

'You see,' I said to Barbara, 'they're right back where they were yesterday morning. "No Change," as they say in the election results. *Pygmies are Pygmies still, though perched on Alps.*'

'Never mind,' replied Barbara. 'Natures never do change, really: that's why you will always be nice, whatever happens. But when I asked you just now how you felt, I meant, how does it feel to have been a king?'

'I never was quite a king,' I said modestly. 'I was just Dido's consort for the time being—a sort of demi-royalty.'

'Half a sovereign, as it were?'

'Exactly. And I never want to go into currency again.'

Young voices were audible below us.

'Can you climb this ladder, darling?'

'Yes, darlingest!'

'You *marvellous* girl!'

'This,' I observed to Barbara, 'sounds like the Voice of Love.'

Next moment Lila's shingled head and saucer eyes appeared above the edge of the chart-house. On seeing us:

'Oh, sorry!' she said, with an indulgent smile—adding to her invisible swain:

'No good, Jimmy: number engaged! We must ooze away somewhere else. So long, my children!'

'Don't go,' I said: 'I want to talk to you.'

'To both of us?'

'Certainly.'

'Then we'll stay. What about?'

'Yes, what about?' echoed Jimmy, his head appearing behind Lila's shoulder. I noted that his whiskers had disappeared already.

'I want to apologise to you,' I said. 'I had meant to start with Jubberley; but you're on the list too, so I may as well take you first. Lila, I apologise! Jimmy, I apologise! No, I'm not quite sure about you, James. What about this bump on my head, my lad?'

'I can apologise too, and then we'll be all square,' suggested Jimmy.

'What exactly are you apologising for, Leslie?' inquired Lila, who by this time had joined her sister in her hempen nest.

'For my rather cavalier treatment of you both yesterday.'

'Yesterday,' said Lila gravely, 'is an official wash-out; so you needn't apologise to anybody.'

'That's a relief,' I said.

'Still,' pursued Lila, with the healthy curiosity of her age and sex, 'whom else would you have apologised to, besides us?'

'Jubberley and Podmore, probably. They both showed themselves stout fellows in yesterday's unpleasantness. Any others, Barbara?'

'I don't think so,' said Barbara. 'By the way, are you two creatures properly—I mean, is it official now?'

Lila shook her head vigorously.

'No, not yet. We want to keep it to ourselves for a bit.'

'You made a pretty clean breast of things in public last night, you know,' I reminded her.

Lila turned pink. Too late, I cursed my clumsiness.

'Last night,' interposed Barbara swiftly, 'is officially in oblivion. That's all right, Lila darling: give your big sister a kiss, and bless you! Don't choke me, though. Now you, Jimmy dear!'

Master James complied, blushing.

'Don't I come in anywhere?' I complained.

Lila leaned out of the nest and kissed me upon the right ear.

'That's for fishing me out of the chain-gang last night,' she said. 'I may as well forgive you, because Gwen never will! Now, Jimmy, let's skedaddle: the old folks have much to engross them.' She slid down the iron ladder, like a sylph down a cobweb, followed by the adoring James, and we were left alone again.

II

Barbara and I sat very silent for a while, and, I think, very contented. The sun was setting, and most of our shipmates had gone to their cabins. Somewhere below a bugle sounded—the dressing bugle, probably. The discordant strains of the bridge four had died away.

'Jimmy's all right,' said Barbara, suddenly and decisively, as if answering a question which she had been debating within herself.

'Yes, I think he is,' I agreed. 'In fact, the whole rising generation is all right—if old fogies like me would only admit it. I think the War has prematurely aged those of us who are between thirty and forty. I must say I loathed Jimmy when first I met him; but he seems to me different now—more human. And Lila's altered too.'

'Not altered,' amended Barbara softly. 'Grown up—in a night!'

'I see,' I said. 'I wonder if they have been in love with one another for long?'

'For quite a while, I expect, only neither of them realised it. That's the way it usually goes.'

'It's an odd thing, realisation,' I mused. 'Barbara, have you ever read Jules Verne's story, about the shipwrecked men on the raft?'

'Not that I remember.'

'It's an old favourite of mine, and seems in its way to symbolise half the tragedy—and half the hope—of life. These men had been adrift for days, out of sight of land, trying to shape a course under a tropical sun, with nothing to help them but a rag of canvas, and a steering-oar, and their own will to hold on. Their provisions were gone, their water was gone, and they were dying one by one of hunger and thirst—mainly thirst, of course. At last, on the morning of the third day without water, one of them (the man at the steering-oar, I think he was) suddenly reached the limit of his endurance. He picked up a pannikin, dipped it into the sea, and drank it right off. Barbara, that water was fresh! Brackish, of course, but fresh and drinkable! Without knowing it, they had arrived opposite the mouth of the Amazon; and though the coast of South America was still far below the horizon, the outward thrust of the river—the greatest river in the world—was sufficient, even at that distance, to sweeten the water of the ocean itself! What a moment! Can't you see those poor, gasping, incredulous fellows throwing themselves on their faces and lapping up fresh water out of the Atlantic? I was ten years old when first I read that story, but I fairly cried with the thrill of it. It brings tears to my eyes still.... You see the application of the story?'

'You mean, we are never sufficiently conscious of our own "mercies," as they say in Scotland?'

'That's the general idea; but there is a particular application.'

'Jimmy and Lila?'

'No; you and I. I am the man with the pannikin, and you are the river. When I came on board this ship I felt exactly like our friends on the raft—water everywhere, and not a drop to drink, as it were. People everywhere, and not a soul to speak to, or cotton on to, or confide in, or care for. Then at Naples you came on board, and the deep waters all around me turned sweet and clean and refreshing. Not that I realised the fact all at once: fool that I was, I went for days without knowing what had happened. I know now, though!'

Barbara lifted her eyes to mine, and kept them there for an appreciable moment.

'What told you?' she asked gently.

'Something that happened yesterday. After I had made that awful and useless exhibition of myself in the cave during luncheon, and after, I went for a ramble along the beach, to cool off and clear my thoughts. And as I walked, I suddenly realised that all these impossible people, whom I hated so much and feared so much, were nothing in my life at all, any longer. They could fuss and wrangle, sing and dance, peep and pry, hector and bully to their hearts' content, and it would all mean nothing to me—nothing in the world. And why? Because I had just come within range of you, my dear! If ever again I felt discouraged, or helpless, or down and out, I knew now that all I had to do was to dip my battered old pannikin into the sweet waters of your presence, and drink my fill. That's all!'

I stopped, and glared at Barbara.

'Am I an old sentimentalist?' I asked defiantly.

'If you are,' she answered softly, 'so am I.' And her eyes were wet.

Chapter XVII

Old Scores

I

Dinner was an entirely ordinary function: the constraint of tea-time had vanished. With all modesty, I must claim no small share in the credit for this. For the first time since I came on board the yacht I felt at peace with all men. I did not fear Lady Rumborough; I did not flinch from Jubberley; I did not even feel a desire to rise up and kick George Bumpstead in the base of the spine. I endured Podmore cheerfully, and my host with equanimity.

Gwen was present, for the first time that day, and I found myself gazing upon her with that compassion which is akin to affection. Poor Gwen! how faithfully Dido had summed her up the previous evening! For that matter, Dido had summed every one up with extraordinary terseness and truth. I felt almost sorry that reporters had not been present—or at least some amateur recorder of the utterances of eminent persons. Dido's strictures upon our yacht party would have added spice to any volume of reminiscences.

The company soon reacted to my obvious normality, and all present, having realised that the question of binding me with cords had now receded beyond the pale of practical necessity, settled down contentedly enough to their accustomed enjoyment of life—gorging, gossiping, boasting, fussing, soliloquising, or making eyes. I sat between Mrs. Dunham-Massey and Arabella Hockley. Barbara I had resigned to my host; but I had an appointment with her behind the steam steering-gear at moonrise. For the time being I was at liberty to devote myself to the duties of social intercourse.

Arabella attracted my attention first. She was wearing an absolutely clean white frock—a notable incident in itself—and the effects of the thorough grooming which she had received yesterday were still apparent. Her hair rippled and shone: plainly the efficient artist to whose hands I had committed her had administered to her *coiffure* some kind of prehistoric permanent wave. There, I fear, the improvement ended. She still snored over her food and interrupted conversation in order to hurl hoarse pleasantries across the table. I began to realise the truth of Barbara's dictum upon the immutability of human character. Beyond a certain nascent concern for her own personal appearance, Arabella Hockley's recent schooling had borne no fruit at all. She remained what she had been—a female hobbledehoy, with defective tonsils and an untimely sense of humour.

Barbara's theories, I soon found, also held good in the case of Mrs. Dunham-Massey. Half-way through dinner that disciple of Truth got to work upon me, with characteristic thoroughness.

'We mustn't discuss forbidden topics,' she purred; 'but how you and dear Barbara must have enjoyed yourselves yesterday! And what a lot of rehearsals you must have had!'

'Yesterday?' I replied vaguely. 'I was suffering from a touch of the sun yesterday; so my recollections are rather——'

'And was Barbara suffering too, poor darling?'

'I'm afraid I'm not in Mrs. Hatton's confidence.'

'Oh, I thought you were. You sat together up on the top of the chart-house quite a long time this afternoon, didn't you?' Having delivered this side-thrust, Mrs. Massey reverted to frontal attack. 'But do you really mean to tell me that you have no recollection of anything that happened yesterday?'

'That is exactly what I do mean to tell you,' I replied, with perfect truth.

'What a pity! You missed a good deal. Barbara was dreadfully candid in some of the things she said about people. It would have been cruel to laugh, but her criticisms were really too divine. She summed up each one of us in turn, to our faces.'

I could not resist asking an innocent question here.

'Oh, me? She was very lenient to poor little me—perfectly sweet, in fact. But some of the others! I'm afraid they'll never forgive her: I don't quite see how they can. I wonder if Barbara has any recollection of what she said.'

'I know she hasn't,' I replied, again with perfect truth.

Mrs. Dunham-Massey turned and surveyed me with grave interest.

'That's odd,' she remarked.

'What's odd?'

'You told me just now that you weren't in Mrs. Hatton's confidence—didn't you? Of course, you forgot. It's so difficult to remember everything one says—isn't it?'

Two days ago pinpricks of this kind would have rendered me frantic. But I had obtained a suit of armour since then.

'I don't remember everything I say,' I rejoined blandly; 'but I usually remember everything I hear. And that brings something back to me—something from last night. I seem to recall a voice. It might have been Mrs. Hatton's, except that it was far too loud and commanding. Anyhow, this voice was describing some other woman—pretty succinctly, I thought.'

'Oh! Who was the woman?'

'I have no idea: all I heard was her description. She had a painted face, and false hair, and only employed the truth when it was unsavoury or painful to others. Did you notice any one like that among those present?'

Mrs. Dunham-Massey turned half round in her chair and eyed me intently. I met her gaze with a vapid smile. Her nostrils were twitching slightly.

'Is that all you remember?'

'All at present. But I shall never forget it.'

Then, oh joy! she lost her temper.

'You'll be sorry for this!' she said, in a low, venomous voice.

'Not if I am careful,' I replied reassuringly. 'I've got a good constitution; and after all, what's a touch of the sun?'

Then, turning away, I caught Barbara's eye across the table. I picked up my glass, made a motion as of dipping it into something, and drank. Barbara took my meaning, and smiled gravely back at me. I heaved a little sigh of sheer content: I was proof against all the Dunham-Masseys of this world for all time now, and the estimable lady at my side knew it. I turned to her again.

'I'll let you know if I remember anything more,' I promised her; and only the general uprising of the company saved me, I firmly believe, from common assault.

II

Having arrived on deck, I looked at my watch. Barbara and I could hardly steal away as yet—that was clear. Very well, then: I would devote the intervening hour to making myself agreeable to my companions. I would even cut in at bridge, if invited. One should always be ready to brighten the lives of those less fortunately situated.

But first I looked round for Barbara: I wanted to confirm my appointment with her. She was sitting with her back to me, talking to Mrs. Dunham-Massey. I decided to wait.

'Will you cub and help be to tie fish-hooks?' asked a voice at my side. 'We're going to anchor subwhere to-borrow dight, and I want to lay a dight-lide.'

I must say this for Arabella: she does not nurse grievances. I had handled her drastically enough not twenty-four hours ago, and here she was conferring upon me the highest honour that it was in her power to bestow. I began dimly to suspect that Arabella might be a Giver.

'All right,' I said heartily. 'Just a moment, though.' Barbara had abandoned Mrs. Dunham-Massey, and was on her way to entertain Podmore, who was sitting a little forlornly by himself. (Morris-dances were low in the market these days.) I crossed the deck and intercepted her. The gramophone was making its usual din—not the portable monstrosity which I had destroyed on the beach, of course, but a massive instrument indigenous to the quarter-deck—and I had to raise my voice a little.

'Ten o'clock,' I said, 'behind the wheel-house?'

Barbara smiled, and gave me a little nod.

'Not quite so loud though, dear!' she murmured.

It was only then that I realised that some one had stopped the gramophone. It was Mrs. Dunham-Massey.

III

The ship's bell under the bridge chimed, four times: the new night-line had been equipped with hooks and coiled away, and I was free to proceed to more congenial business. I rose to my feet and stretched myself.

'Good night, Arabella,' I said; 'and thank you for letting me help.'

'That's all right. Good night, by dear!' replied Arabella, with sudden *abandon*; and passes from this narrative.

I looked round the deck. The bridge four were still engrossed in their game: Mrs. Dunham-Massey and Sir James were conversing under the awning. Jimmy and Lila, I knew well, were by this time on the top of the chart-house. Barbara, as I had hoped, was nowhere to be seen.

I strolled towards the stern. As I passed Mrs. Dunham-Massey she favoured me with what I can only describe as a leery look....

Abaft the awning, screening the stern-rail and the ensign-staff, stood the little deck-house which contained the emergency wheel and the steam steering-gear, the latter clacking and whirring soothingly enough in response to the movements of the wheel up on the bridge. The night was calm and warm: a full moon was swinging up into a purple sky, softly illuminating the bubbling, whispering wake of the yacht.

With my heart beating gently, I strolled round to the rear of the wheel-house. A vision in *crêpe-de-chine* was leaning over the stern-rail, communing apparently with the moon. At the sound of my footsteps it turned quickly, and I found myself looking into the lovely but foolish face of Gwen Gowlland. Her eyes were dilated, and her hands were clasped together in suppressed agitation.

'Leslie!' she murmured: 'you've come?'

'It looks like it,' I said. 'Were you expecting me?'

'Yes. Margot Massey said she would send you.'

'Oh, did she?' Margot Massey and I were all square again, it seemed. Still, I was not unduly discomfited: in fact, I felt just a little grateful to the lady in question. Gwen had been on my conscience for some time; and I realised that sooner or later, if I was to obtain my formal release from the entirely imaginary ties which bound me to her service, there would have to be an interview and an 'explanation.' Of course, Gwen was entitled to neither; but that would not deter her from expecting both. The opportunity had now occurred, and it was for me to make the most of it. I took a good look at Gwen, then metaphorically dipped my pannikin into the Atlantic and took a deep draught of Barbara.

I became aware that Gwen was addressing me, with more than usual intensity.

'Leslie dear, I must speak to you. First of all, you mustn't believe a word Arabella says!'

'Arabella strikes me as a boring but singularly reliable *raconteuse*,' I replied. I had just listened for an hour while the damsel in question regaled me, item by item, with a faithful and remorseless inventory of the contents of the stomach of a giant pike, whose capture, death, and subsequent evisceration she had once been privileged to witness in her extreme youth. But my words appeared to increase rather than allay Gwen's distress.

'She's a horrible little scandalmonger,' she said, 'and you mustn't believe a word of it.'

'I'm not really worrying about Arabella,' I replied. 'I'm on your track, really.' Gwen's eyes dilated still further, as if in sudden alarm. 'The fact is—I want to beg your pardon.'

'Oh!' Apparently Gwen had not been expecting this. 'Why?'

'After yesterday, you know. I rather put you through it, didn't I?'

'You were terribly cruel to me,' agreed Gwen, rapidly adjusting her bearings and emitting a little moan.

'Fortunately,' I continued, 'we have all agreed to forget yesterday.'

Gwen gave me a shy smile.

'Do you know, Leslie,' she said, 'I think you're rather splendid when you bully people. Yesterday showed me a new side to your character. Of course, I can never forget the things you said to *me*, because that was sheer brutality——'

She paused: apparently an answer of some kind was due here.

'Sheer brutality!' she repeated.

'I think on the whole you deserved it,' I replied thoughtfully.

Gwen gave a heartrending wail.

'Then—you *do* believe what Arabella told you?'

I was filled with a not unnatural craving to know what Arabella had told me.

'You mean, about——?' I hazarded.

'Yes—about George!'

'Aha!' I said to myself; and added aloud, with very creditable hollowness of utterance:

'George? Exactly! George!'

'How *much* do you know?' continued Gwen tremulously.

Knowing nothing, I fell back upon an air of massive and judicial calm.

'Ah!' I said.

'Don't torture me, Leslie! How much do you know?'

'A lot,' I replied, taking a chance.

'You can't know a lot,' sobbed Gwen, producing her handkerchief, 'because it only happened once!'

The situation was now elucidated.

'Once was quite enough!' I replied, with sincere satisfaction.

Gwen gave another little wail. 'Be generous, Leslie! It was foolish of me, I know! I was weak! I ought not to have let him; but——'

'When and where did it happen?' I asked sternly.

'On the bridge, after dinner. He took me up to show me the moon——'

'And the moon proved too much for you?' I laughed sardonically.

'Oh, Leslie, how can you be sarcastic at a moment like this! You're mocking me! I don't believe you care if another man does kiss me!'

I laughed again—an ironical and disillusioned laugh, this time.

'I take off my hat to the other man,' I said, 'that's all! He has succeeded in doing a thing that I have never succeeded in doing in all the years of our acquaintance. Stout fellow, George! But then, of course, George is a Taker.'

'I don't know what you 're talking about,' lamented Gwen, declining at any price to emerge from the bath of steamy sentiment in which she was wallowing. 'Don't you realise the tragedy of it all? I've seen it threatening for weeks; but you were so unconscious. So was George——'

'Oh, old George was unconscious too, was he?'

'And I had to bear the burden alone. It has kept me awake at night——'

'It's a terrible business,' I agreed, 'lying awake at night—especially when every one else is unconscious.'

Gwen, whose sense of humour is not all that it might be, was quite overcome by this.

'Thank you, Leslie dear, thank you! I knew you'd understand the tragic dilemma which faced me. I was loved by two good men, and I seemed fated to have to wreck the life of one of them. Of course, I had known for some time that George worshipped me, almost as much as you do.... Almost as much as you do, Leslie!' she repeated, a little louder.

I glanced furtively at my wrist-watch. It was ten minutes past ten, and, after all, there are limits.

'So, when he kissed me on the bridge——'

'You decided to break the news to me, at all costs?'

Gwen snatched her handkerchief from her eyes.

'Break the news! Didn't you know?'

'No. How should I?'

'*Didn't Arabella tell you?*'

'Arabella? Good heavens, no! Why?'

'But—she saw us! She was peeping, as usual. And when she sat beside you to-night, talking for an hour—oh, Leslie! Gwen's emotion was genuine at last: she was really crying now, with sheer mortification. I handed her my handkerchief.

'Carry on with this,' I said. 'I have found a way out, Gwen. It is the Only Way. I'll be back in a minute.' And I took my departure as impressively as possible.

My first action was to hurry down to the door of Barbara's cabin. I tapped: she looked out.

'I'm terribly sorry,' I said. 'Did you come up?'

'I always keep appointments,' she replied; 'but this appears to be your busy evening.'

'Come up again in five minutes,' I begged, 'and I'll promise you a clear deck.'

'You shall have one more chance,' said Barbara sternly. She closed her door with a comprehending smile, and I proceeded to the principal item of my business.

I found George Bumpstead smoking a cigar on the forward deck. Fortunately, he was alone: the others had gone to bed. I advanced upon him, and clasped his hand.

'Congratulations, old man!' I said warmly.

'What the hell for?' he inquired simply.

'I've just heard the glorious news from Gwen.'

'What glorious news?'

'You're engaged to her.'

'I'm no such thing!'

'Oh yes, you are! She told me so herself.'

'Oh, did she? My God, that girl has a nerve!' This simple, strong Englishman was speaking from his heart now.

'She wasn't at all brazen about it,' I explained. 'She told me the story with great modesty and becoming reserve.'

'But I'm not engaged to her!' protested George frantically.

'Well, you soon will be. Take her on the bridge, and give her another kiss or two. Three kisses, on an average, establish an engagement—especially when delivered in the presence of witnesses.'

'Witnesses?'

'Yes. Your first salute was duly witnessed; and if I know anything of that alluring child Arabella Hockley, the next two will be witnessed also.' I grasped our disgruntled explorer and humorist by the elbow, and impelled him towards the stern. 'Gwen's waiting for you—waiting for *you*, you lucky fellow! I want to see your meeting, if I may. In fact, I will take you to her myself. No, by Jove, here she is coming to you!'

Gwen stood before us—beautiful, spirituelle, exuding treacle from her very finger-tips.

'George! Leslie!' she murmured, and extended a hand to each of us. 'My two loyal, faithful caval——!'

'Take her below!' I said to George: 'the forward lounge is a good place. Good night, and God bless you! As for me, I must be alone.'

And I walked firmly in the direction of the wheel-house.



Chapter XVIII

The Ring

Once more I found myself under the lee of the wheel-house—this time in the proper company.

'You're sure I did right in foisting Gwen and George Bumpstead upon one another?' I asked Barbara.

'You did no wrong, anyhow.'

'In short, Takers ought to marry Takers?'

'Heaven forbid that they should marry any one else! George and Gwen will be about as happy as they are capable of being; and their life will be one long, spirited battle to get the better of one another.'

'But in that case, one of them is bound to lose.'

'No,' said Barbara, with her engaging little air of serious wisdom; 'they'll both win.'

'But, Barbara,' I said earnestly, 'a battle is one of the few things that I have been in; and I assure you it's a tactical impossibility for both sides to win.'

'Not in a connubial battle. You see, George will bluster and boast and plume himself upon being master in his own house; and Gwen will melt and yield and sacrifice herself, as usual; but she'll have George wrapped comfortably round her little finger in no time. He won't know it, but he'll be there. So they'll both win.'

'But will they be happy?' I asked dubiously.

'They'll think they are, which is the next best fate for people like them. They'll never have the big things, of course—the things the Givers get out of life—but they won't know that, poor things; they won't know!'

'Barbara,' I asked, almost timidly, 'which am I?'

Barbara laughed outright.

'You? You're the most whole-hearted, unsophisticated old Giver in all the wide world!'

'I am not unsophisticated,' I said, rather warmly. (There are two things that a self-respecting person absolutely declines to be called: one is unsophisticated, and the other is sophisticated.)

'Oh yes, you are,' said Barbara. 'You haven't the slightest idea which side your bread is buttered on: you miss chances right and left. You have always been full of shy schemes for doing good turns to people and helping lame dogs over stiles; and half of them come to nothing because you are afraid of offending people by forcing something on them which they may not want. You have no belief in the value of the things you give, Leslie, but you're a Giver all right!'

'I'm afraid you won't find much public support for that contention,' I said, with a wry smile. 'To most people I am just a stiff, unsociable, irritable——'

'Perhaps I'm different from other people where you are concerned,' said Barbara. 'I've always studied you, I think—always!' She came a little closer; then she looked up into my face again.

'What am I, Leslie?' she inquired.

'You are no Giver,' I replied.

'Oh, Leslie!'

'You are a Squanderer. You were a Squanderer when you were a little girl. Your toys, your tears, your hugs, your sympathy—you used to give them away with both hands—not always to deserving cases, either. You were doing it when Fate separated us; and now, after an eternity of years, when I find you again, you are doing it still! No Change! After all you've gone through and put up with, No Change! Thank God, No Change!'

Then we smiled upon one another—widely and mistily. Presently Barbara continued, half to herself:

'After all, giving is the only thing, isn't it? One gets taken in, and deceived, and laughed at, over and over and over again; but it's worth it, when all's said, even when you—give in the wrong quarter.'

'What makes you say that?' I asked. Then quickly: 'Don't tell me if you'd rather not.'

'I don't think I should be telling you anything you didn't know,' said Barbara. 'When I was nineteen I married a man; and I gave him—everything. When a girl of nineteen gives a man everything, she gives him an awful lot, Leslie.'

'And he took it all?' I said, through my set teeth.

'No. Some of the things that I offered were of no value to him, so—I have them still.'

I put an arm round her.

'May I have them?' I asked.

She looked up at me.

'Taker!' she smiled.

Presently—it may have been three minutes, or three hours, later—we rose and walked to the stern, where we stood gazing out over the softly whispering wake of the ship. I kissed my finger-tips to the horizon.

'Good night, Dido,' I said; 'and thank you, O Queen, for the last time!'

'While we are on that subject,' announced Barbara, 'I think it is time we all said good night. Let me go now, Leslie dear: I'm growing sleepy—so sleepy! It seems to have come on quite suddenly,' she added.

'*Sleepy—suddenly?* There's a familiar ring about that.'

With one accord we turned to one another, stricken by the same paralysing thought.

'Leslie,' asked Barbara tremulously, 'she can't come back, can she? Surely she can't reach us here! I mean to say, if every time I close an eye she's going to—— She *shan't* have my body again!'

I reassured her. I was full of assurance to-night, not unnaturally.

'It's all right,' I said. 'The whole thing was only a dream—a collective vision—an Induced Phenomenon, or whatever old Podmore said it was. It never really happened, you know. What we both want is a sound night's sleep. Come along, my dear: it's getting late. It must be nearly——'

I inserted my hand into my watch-pocket, and produced—Dido's ring.

Heavens above! I had clean forgotten the thing, from the moment when Her Majesty had bestowed it upon me nearly forty-eight hours ago. It lay upon my extended palm in the moonlight—solid, substantial, stunningly conclusive. We both gazed at it, breathless and awestricken.

'She gave you that?' whispered Barbara at last.

I nodded.

'You're quite certain? You didn't just find it somewhere?'

'I distinctly remember her putting it into my hand.'

'What for?'

'As a bond of union between us. She said it would give her the power to visit me whenever she liked.'

'O-o-oh! So that's what's letting her put me to sleep when she wants to!'

'I suppose it is,' I said. Then I smiled, dismally. 'Old Podmore would be interested in this, wouldn't he? It would create a real splash in psychic circles.'

'Never mind Mr. Podmore!' said Barbara feverishly. She laid both hands on my arm. 'Leslie, what exactly did that woman say to you about—that?' She laid an agitated finger on the ring.

'She said: "Guard it well. Should you lose it, I should recover it, but I could never visit you more."'

'Then for mercy's sake throw it overboard!'

For a moment I hesitated. After all, respect for private property is the keystone of the Conservative character.

'Will she be able to find it again, do you think? I shouldn't like to deprive her of it—especially as she'll probably want it again, for her next young——'

'She'll send a Phenomenon for it,' said Barbara hysterically. 'Throw it away, dear—quickly!'

'All right!' I said.

I stepped to the rail, and flung the ring with all my might far over the stern. It dropped into the moon-dappled wake of the yacht— and I could have sworn that a mermaid's hand rose out of the water to catch it as it fell!

THE END

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Transcriber's Note:--

Punctuation errors have been corrected.

The following suspected printer's error has been addressed.

Page 2. froward changed to forward. (this forward youth)

[The end of *Half a Sovereign* by Ian Hay]