

STELLA  
BENSON



COLLECTED  
SHORT  
STORIES

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Stella Benson

# COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

*By*

STELLA BENSON

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# THE AWAKENING

A FANTASY

# THE AWAKENING

## A FANTASY

“You know, I have fallen so low in the world,” he said, “that I am not able to grasp the order of the things that have happened to me—I get confused as to which part of eternity came first. I can only tell you how I remember things—but you must bear in mind that I am not very good at remembering things . . . not, as you would say, the man I was. Only of course the point is that I wasn’t a man—I was a god.” He looked at me shyly and one of his feet trod on the other. If his eyes had once been a god’s, they were less than a man’s eyes now; they looked like fishes’ eyes, being magnified by very thick glasses. “Yes, you may well look at me contemptuously,” he went on, not bitterly. “As a god I should have been ashamed to create the man I am now. I have poor teeth and a lot of trouble with my digestion . . . but still I have my great days to remember. I was one of the old gods. A great many mountains . . . and roaring beasts . . . and dead cities . . . and beautiful bodies . . . have my seal upon them. I was quite a creator in my day. You know, you should not utterly despise a man who has made a mountain range. Of course, I had very strong hands then—(look at them now)—and a very strong heart—so strong that you wouldn’t have recognized it as a heart. It was more like a world in itself—and now I can scarcely feel it beat. You can have no conception how a god can change. When we gods were young we made all lands and seas, and some of us were herdsmen and drove flocks of suns and stars away to pasture in space. It was only later we made man—when we had learnt to be peevish and ingenious. But I was a mountain-maker. I know all the writings on the flanks of mountains. The stuff of mountains is such gracious material . . . so luminous with sound . . . so sonorous with colour. Mountains are like bells—they are tuned like bells. You’d know what I mean if you had made them. When a mountain is well made, even an incurably mortal ear can hear the bell-note sometimes—especially when it rings to the touch of the last ray of the sun. A good mountain should be on a crescendo note. You put all the gentleness of your theme into the lower slopes, making them fit for mosses and grass meadows—meadows that are stroked with silver by the blowing of a summer wind. Then, as you add alp to alp and precipice to precipice, you mix the earth of stronger stuff—soil that will hold strong sharp trees upright so that their crests tear the cold mists to shreds. But the peak of the mountain has only to support the delicate memorial of perpetual snow. The peak is the



ordeal of the creator. It is naked line, of course—a poor workman cannot cover up mistakes with easy trees. The peak must be eccentric and terrible and . . . witty, if you know what I mean. An epigram of a peak is best. Gods are so often judged by the peaks they throw against the sky.” He interrupted himself, shuffling nervously. “I expect this all sounds silly to you. We ex-gods have great difficulty in not being thought silly.” He sighed and after a little while continued. “It was a funny thing. After I had made mountains for a long time, the glory seemed to go out of making noble things. Noble began to be a word that we gods were ashamed of—like purity . . . or beauty . . . or truth. . . . Mountains, somehow, were seen to be not very smart things to make. The gods of my set were becoming so dreadfully clever—it became a great strain to us all to keep pace with one another in cleverness. Of course I know now—looking at it from the safe sad standpoint of the ex-god—that we were already beginning to lose our godship. The leprosy of mortality had already infected our strong hearts. Ah, why is it—why is it that gods must die? Why is mortality such a relentless invader and rapture such a defenceless realm? You must excuse my excitement. All that survives of my divinity is sorrow. I am so very old and cannot die. Remember that I have a very long and enormous youth to regret. Even men’s sons are almost gods when they are young—even mortals are a little immortal when they remember their youth . . . and as for the old gods. . . . Well, I was just telling you how clever we all became. So articulate. So complex. We began to have schools of complexity. We began to compete in making life crawl about our clean world. We began to invent the most intricate and ingenious bodies, and to thread pains and desires in and out of the veins and channels of sensation in those bodies. Of course you would think our first experiments ridiculously clumsy. My wife was reading in the Encyclopaedia yesterday about the history of watches—(my dear wife has such a thirst for information)—and I saw at once the similarity between the first old triumphant making of turnplike timepieces and our first crude experiments in creating living things. I well remember the first living creature I made. It was a lizard a hundred and forty feet long. It had almost no sense but it could propagate its kind in the most ingenious way—I should like to show you the rough diagrams of its propagating plan, but perhaps you are familiar with the idea already—the other gods stole the design. I remember thinking that ingenuity in the lizard line could go no further—and yet look at the lizards they turn out nowadays—as small as a blade of grass and yet fitted with the same conveniences as my first lizard—perhaps even better ones. Ah, what a pity that ingenuity crept in! Because at first, you see, grandeur was still in our thoughts; we still had the habit of grandeur, even though our hands were not so strong. The very size and crudeness of my lizard will

show you that mountain tradition was with me still. Life was still a side-issue with us—a kind of by-product. I was still making strong and true things, though I had become a little foolishly fastidious. At first I had simply pulled my mountains out of the stuff of the sea, rooting them in the dark water and crowning them naïvely with the bright sky—but now I began to make pedestals for my mountains; now I had to make room for my new creations; now I had to smooth out broad places for my rootless things to travel on. And so I learnt to make deserts and to glaze them with odd deceiving air. . . . Rivers were my tools and with them I carved deep patterns in the flesh and bone of the land. And tenderness, which is, I suppose, the most beautiful symptom of weakening godship, taught me to care for my young fragile living things by hanging clouds before the cruel sun, by spreading safe meadows for unsteady feet. I learnt to make flowers at that time, too—the last grand work my hands ever accomplished.

“Gods made more and more fantastic experiments with life, but I forget who it was who first made man. I think it was the god of the Jews—his adherents now claim that he was the first, and you will readily believe that not one among us is anxious to dispute so doubtful an honour. By the time man was first created, mortality was already incurable among us gods on the earth. In our thickened hearing, mountains that had once been peals of bells strung upon the cords of our sky, seemed to jangle. I had begun to notice—you will laugh—that my seas were dangerous and my deserts empty. I could hunger and thirst on the face of my own world. I could bend before my own storms. All the sorry signs of manhood were upon me, but of course I was still a god—and terrible, compared to the thing I am now. You may think it curious that I can remember godship so well—that such great memories can find place in so shrunken a body as mine. But it is a fact that one remembers rapture more clearly when one has utterly lost it than when a thin measure of rapture still survives. Just as only very old men remember the perfection of being young.

“Well, we began making man. That was the most fatal step in our slow suicide . . . we made man. We were all in the same case, of course. Not one of us retained any integrity of immortality. Scattered among the stars there may still have been real gods—star-makers—immovably almighty. But we—we had nothing to do with stars now . . . we had even to borrow the light of other gods’ stars to help our weak eyes to penetrate the small soft

particular mysteries of our new creations. I remember luring a reluctant borrowed sun a little closer.

“Directly man was created, two things happened. The first thing was that we gods fled one from another, like plotters discovered in a conspiracy. We hid from one another, wishing to work secretly and confound one another with our separate cleverness. And the second thing was that we all lost for ever our standard of divinity—our recognition of perfection. Man—our thing—became our standard. And I fell furthest. . . . I lost perfection most utterly. . . . Look at me now—look at me now. . . . How terrible to think that even from the beginning I—a god—had this canker of death within me—this germ of devastating imperfection lying in wait for my divinity. Eternity, the gift of the gods, was to be for me a diminishing and a humiliation. From the beginning I was cursed—all unaware—with potential wretchedness—potential humanity—although I was born a god, although I made mountains. . . . Oh, what a pity. . . . what a pity. . . .”

He sniffed a little and his bent fragile shoulders shook. But after a moment he composed himself and said with a tremulous pride, “Well . . . I’m sure I ought to be thankful for small mercies. I ought to remember how men glory in manhood—men who have never been gods. And I enjoy man’s pleasures. I am a golfer . . . I have an excellent wife not much over forty . . . and I do like my cup of tea of an evening. . . .”

“As I told you, we fled one from another—and I fled west. The gods I left behind were older than I. There was always a sort of dignity about them, even in decay—there probably still is, but we are not on neighbourly terms now. I was at one time obsessed with the idea that I could teach them how to be smart and young. They seemed to me too delicately concerned with maintaining all the darkness and magnificence they could save from the wreck of divinity. In creating man those old gods created only old men. But perhaps I am not just. I never knew much about those conservative gods. They basked in the flattery of forgotten rites. They baffled men with mysteries. I thought that a very out-of-date method—yet I believe that men under their brazen sun still serve their will. But I can only tell you at first hand about my rival and me—two gods who aspired to the conquest of youth. We devoted ourselves to youth—and complexity destroyed us at last. All our creations had the flare and urgency of youth. I dare say you, being young, will think it strange that the cult of youth should have spelt decay for us. But you see, we were creating humiliation . . . men ceased to be grateful to us for the gift of life—ceased to cry upon us for the right to die at our

feet. The smoke of incense in the East and in the West wavered . . . our feasts grew spare . . . each of us rejoiced to see the dwindling intoxication of the other. For we were quite fallible by then—jealous, you know—we used to compare prayers . . . and martyrdoms. . . .

“But we had one passion in common—in common, I say, though of course it made for the bitterest rivalry of all. Sharing as we did the pangs of failing godship, we each secretly hoped to redeem our old imperfection by creating Man and God in one. We each desired to be the one to beget a new god—to create posterity—an heir to all we had lost—one who should be god enough to reawaken ecstasy in man, and man enough to justify us gods in our creation of man and to comfort us with an assurance of democratic continuity.

“You wouldn’t know my name as a god, even if I were to tell it to you. I was the unknown god, the god undiscovered by those who give names to gods. But you would know my great eastern rival’s name—that is, if mortals ever can be said to know the names of gods.

“Perhaps you know the end of my story too. Men know so much more than gods in these days. In my own dazed mind the story is much confused. I seem to remember lighting the first fire in the mouth of a cave . . . and planning golf-links . . . and trying to understand Christian Science . . . and guiding the hand of the first man who smeared a portrait of his wife on a rock’s face . . . but I cannot recall which preceded which . . . I remember piling stone upon stone . . . building city after city and erasing them with desert sand and building them again. Nothing seemed worthy of this intricate new creation—man. I remember perfecting the soul and body of man, little by little, teaching first strength and then guile and then ingenuity to man’s crude hands—making a little creator of him, a little competitor. Of course all those experiments seem to me now as clumsy as my first lizard—(I told you, didn’t I, how proud I was of my first lizard?)—as clumsy and as monstrous and as impossible—but, oh, much more beautiful and innocent than the enchantments gods weave to-day. . . . Early men still had innocence . . . virtue was still in my hand. But the paralysis of complexity was upon my hand—as it was upon my rival’s. And as the men we made grew tamer and tamer, they became more and more cruel to us. We were afraid of them—yet we had forgotten how to create simply. I thought that salvation and perfection lay beyond cleverness. I thought that a theory might evolve the Man of God who should save me from the cruelty of men and confound my rival. Under my borrowed stars, I swore, the Man who is God should be

born. Seeking absurdly to produce that perfect flower from the old root of exhausted godship—I inevitably poisoned the soil for such a flower. My dreams seem like ravings now—because I have fallen so far below dreams. It was my dream to create a new world for redeeming man—a world of instant achievement—a world of easy speakable truths that should not weary young men and old gods—a world of success—a world in which the fool should not be ashamed to claim equality with the wise—a world of big ingenious wheels and little ingenious conventions—a world that should pat me democratically on the back and be patted by me. . . . For I was quite a withered small god by then—men could easily look into my face. . . . We were really good pals—men and I. It was a prophetic vision of the Y.M.C.A.

“I had great faith in my dream. I felt very hopeful and superior as I watched my rival—that despot god—driving his reluctant Jews across deserts and seas, ignoring—as it seemed to me—the essential principles of democracy. My dream of democracy running westward on little wheels seemed to me so much more new. It seemed so obvious that only by flattering man should gods achieve flattery now. Omniscience was nothing less than an insult to the intelligence of man. Victory and redemption by a New Birth should be, I was convinced, the heritage of the west. Or if not victory—something just as good and even more showy. Truth was a pale flower and substitutes made such a fine effect—more beautiful than the real thing. All the substitute arts flourished in the vivid air of my dream, and on my paper altars the devotees of substitute religions burned incense that was far cheaper than the old incense and smelt just the same. Among so many short cuts to rapture it seemed that a quick path to salvation must be found. An atmosphere of efficient achievement must be favourable to the birth of that heir who should confound my rival—that young hunter of the west, to whom redemption would fall such instant prey. Democracy—democracy—democracy was my hope. . . . Half-wisdom spread thinly over a continent was better than wisdom founded on a rock.

“The dream of my world and the awakening are so confused in my mind now—I can hardly disentangle them. . . . I became so old and dwarfed . . . bewildered with so much dreaming . . . so much building on sand. . . . Under my star that shone so exactly like a real one—(for I had given up borrowing real stars now, the artificial ones were so much more convenient)—under my hollow gold star, I waited for the Child to be born. . . .

“And the end of the hope—the end of the waiting—must have found me sleeping. For I remember only a voice calling me from the exhausted dreams of old age . . . telling me that a Child was born.

“A Child? In what land?

“ ‘In Bethlehem.’

“I knew it. . . . I knew it. . . . In Bethlehem, Pa.; under my star. . . .

“ ‘In Bethlehem of Judaea. . . . Under an Eastern star.’ And I awoke, weeping, and lo—a star which I saw in the east went before me, till it came and stood over where the young child was. . . .”

THE MAN WHO MISSED THE  
'BUS

## THE MAN WHO MISSED THE 'BUS

Mr. Robinson's temper was quite sore by the time he reached St. Pierre. The two irritations that most surely found the weak places in his nervous defences were noise and light in his eyes. And, as he told Monsieur Dupont, the proprietor of Les Trois Moineaux at St. Pierre, "If there is one thing, monsieur, that is offensive—essentially offensive—that is to say, a danger in itself—I mean to say, noise doesn't have to have a meaning. . . . What I mean is, monsieur, that noise—" "Numéro trente," said Monsieur Dupont to the chasseur. Mr. Robinson always had to explain things very thoroughly in order to make people really appreciate the force of what he had to say—and even then it was a hard task to get them to acknowledge receipt, so to speak, of his message. But he was a humble man, and he accounted for the atmosphere of unanswered and unfinished remarks in which he lived by admitting that his words were unfortunately always inadequate to convey to a fellow-mortal the intense interest to be found in the curiosities of behaviour and sensation. His mind was overstocked with by-products of the business of life. He felt that every moment disclosed a new thing worth thinking of among the phenomena that his senses presented to him. Other people, he saw, let these phenomenal moments slip by unanalysed, but if he had had the words and the courage, he felt, he could have awakened those of his fellow-creatures whom he met from their trance of shallow living. As it was, the relation of his explorations and wonderings sounded, even to his own ears, flat as the telling at breakfast of an ecstatic dream. What he had meant to say about noise, for instance, had been that noise was *in itself* terrifying and horrible—not as a warning of danger, but as a physical assault. Vulgar people treat noise only as a language that *means* something, he would have said, but really noise could not be translated, any more than rape could be translated. There was no such thing as an ugly harmless noise. The noise of an express train approaching and shrieking through a quiet station—the noise of heavy rain sweeping towards one through a forest—the noise of loud, concerted laughter at an unheard joke—all benevolent noises if translated into concrete terms, were in *themselves* calamities. All this Mr. Robinson would have thought worth saying to Monsieur Dupont—worth continuing to say until Monsieur Dupont should have confessed to an understanding of his meaning—but, as usual, the words collapsed as soon as they left Mr. Robinson's lips.



Monsieur Dupont stood in the doorway of Les Trois Moineaux with his back to the light. Mr. Robinson could see the shape of his head set on stooping shoulders, with a little frail fluff of hair beaming round a baldness. He could see the rather crumpled ears with outleaning lobes bulging sharply against the light. But between ear and ear, between bald brow and breast, he could see nothing but a black blank against the glare. Mr. Robinson had extremely acute sight—perhaps too acute, as he often wanted to tell people, since this was perhaps why the light in his eyes affected him so painfully. “If my sight were less acute,” he would have said, “I should not mind a glare so much—I mean to say, my eyes are so extremely receptive that they receive too much, or, in other words, the same cause that makes my eyes so very sensitive is . . .” But nobody ever leaned forward and said, “I understand you perfectly, Mr. Robinson, and what you say is most interesting. Your sight includes so much that it cannot exclude excessive light, and this very naturally irritates your nerves, though the same peculiarity accounts for your intense powers of observation.” Nobody ever said anything like that, but then, people are so self-engrossed. Mr. Robinson was not self-engrossed—he was simply extravagantly interested in *things*, not people. For instance, he looked round now—as the chasseur sought in the shadows for his suitcase—and saw the terrace striped by long beams of light—broad flat beams that were strung like yellow sheets from every window and door in the hotel to the trees, tall urns and tables of the terrace. A murmur of voices enlivened the air, but there were no human creatures in any beam—only blocked dark figures in the shadows—and, in every patch of light, a sleeping dog or cat or two. Dogs and cats lay extended or curled comfortably on the warm, uneven paving-stones, and Mr. Robinson’s perfect sight absorbed the shape of every brown, tortoiseshell or black marking on their bodies, as a geographer might accept the continents of a new unheard-of globe. “It’s just like geography—the markings on animals,” Mr. Robinson had once said to an American who couldn’t get away. “What I mean to say is that the markings on a dog or rabbit have just as much sense as the markings on this world of ours—or, in other words, the archipelagos of spots on this pointer puppy are just as importantly isolated from one another as they could be in any Adriatic Sea—” But the American had only replied, “Why, no, Mr. Robinson, not half so important; I am taking my wife—with the aid of the American Express Co.—to visit the Greek islands this summer, and we shall be sick on the sea and robbed on the land; whereas nobody but a flea ever visits the spots on that puppy, and the flea don’t know and don’t care a damn what colour he bites into.” Showing that nobody except Mr. Robinson ever really studied things impersonally.

Mr. Robinson, a very ingenious-minded and sensitive man with plenty of money, was always seeking new places to go to, where he might be a success—or rather, where his unaccountable failures elsewhere might not be known. St. Pierre, he thought, was an excellent venture, although the approach to it had been so trying. As soon as he had heard of it—through reading a short, thoughtless sketch by a popular novelist in the *Daily Call*—he had felt hopeful about it. A little Provençal walled town on a hill, looking out over vineyards to the blue Mediterranean—a perfect little hotel, clean and with a wonderful cook—frequented by an interesting few. . . .

“By the time I get downstairs,” thought Mr. Robinson, as he carefully laid his trousers under the mattress in his room and donned another pair, “the lights will be lit on the terrace, and I shall be able to see my future friends. I must tell someone about that curious broken reflection in the river Rhône. . . .” He went downstairs and out on to the terrace, where the tinkle of glasses and plates made him feel hungry. He could hear, as he stood in the doorway looking out, one man’s voice making a series of jokes in quick succession, each excited pause in his voice being filled by a gust and scrape of general laughter—like waves breaking on a beach with a clatter and then recoiling with a thin, hopeful, lonely sound. “Probably all his jokes are personalities,” thought Mr. Robinson, “and therefore not essentially funny. No doubt they are slightly pornographic, at that. When will people learn how interesting and exciting *things* are. . . .?”

A waiter behind him drew out a chair from a table in one of the squares of light thrown from a window. Mr. Robinson, after sitting down abstractedly, was just going to call the waiter back to tell him that his eyes were ultra-sensitive to light, and that he could see nothing in that glare, when a large dog, with the bleached, patched, innocent face of a circus-clown, came and laid its head on his knee. Mr. Robinson could never bear to disappoint an animal. He attributed to animals all the hot and cold variations of feeling that he himself habitually experienced, identifying the complacent fur of the brute with his own thin human skin. So that when the waiter, coming quietly behind him, put the wine-list into his hand, Mr. Robinson merely said, “Thank you, garçon, but I never touch alcohol in any form—or, for the matter of that, tobacco either. In my opinion—”—and did not call the rapidly escaping waiter back to ask him to move his table. The dog’s chin was now so comfortably pressed against his knee, and the dog’s paw hooked in a pathetically prehensile way about his ankle.

Mr. Robinson made the best of his position in the dazzle and tried to look about him. The Trois Moineaux was built just outside the encircling

wall of the tightly corseted little town of St. Pierre, and, since St. Pierre clung to the apex of a conical hill, it followed that the inn terrace jutted boldly out over a steep, stepped fall of vineyards overhanging the plain. The plain was very dim now, overlaid by starlit darkness, yet at the edge of the terrace there was a sense of *view*, and all the occupied tables stood in a row against the low wall, diluting the food and drink they bore with starlight and space. The men and women sitting at these tables all had their faces to the world and their backs to Mr. Robinson. He could not see a single human face. He had come down too late to secure one of the outlooking tables, and his place was imprisoned in a web of light under an olive tree. In the middle of the table peaches and green grapes were heaped on a one-legged dish. And on the edge of the dish a caterpillar waved five-sixths of its length drearily in the air, unable to believe that its world could really end at this abrupt slippery rim. Mr. Robinson, shading his eyes from the light, could see every detail of the caterpillar's figure, and it seemed to him worth many minutes of absorbed attention. Its colour was a pale greenish fawn, and it had two dark bumps on its brow by way of eyes. "How unbearably difficult and lonely its life would seem to us," thought Mr. Robinson, leaning intensely over it. "How frightful if by mistake the merest spark of self-consciousness should get into an insect's body—(an accidental short-circuit in the life current, perhaps)—and it should know itself absolutely alone—appallingly free—" He put his finger in the range of its persistent wavings, and watched it crawl with a looping haste down his finger-nail, accepting without question a quite fortuitous salvation from its dilemma. He laid his finger against a leaf, and the caterpillar disembarked briskly after its journey across alien elements. When it was gone, Mr. Robinson looked about him, dazed. "My goodness," he thought, "that caterpillar's face was the only one I have seen to-night."

The noise of chatter and laughter went up like a kind of smoke from the flickering creatures at the tables near the edge of the terrace. At each table the heads and shoulders of men and women leaned together—were sucked together like flames in a common upward draught. "My dear, she looked like a . . . Oh, well, if you want to . . . he's the kind of man who . . . *No*, my dear, not in my *bedroom*. . . . A rattling good yarn. . . . Stop me if I've told you this one before. . . ." One man, standing up a little unsteadily, facing the table nearest to Mr. Robinson, made a speech: ". . . the last time . . . delightful company . . . fair sex . . . happiest hours of my life . . . mustn't waste your time . . . us mere men . . . as the Irishman said to the Scotsman when . . . happiest moments of all my life . . . one minute and I shall be done . . . always remember the happiest days of all my . . . well, I mustn't keep

you . . . I heard a little story the other day . . .” And all the time his audience leaned together round their table, embarrassed, looking away over the dark plain or murmuring together with bent heads. The only woman whose face Mr. Robinson might have seen was shielding her face with her hands and shaking with silent laughter. The speaker was wavering on his feet, very much as the caterpillar had wavered on its tail, and his wide gestures, clawing the air in search of the attention of his friends, suggested to Mr. Robinson the caterpillar’s wild gropings for foothold where no foothold was. “Yes,” thought Mr. Robinson, “the caterpillar was *my* host. No other face is turned to me.”

However, as he thought this, a man came from a further table and stood quite close, under the olive tree, between Mr. Robinson and the lighted doorway, looking down on him. The man stretched out his hand to the tree and leaned upon it. A freak of light caught the broad, short hand, walnut-knuckled and brown, crooked over the bough. Mr. Robinson could not see the man’s face at all, but he felt that the visit was friendly. To conciliate this sympathetic stranger, he would even have talked about the weather, or made a joke about pretty girls or beer, but he could not think of anything of that kind to say to a man whose hand, grasping an olive bough, was all that could be known of him. All that Mr. Robinson could do for the moment was to wonder what could have sent the man here. “It could not have been,” thought Mr. Robinson humbly, “that he was attracted by my face, because nobody ever is.” And then he began thinking how one man’s loss is nearly always another man’s gain, if considered broadly enough. For one to be forsaken, really, means that another has a new friend. “This young man,” thought Mr. Robinson, gazing at the black outline of the stranger’s head, “has probably come here blindly, because of some sudden hurt, some stab, some insult, inflicted by his friends at that table over there—probably by a woman. Perhaps he thinks he has a broken heart (for he has young shoulders)—nothing short of a wound that temporarily robbed him of his social balance could make him do so strange a thing as suddenly to leave his friends and come here to stand silent by me in the shade. Yet if he could—as some day, I am convinced, we all shall—know that the sum remains the same—that some other lover is the happier for this loss of his—and that if he had gained a smile from her, the pain he now feels would simply have been shifted to another heart—not dispelled. . . . We only have to think impersonally enough, and even death—well, we are all either nearly dead or just born, more or less, and the balance of birth and death never appreciably alters. Personal thinking is the curse of existence. Why are we all crushed under the weight of this strangling ME—this snake in our garden . . .?” So

he said to the young man, "Isn't it a curious thing, looking round at young people and old people, that it doesn't really matter if they are born or dead—I mean to say, it's all the same whatever happens, if you follow me, and so many people mind when they needn't, if people would only realize——" At this moment there was a burst of clapping from the far table, and the young man bounded from Mr. Robinson's side back to his friends, shouting, "Good egg—have you thought of a word already? Animal, vegetable or mineral?—and remember to speak up because I'm rather hard of hearing. . . ."

Mr. Robinson suddenly felt like Herbert Robinson, personally affronted. The sum of happiness (which of course remained unaltered by his setback) for a moment did not matter in the least. He pushed back his chair and walked away, leaving his cheese uneaten and the clown-faced dog without support. He went to his bedroom and sat down opposite his mirror, facing the reflection of his outward ME. There sat the figure in the mirror, smooth, plump, pale, with small pouched eyes and thick, straight, wet-looking hair. "What is this?" asked Mr. Robinson, studying the reflection of his disappointed face—the only human face he had seen that evening. "Look at me—I *am* alive—I am indeed very acutely alive—more alive, perhaps, than all these men and women half-blind—half-dead in their limitations of greed and sex. . . . It is true I have no personal claim on life; I am a virgin and I have no friends—yet I live intensely—and there are—there *are*—*there are* other forms of life than personal life. The eagle and the artichoke are equally alive—and perhaps my way of life is nearer to the eagle's than the artichoke's. And must I be alone—must I live behind cold shoulders because I see *out* instead of *in*—the most vivid form of life conceivable, if only it could be lived perfectly?"

He tried to see himself in the mirror, as was his habit, as a mere pliable pillar of life, a turret of flesh with a prisoner called *life* inside it. He stared himself out of countenance, trying, as it were, to dissolve his poor body by understanding it—poor white, sweating, rubbery thing that was called Herbert Robinson and had no friends. But to-night the prisoner called *life* clung to his prison—to-night his body tingled with egotism—to-night the oblivion that he called wisdom would not come, and he could not become conscious, as he longed to, of the live sky above the roof, the long winds streaming about the valleys, the billions of contented, wary or terrified creatures moving about the living dust, weeds and waters of the world. He remained just Herbert Robinson, who had not seen any human face while in the midst of his fellow-men.

He began to feel an immediate craving—an almost revengeful lust—to be alone, far from men, books, mirrors and lights, watching, all his life long, the bodiless, mindless movements of animals—ecstatic living things possessing no ME. “I should scarcely know I was alive, then, and perhaps never even notice when I died. . . .” He decided he would go away next day, and give no group again the chance to excommunicate him.

He remembered that he had seen a notice at the door of the hotel, giving the rare times at which an omnibus left and arrived at St. Pierre. “I will leave by the early ’bus, before anyone is awake to turn his back on me.”

He could not sleep, but lay uneasily on his bed reading the advertisements in a magazine he had brought with him. Advertisements always comforted him a good deal, because advertisers really, he thought, took a broad view; they wrote of—and to—their fellow-men cynically and subtly, taking advantage of the vulgar passion for personal address, and yet treating humanity as an intricate mass—an instrument to be played upon. This seemed the ideal standpoint, to Mr. Robinson, and yet he was insulted by the isolation such an ideal involved.

He dressed himself early, replaced in his suitcase the few clothes he had taken out, put some notes in an envelope addressed to Monsieur Dupont, and leaned out of the window to watch for the ’bus. St. Pierre, a sheaf of white and pink plaster houses, was woven together on a hill, like a haycock. The town, though compact and crowned by a sharp white bell-tower, seemed to have melted a little, like a thick candle; the centuries and the sun had softened its fortress outlines. The other hills, untopped by towns, seemed much more definitely constructed; they were austere built of yellow and green blocks of vineyard, cemented by the dusky green of olive trees. Gleaming white, fluffy clouds peeped over the hills—“like kittens,” thought Mr. Robinson, who had a fancy for trying to make cosmic comparisons between the small and the big. On the terrace of the inn, half a dozen dogs sprawled in the early sun. Over the valley a hawk balanced and swung in the air, so hungry after its night’s fast that it swooped rashly and at random several times, and was caught up irritably into the air again after each dash, as though dangling on a plucked thread. Mr. Robinson leaned long on his sill looking at it, until his elbows felt sore from his weight, and he began to wonder where the ’bus was that was going to take him away to loneliness. He went down to the terrace, carrying his suitcase, and stood in the archway. There was no sound of a coming ’bus—no sound at all, in fact, except a splashing and a flapping and a murmuring to the left and right of him. A forward step or two showed him that there were two long washing-troughs,

one on each side of the archway, each trough shaded by a stone gallery and further enclosed in a sort of trellis of leaning kneading women. Mr. Robinson noticed uneasily that he could not see one woman's face; all were so deeply bent and absorbed. After a moment, however, a woman's voice from the row behind him asked him if he was waiting for the 'bus. He turned to reply, hoping to break the spell by finding an ingenuous rustic face lifted to look at him. But all the faces were bent once more, and it was another woman behind him again who told him that the 'bus had left ten minutes before. Once more the speaker bent over her work before Mr. Robinson had time to turn and see her face. "What a curious protracted accident," he thought, and had time to curse his strange isolation before he realized the irritation of being unable to leave St. Pierre for another half-dozen hours. He flung his suitcase into the hall of the inn, and walked off up a path that led through the vineyards. As if the whole affair had been prearranged, all the dogs on the terrace rose up and followed him, yawning and stretching surreptitiously, like workers reluctantly leaving their homes at the sound of a factory whistle.

Mr. Robinson, true to his habit, concentrated his attention on—or rather diffused it to embrace—the colours about him. The leaves of the vines especially held his eye; they wore the same frosty bloom that grapes themselves often wear—a sky-blue dew on the green leaf. Two magpies, with a bottle-green sheen on their wings, gave their police-rattle cry as he came near and then flew off, flaunting their long tails clumsily. A hundred feet higher, where the ground became too steep even for vines, Mr. Robinson found a grove of gnarled old olive trees, edging a thick wood of Spanish chestnuts. Here he sat down and looked between the tree-trunks and over the distorted shadows at the uneven yellow land and the thin blade of matt blue sea stabbing the furthest hills. The dogs stood round him, expecting him to rise in a minute and lead them on again. Seeing that he still sat where he was, they wagged their tails tolerantly but invitingly. Finally they resigned themselves to the inevitable and began philosophically walking about the grove, sniffing gently at various points in search of a makeshift stationary amusement. Mr. Robinson watched them with a growing sense of comfort. "Here," he thought, "are the good, undeliberate beasts again; I knew they would save me. They don't shut themselves away from life in their little individualities, or account uniquely for their lusts on the silly ground of personality. Their bodies aren't prisons—they're just dormitories. . . ." He delighted in watching the dogs busily engrossed in being alive without self-consciousness. After all, he thought, he did not

really depend on men. (For he had been doubting his prized detachment most painfully.)

One of the dogs discovered a mouse-hole, and, after thrusting his nose violently into it to verify the immediacy of the smell, began digging, but not very cleverly, because he was too large a dog for such petty sports. The other dogs hurried to the spot and, having verified the smell for themselves, stood restively round the first discoverer, wearing the irritable look we all wear when watching someone else bungle over something we feel (erroneously) that we could do very much better ourselves. Finally, they pushed the original dog aside, and all began trying to dig in the same spot, but finding this impossible, they tapped different veins of the same lode-smell. Soon a space of some ten feet square was filled with a perfect tornado of flying dust, clods, grass and piston-like forepaws. Hindlegs remained rooted while forelegs did all the work, but whenever the accumulation of earth to the rear of each dog became inconveniently deep, hindlegs, with a few impatient, strong strokes, would dash the heap away to some distance—even as far as Mr. Robinson's boots. Quite suddenly, all the dogs, with one impulse, admitted themselves beaten; they concluded without rancour that the area was unmistakably mouseless. They signified their contempt for the place in the usual canine manner, and walked away, sniffing, panting, sniffing again for some new excitement. Mr. Robinson, who had been, for the duration of the affair, a dog in spirit, expecting at every second that a horrified mouse would emerge from this cyclone of attack, imitated his leaders and quietened down with an insouciance equal to theirs. But he had escaped from the menace of humanity; he was eased—he was sleepy. . . .

He slept for a great many hours, and when he awoke the sun was slanting down at the same angle as the hill, throwing immense shadows across the vineyards. The dogs had gone home. And there, on the space of flattened earth between two spreading tree-roots, was a mouse and its family. Mr. Robinson, all mouse now, with no memory of his canine past, lay quite still on his side. The mother mouse moved in spasms, stopping to quiver her nose over invisible interests in the dust. Her brood were like little curled feathers, specks of down blown about by a fitful wind. There seemed to be only one licence to move shared by this whole mouse family; when mother stopped, one infant mouse would puff forward, and as soon as its impulse expired, another thistledown brother would glide erratically an inch or two. In this leisurely way the family moved across the space of earth and into the grass, appearing again and again between the green blades. Mr. Robinson lay still, sycophantically reverent.



Between two blades of grass the senior mouse came out on to a little plateau, about eighteen inches away from Mr. Robinson's unwinking eyes. At that range Mr. Robinson could see its face as clearly as one sees the face of a wife over a breakfast table. It was a dignified but greedy face; its eyes, in so far as they had any expression at all, expressed a cold heart; its attraction lay in its texture, a delicious velvet—and *that* the mouse would never allow a human finger, however friendly, to enjoy. It would have guarded its person as a classical virgin guarded her honour. As soon as Mr. Robinson saw the mouse's remote expression, he felt as a lost sailor on a sinking ship might feel, who throws his last rope—and no saving hands grasp it.

He heard the sound of human footsteps behind him. There was a tiny explosion of flight beside him—and the mouse family was not there. Through the little grove marched a line of men in single file, going home from their work in the vineyards over the hill. Mr. Robinson sat up, and noticed, with a cold heart, that all the men wore the rush hats of the country pulled down against the low last light of the sun, and that not one face was visible.

Mr. Robinson sat for some time with his face in his hands. He felt his eyes with his finger, and the shape of his nose and cheek-bone; he bit his finger with his strong teeth. Here was a face—the only human face in the world. Suddenly craving for the sight of that friend behind the mirror, he got up and walked back to the Trois Moineaux. He found himself very hungry, having starved all day, but his isolation gave him a so much deeper sense of lack than did his empty stomach that, although dinner was in progress among the bands of light and shade on the terrace, his first act was to run to his room and stand before the mirror. There was a mistiness in the mirror. He rubbed it with his hand. The mistiness persisted—a compact haze of blankness that exactly covered the reflection of his face. He moved to a different angle—he moved the mirror—he saw clearly the reflection of the room, of his tweed-clad figure, of his tie, of his suitcase in the middle of the floor—but his face remained erased, like an unsatisfactory charcoal sketch. Filled with an extraordinary fear, he stood facing the mirror for some minutes, feeling with tremulous fingers for his eyes, his lips, his forehead. There seemed to him to be the same sensation of haze in his sense of touch as in his eyesight—a nervelessness—a feeling of nauseating contact with a dead thing. It was like touching with an unsuspecting hand one's own limb numbed by cold or by an accident of position.

Mr. Robinson walked downstairs, dazed, and out on to the terrace. As before, the shadowed tables looking out over the edge of the terrace were already surrounded by laughing, chattering parties. Mr. Robinson took his seat, as before, under the olive tree. "Bring me a bottle of . . . Sauterne," he said to the waiter (for he remembered that his late unmarried sister used to sustain upon this wine a reputation for wit in the boarding-house in which she had lived). "And, waiter, isn't there a table free looking out at the view? I can't see anything here." It was not the view he craved, of course, but only a point of vantage from which to see the faces of his mysterious, noisy neighbours. His need for seeing faces was more immediate than ever, now that his one friend had failed him. "There will be tables free there in a moment," said the waiter. "They are all going to dance soon. They're only waiting for the moon." And the waiter nodded his shadowed face towards a distant hill, behind which—looking at this moment like a great far red fire—the moon was coming up. "Look, the moon, the moon, the moon, look . . ." everyone on the terrace was saying. And a few moments later, the moon, now completely round, but cut in half by a neat bar of cloud, took flight lightly from the top of the hill.

There was scraping of chairs, the scraping of a gramophone, and half a dozen couples of young men and women began dancing between the tall Italian urns and the olive trees on the terrace. Mr. Robinson poured himself out a large tumbler of Sauterne. "Waiter, I don't want a table at the edge now—I want one near the dancers—I want to see their faces."

"There are no tables free in the centre of the terrace now. Several are vacant at the edge."

"I can see a table there, near the dancers, with only two chairs occupied. Surely I could sit with them."

"That table is taken by a large party, but most of them are dancing. They will come back there in a moment."

Mr. Robinson, disregarding the waiter, and clutching his tumbler in one hand and his bottle in the other, strode to the table he had chosen. "I'm *too* lonely—I *must* sit here."

"So lonely, po-oo-or man," said the woman at the table, a stout, middle-aged woman with high shoulders and a high bosom, clad in saxe-blue sequins. She turned her face towards him in the pink light of the moon. Mr. Robinson, though desperate, was not surprised. Her face was the same blank—the same terrible disc of nothingness that he had seen in his mirror. Mr.

Robinson looked at her companion in dreadful certainty. A twin blank faced him.

“Sh-lonely, eh?” came a thick young voice out of nothingness. “Well, m’lad, you’ll be damn sight lonelier yet in minute ’f y’ come buttin’ in on \_\_\_\_\_”

“Ow, Ronnie,” expostulated his frightful friend—but at that moment the gramophone fell silent, and the dancers came back to their table. Mr. Robinson scanned the spaces that should have been their faces one by one; they were like discs of dazzle seen after unwisely meeting the eye of the sun.

“This old feller sayzzz-lonely—pinched your chair, Belle.”

“Never mind, duckie,” said Belle, and threw herself across Mr. Robinson’s knee. “Plenty of room for little me.”

The white emptiness of her face that was no face blocked out Mr. Robinson’s view of the world.

“Oh, my God!” she cried, jumping up suddenly. “I know why he’s lonely—why—the man’s not alive. Look at his face!”

“I am—I am—I am!—” shouted Mr. Robinson in terror. “I’ll show you I am . . .” He lurched after her and dragged her among the dancers as the music began again. He shut his eyes. He could hear her wild animal shrieks of laughter, and feel her thin struggling body under his hands.

Mr. Robinson sat, quite still but racked by confusion, excitement and disgust, beside the road on the wall of the vineyard, watching the last stars slip down into the haze that enhaloed the hills. The moon had gone long ago. All Mr. Robinson’s heart was set on catching the ’bus this morning; to him the dawn that was even now imperceptibly replacing the starlight was only a herald of the ’bus and of escape. He had no thoughts and no plans, beyond catching the ’bus. He knew that he was cold—but flight would warm him; that he was hungry and thirsty—but flight would nourish him; that he was exhausted and broken-hearted—but flight would ease and comfort him.

A white glow crowned a hill, behind which the sky had long been pearly, and in a minute an unbearably bright ray shot from the hill into Mr. Robinson’s eyes. The dazzling domed brow of the sun rose between a tree and a crag, and a lily-white light rushed into the valley.

The ’bus, crackling and crunching, waddled round the bend. Mr. Robinson hailed it with a distraught cry and gesture.

“Enfin . . . très peu de place, m’sieu—n’y a qu’un tout p’tit coin par ici. . . .”

Mr. Robinson had no need now to look at the face of the driver, or at the rows of senseless sunlit ghosts that filled the ’bus. He knew his curse by now. He climbed into the narrow place indicated beside the driver. The ’bus lurched on down the narrow, winding road that overhung the steep vineyards of the valley. Far below—so far below that one could not see the movement of the water—a yellow stream enmeshed its rocks in a net of plaited strands.

Mr. Robinson sat beside the driver, not looking at that phantom, faceless face—so insulting to the comfortable sun—but looking only at the road that was leading him to escape. How far to flee he did not know, but all the hope there was, he felt, lay beyond the furthest turn of the road. After one spellbound look at the sun-blinded face of St. Pierre, hunched on its hive-like hill, he looked forward only at the winding, perilous road.

And his acute eyes saw, in the middle of the way, half a dozen specks of live fur, blowing about a shallow rut. . . . The ’bus’s heavy approach had already caused a certain panic in the mouse family. One atom blew one way, one another; there was a sort of little muddled maze of running mice in the road.

Mr. Robinson’s heart seemed to burst. Before he was aware, he had sprung to his feet and seized the wheel of the ’bus from the driver. He had about twenty seconds in which to watch the mice scuttering into the grass—to watch the low, loose wall of the outer edge of the road crumble beneath the plunging weight of the ’bus. He saw, leaning crazily towards him, the face—the *face*—rolling eyes, tight grinning lips—of the driver, looking down at death. There, far down, was the yellow net of the river, spread to catch them all.

HOPE AGAINST HOPE

## HOPE AGAINST HOPE

Ward Clark thought, “Really, women shouldn’t be allowed to live beyond the age of about thirty—unmarried women, at any rate.” He watched Miss Hope coming across the terrace, carrying a little tray towards him. Miss Hope-against-hope he called her because there was something so senselessly hopeful about the large and rather fine slate-coloured eyes behind her glasses. Directly she saw that he was looking at her, she made a little arch backward movement with the back of her neck, tucking her chin in, like a lizard when it sees a fly.

Her hair was of an uncertain dust colour. One could imagine the kind of clothes, thought Clark, that she would choose to suit that hair—unobtrusive ladylike clothes, navy blue probably, black stockings, a neat black bow at the throat, a neat black bow at the instep. But now, of course, she was dressed in the garb of her profession—“trim” it was always called—quiet blue linen with stiff white collar and cuffs, a white winged headkerchief round her head allowing only one loop of her dull hair to be seen over one temple.

“You naughty man,” said Hope-against-hope. “You didn’t take your medicine I poured out for you after breakfast. And now I’ve brought you your eggnog, and it won’t mix! Well . . . you ought to be well smacked. . . .”

Ward Clark did not answer. He did not even stretch his lips to the smile that politeness demanded as a reaction to such roguishness. He had ceased to mind hurting his nurse’s feelings. Besides, as far as he could see, she hadn’t any.

“I climbed down the steps on to the beach . . . such pretty little . . . very like our Cornish thyme . . . and running up and down on the wet . . . oh, you would have laughed . . . little birds . . . oh, I stood and laughed . . . running so fast, like toys . . . an old fisherman said they were called Ri-ti-ti . . . ri-ti-ti— isn’t it *killing*? . . .” She stood leaning towards him with both her hands flat on the table, turned in like ungainly toes, her eyes burning intensely at his face, imploring him to laugh. Clark gave a slight snort and withdrew his eyes from hers. He heard her sigh. Fun evidently would not do. She looked about the bright sun-dappled terrace, as he was looking. The mountain rose so tall and velvet-grey behind the hotel that it seemed like a lowering thunder sky until one’s eye caught the peak, brittle and gold-trimmed, against a pearl-blue cloudlessness, far above the chimneys. “Oh, what

weather!” said Miss Hope, clenching her fists and jaws. “Doesn’t it make you *thrill* to be alive?” He felt his flesh creep as she looked at him wistfully. He was conspicuously refraining from thrilling to be alive.

“D’you see that man over there sitting near the windows?” she said (and Clark could almost hear her thoughts—“Well, we’ll see if a little gossip will rouse him.”)—“Well, his name is Jawge Dawkins and he comes from China. *China*—just think how . . . Oh, how *thrilling* it must be to travel. . . .”

Ward Clark carefully looked away from Mr. Dawkins, out over the merry speckled sea. To his astonishment he heard the indomitable Miss Hope draw a chair across the gravel to his side and sit down. “Mustn’t it be wonderful,” she said, “to live in *China* . . . it makes you *thrill* to think. . . . Last night I was sitting reading my . . . and he was at the next table talking to the . . . Oh my, Mr. Clark, you should have heard the . . . well, all about brigands and temples and rickshaws and . . . you know . . . all matter-of-fact—as if they were just everyday things . . . well, of course, they *are*, to him. . . .”

Clark’s eyes were drawn by a morbid fascination from the sea to his tormentor. Her chin, he thought, looked too soft, as if it had been boned like a chicken; all its flesh trembled as she talked. He gnawed his nails moodily as he lay staring at her. He felt justified in despising her, since he thought of himself as a reasonable-looking and still young man, in spite of the fact that he was older than she was, that his nose was a little crooked, and that baldness ran up like a boulevard to the crown of his head between two thinned thickets of fair curly hair. Still, he felt himself a man—what a man ought to be—and knew her to be absurdly faded and virgin—exactly what a woman ought not to be. Of course, he was an assiduous reader of Mr. Aldous Huxley.

In spite of his efforts not to flatter her by attention to what she was saying, Ward Clark could not help letting his eyes rest on Mr. George Dawkins for a moment. He saw a thin-nosed wide-eyed man, some fifty years old, with a very noticeable trick of sniffing. When he sniffed, he twitched up his upper lip to disclose large teeth, making the apologetic snarling grimace a dog makes when a friend touches a wounded part of its body. His sniff was a sort of punctuation and made every action seem like a significant parenthesis. He sniffed when he turned a page of his newspaper, or spoke to the waiter, or looked out admiringly over the polished sea. He sniffed twice as he was joined by a pretty young girl who came out of one of the French windows of the hotel.

“That’s his daughter,” said Miss Hope, pleased to see that the angle of her patient’s head now expressed a slight awakening of interest. “Pretty little thing, isn’t she? . . . but rather a *meaningless* face . . . if you know what I mean. . . . I always think an *interesting* face is so much more attractive than a *pretty empty* face . . . don’t you know what I mean? I remember when I used to live with my dear stepmother and she found me crying one day over . . . and she said, ‘Now, Agnes . . . you’ve got a face full of *character* . . .’ she said, ‘that’ll be a hundred times more useful to you than *curls* and *cream*. . . .’ That’s what she said . . . *curls* and *cream*—I’ve never forgotten that. . . .”

“I’ve left my pocket-handkerchief upstairs, nurse,” blurted Clark. “Would you mind . . .?” The fact that this jelly-faced faded creature should have her vanity made him feel almost sick. With a glowering eye he followed her retreat across the terrace towards the vine-shaded windows. At the table of George Dawkins the fantastically confident woman actually paused and made a Social Advance. Ward Clark could hear in the clear air, “Lovely day, isn’t it? Doesn’t this weather make you positively *thrill* to be alive?”

Mr. Dawkins, between one sniff and another, made some obviously affable reply—even rubbing his hands together in a complaisant gesture of *thrill*. “How *can* he?” thought Ward Clark. “It’s so *bad* for her.” It would have been difficult to explain why. When Miss Hope had gone indoors, the Dawkins daughter looked after her with a hoarse giggle in which Mr. Dawkins did not join. Miss Dawkins’s eye, rendered homeless, as it were, by her father’s unresponsiveness, met Clark’s curious look across the terrace. She rose at once and made a coy devious way towards Clark. She approached sidelong the terrace balustrade and leaned her hip against it, looking self-consciously from the invalid to the sea and back again. “Lovely weather, isn’t it?” she said with her husky short giggle. “Shame you can’t be up and about to enjoy it.”

Ward Clark’s face lit up. “It is rather a shame, isn’t it?” he said happily. “Especially as I’m a bit of a golf maniac. But it’s my own fault I’m laid up. I can’t blame anyone at all—I would if I could.” He went on eagerly to tell her of his own rather picturesque rashness in riding a steeplechase on an untried horse, of his accident—three broken ribs and double pneumonia. . . .

“Oo Lor,” said Miss Dawkins, now sitting on the end of his chaise-longue. “How you men *dare* to do such things—I’d be simply *tarrified*. . . . I knew a boy in Shanghai who used to . . .”



Ward Clark watched with real delight her short well-cut painted upper lip moving as she spoke. He never would have thought an upper lip could be lovely that was so short that it twitched the tip of the nose slightly every time the mouth closed. Yet there it was—positively delightful. And her eyes too, the way they looked at him as though pleading merrily for his permission to be rather silly every time she told him something about herself. For their talk rapidly resolved itself into the amiable battle of egoisms that is characteristic of all talk between men under forty and women under twenty. Neither was impressed by anything the other said, yet each was delighted with the general effect and felt that something interesting was being made known. “My dad said, ‘Bess, you’ve driven that boy fairly crazy—I can’t move a step in the house without falling over him.’” . . . “A fellow called Bernard on the Stock Exchange—and they know a thing or two, those fellers—and he said, ‘Damn it all, Clark, how *do you do* it?—I’d have had to pay at least fifteen shillings a bottle for it.’” . . . “‘Not a bit of it, old man,’ I said. ‘If you’ll let me give you a word of advice. . . .’” “I suppose I’m silly and fastidious but I simply can’t *pretend* about that kind of thing—I just blurt out.” . . . “I know, I’m like that too, I used to get into no end of trouble with——”

“Here’s ya hankie, mister,” said Miss Hope’s bright voice behind him. “*Do you know what happened?* I got up into that room and I simply *couldn’t* remember what I’d come for—*too* killing—I simply stood gaping—I got hold of your clothes-brush and gaped at it as if I was . . . I’m sure the *fam-de-chombe* must have thought I was *raving mad* . . . she happened to . . . ‘Now what *did* I come for?’ I said—and then all at once . . . Oh, I see you’ve got a nice companion now—a little lady from China to talk to. . . . Well, I’ll leave you to have a nice . . . and don’t forget ya eggnog again, you naughty man . . . and I’ll just hop up and do a little . . .”

She entered the house at the same French window as before and the back of her neck made the same lizard-like moue as before towards the Dawkins’ table. But Mr. George Dawkins was no longer there.

Bessie Dawkins gave her curious croaking giggle. “What a *priceless* person. . . .”

“Oh, God!” said Ward Clark. “She ought to have been drowned at birth.” But of course if he had given a little thought to the matter he would have modified his pronouncement. Actually twenty-nine is the age at which practically all women should be drowned, if I understand the average young man correctly. Miss Dawkins was quite safe for some time yet. She was only nineteen.

“I won’t hear a *word* against a woman,” she said. “I don’t know where you men get the idea us women are always cats to each other. I do admire women who go out and earn their living most *frightfully*—I mean I really *do*. . . . I wish Dad would let me do it myself, but since Mum died—d’you know what he says? He says—(it’s too killing of him)—he says, ‘No, no, Bess, you’re far too pretty.’ . . . I *do* think it’s *too* tiresome of the men to run after a girl that only wants to be let alone. . . . Though, as I often say, I love to have plenty of men friends, only somehow just when I get to know a boy really well he always gets silly and falls passionately in love with me . . .”  
etc. . . . etc. . . .

Ward Clark hung on her lips. The only drawback to what she was saying was that it prevented him—(but only temporarily, of course)—from telling her something that he was convinced would interest her very much—a story about his buying a horse against the advice of his horsy brother-in-law—a horse which most marvellously justified his prescience by winning . . .  
etc. . . . etc. . . . And so the amiable contest went on.

“Oo, look,” presently said Bessie, interrupting a rather good story. By sitting up rather carelessly in his chair, Clark could just see over the terrace balustrade, down through the pine trees on the slope to the spot on the beach at which Miss Dawkins’s finger was pointed. There, striding up and down near the waving silver margin of the sea, were Miss Agnes Hope and Mr. George Dawkins, looking eagerly into each other’s faces as they strode. His hand was gesticulating emphatically—one could imagine that he was sniffing like a dog on a trail, but of course one couldn’t hear this. The enchanted exclamations uttered by Miss Hope could, however, be heard, rising rather sweetly and remotely above the faint brittle noise of little waves breaking.

It almost seemed as if the eyes of the two watchers on the terrace had touched some spring in the attention of the ardent talkers on the shore. They swerved, still talking, still twisting their shoulders to face each other, towards the steps among the pines, and disappeared.

“Your unlucky parent . . .” groaned Ward Clark. “He little knows . . .”

“Oh, Dad loves every one,” giggled Mr. Dawkins’s daughter.

And, suitably enough, Mr. Dawkins was talking of love as he came within earshot at the other end of the terrace. “I love my boys,” he was saying. “There’s no denying charm to the Chinese—they certainly have charm. Young or old—it’s all the same. . . . I wouldn’t exchange an evening

spent among educated Chinese men and lads for one in any company. . . . I love my lads . . . both as pupils and as friends. . . .”

Ward Clark gave a slight concealed snort. He disliked schoolmasters almost as much as he disliked plain women.

Miss Hope looked with a dreamy and almost loving look towards her unresponsive patient. “I’ve had such a *thrilling* stroll,” she said, in a surprisingly subdued voice. “Oh, my *dear* Mr. Clark—the *things* I’ve heard. . . . Just like a story-book. . . . Now I must introduce you two. . . .”

Mr. Dawkins drew up his chair and, catching the waiter’s eye across the terrace, called “Boy,” and asked Clark to Name His.

“Not at any rate a missionary,” sighed Ward Clark, secretly feeling like a lamb to which the wind has only been rather ineffectually tempered.

“He hasn’t finished his eggnog yet,” said Miss Hope absently. Clark listened, his exasperated ears stretched for the inevitable roguish “Naughty man.” It did not come. Miss Hope’s dark patient eyes glowed through her glasses at Mr. Dawkins’s face. “Do go on with what you were saying,” she said.

Mr. Dawkins went on, in a competent tenor voice interrupted only by an energetic sniff from time to time. It was obvious, even to the reluctant Clark, that everything that he spoke of was very vivid to his own remembering senses. He drew very few morals, in spite of being a schoolmaster. Nearly everything that he said was told from the point of view of his own eyes and ears. A Chinese dinner party . . . the splashed tablecloth . . . chopsticks nuzzling and biting in the common bowl like storks’ beaks . . . the bright friendly lidless eyes . . . the harsh sing-song talk, never ironic, never careless . . . the clamour of servants uncouthly pushing dishes between guests’ shoulders . . . the far howl of the cook announcing the readiness of a new course. . . .

“I can see now,” said Miss Hope presently in a pause, “that what thrills one about *abroad* is imagining oneself *at home* in it . . . not strange . . . not surprised. . . .”

Ward Clark gaped at her. Her voice was quite quiet, her words thoughtful. He suddenly drank the rest of his eggnog, as a sort of reward to her for speaking so sensibly. . . . Mr. Dawkins said, “It is not often that a garrulous traveller finds such a sympathetic and imaginative audience for his yarns. . . .” He leaned over Clark and tapped him lightly on the diaphragm, sniffing impressively before he said, “Let me tell you, sir, you’re a lucky

man to be nursed through a wearisome convalescence by a woman of imagination . . . It's a very rare thing—imagination—among professional women—and men too, for the matter of that. . . .”

“Oh, get along,” said Miss Hope, crimson with pleasure. “You’ll never get my patient to believe all that. Why, his very *eye* scares all the fancy out of me. . . .”

Ward Clark, who was a healthy man, was well enough in ten days to walk quietly about by the side of his unloved attendant. He might not as yet risk the steep steps down through the pine slopes to the beach, but from the terrace he could walk a little way along the top of the cliff—along the rather cultured little path that broadened every few yards to accommodate an “artistic” bench wherever the view was considered to be finest. To Clark, upright at last after how many weeks of illness, the ground seemed very near and the sea very tremendous and trance-like. Miss Hope, too, seemed to him in his weakness different, more stalwart, a staff of strength—if only, like a staff, she would permit herself to be laid aside, mercifully dumb, when not needed to support his steps.

“You sit on the bench, mister, and have a little rest. I shall sit on the dear moss—oh, the *feel* of it beneath my fingers. . . .” And by the way she threw herself down in a careless sitting position on the ground and straightened her knees and moved her toes in their neat professional low shoes, Clark could see, with the keen understanding of dislike, that she still saw herself as a sprawling girl and had not learned to dissociate herself, as she should, from a calf-like impulsiveness of gesture. She even threw off her hat gaily, as if she had charming roughened curls beneath it, instead of a tortured mat of frizzed strands and hairpins. “One of the signs of a patient’s convalescence,” she said, as she spun the hat round on a finger before flinging it on the moss. “Now you’re up and about, I can come into your august presence like a human being instead of with that starchy napkin flapping about. D’you know why I *love* wearing nothing on my head? . . . You’ll never guess—how should you?—a mere . . . why, I’ll tell you. . . . I hate wearing hats and . . . because I hate to hide my best features. . . . *There* now, aren’t I a silly girl! . . . But it’s not just fancy. . . . I once won a prize for them—first prize at a Features Contest at a bazaar at . . . and besides that, I’ve been complimented on . . . and——”

“On *what*—for God’s sake?” Ward Clark could not restrain himself from saying in a furious voice, though he had been trying to pretend to read

*Punch.*

“Well, look,” said Miss Hope in an excited voice, and she pushed up a dangling frizzle of hair and showed her ear—a good ear enough, small and neat, but, to Clark, a great deal less than interesting. “I’m not vain,” she said, “but I can’t help knowing . . . it’s seldom you see an ear anywhere near the Greek. . . . I remember the judge at the bazaar showed me a plaster cast of . . .”

“Sorry I’m no judge,” said Clark, so much revolted by all she said that he was almost amused. He looked forward to telling Bessie Dawkins about Hope-against-hope’s One Claim to Beauty. He heard in imagination Bessie’s low giggle and his own ironic voice. “Poor little Bessie,” he thought, and a sort of glamour came over the face of earth and sky and sea as he thought of her. He could no longer see her merely as an amusing flapper with a pretty mouth—for she had crowned herself with a secret halo by falling in love with him. It was obvious though unspoken; her concealments were pathetically frail. Clark had outgrown most of the cruder forms of young conceit, and had never aspired to the role of lady-killer; his good sense regretted that the child should harrow her romantic affections to no purpose—yet, there it was—she wore now, in his eyes, a special fragile charm, in spite of the fact that it never once occurred to him to fall in love with her. He had not the slightest intention of marrying, and, in any case, he was never in the least attracted by virgins. He simply felt a sort of deep, still, apologetic gentleness towards the afflicted Bessie, and everything that she said or did was heard or seen by him in a haze of glamorous—almost holy—tolerance. She could, indeed, do no wrong, since even her pettishnesses, her small violences of manner, her craving to exhibit her little soul, like her pretty little knees, to him, her efforts to rivet his interest on the oddities she so wistfully valued in herself—all these were but harmless weeds in that same garden of charm that flowered in the sun of her young passion for him. “Dear little Bessie,” he thought whenever he remembered her—which was fairly often. He had an uneasy conviction that she expected him to propose marriage to her, and was determined to be very very careful to avoid hurting her little feelings more than was necessary. Good God, there was Hope-against-hope again—nagging at his attention as usual. She caught his ear, of course, by naming the radiant name Dawkins.

“Would you believe it?—he noticed my ears. . . . The day I walked to the east point with him and we climbed out on the . . . I had left my hat on the beach . . . and he said, ‘That’s right, now I can see a very pretty sight, like a shell in floating seaweed.’ . . . D’you know, at first I was almost offended—I

made a little face at him because . . . well, seaweed, you know . . . not a very pretty . . . but he showed me some brown seaweed in a pool among the . . . it really *was* like a fairy tress of . . . I was quite pleased then . . . he *does* talk so well, doesn't he? . . . I remember he said that on the ship coming home through a very rough . . . the waves *boiling in blue curls* against his port-hole . . . *boiling in* . . . can't you see them? . . . with stormy sunlight showing through. . . . Oh *my*—I should like to travel. . . . D'you know . . . one so seldom meets *nobility*—it seems almost silly to say . . . you know what I mean . . . *noble* . . . yet it does seem to me that one could use the word of . . . don't you know what I mean?—he could never be unkind or small . . . or cynical . . . or do anything he thought wasn't . . . He is a *noble* person. . . . I *do* feel so proud to have made such a friend—because, you know—I really do think he looks on me as a . . . you know what I mean—what schoolboys call a *pal*. . . . I'm so silly with you, Mr. Clark, because I'm frightened of you . . . you're criticizing all the . . . but with *him* . . . D'you know, I dreamt about him last night . . . wasn't it *killing*? . . . in my dream he called me *Little Woman* . . . he kept on saying it, *Little Woman, Little Woman*. . . . Oh, I—What's the matter, mister—shivering?—Are you cold?"

"Yes," said Ward Clark. "Cold and a little sick. I think I'll start walking home."

He was moved to grind his teeth in a paroxysm of revulsion, as hatred showed him that the dream had been enchanting to her, and that the golden memory of it had filled her silly eyes with tears.

The Dawkinses were gone.

Ward Clark, his elbows on the window-sill of his bedroom, watched the morning shadow of the mountain dwindle upon the sea, and thought of his parting with Bessie. He felt, glowingly, that the chapter was a pretty one in his life; he had been, he knew, kind and understanding, as befitted a man twenty years older than she was, dear little thing. Many men, he knew, would have taken advantage of the child's naïve vulnerability; some men would now be flattering themselves crudely on a small triumph. Short of proposing to the girl, Ward Clark felt that he could not have been more comforting and tactful to her than he had been. Poor little Bessie, her tender courage—so flattering to him—had stirred him. "You men do so well without women . . . but if ever . . ." Her large brown eyes had dazzled with tears. "You will write to me sometimes, Ward, won't you? . . . you don't know what it would mean to me. . . ." "Your post-bag's full already with

letters from all your boy friends, my dear.” Ward had smiled, reminding her gently to be vain—to look past her humiliation. “What about Guy and Tim and Wally and all the rest you told me about? Why, you won’t even have time to open letters from an old crock like me.” The memory of her look gave him an exquisite feeling—almost like a feeling of something accomplished. “I’ve plenty of boy friends,” she said with a strangled giggle, and a modest manner of accepting his offer of dignity. “I’ll probably marry Guy—goodness knows he’s keen enough—so are several of my boy friends . . . but I’ll always remember my *man* friend. . . . Oh, Ward—good-bye—what a fool I am. . . .”

It was a good thing the father—and even the lamentable Hope-against-hope—had had the sense to keep out of the way, Clark thought. The little scene, so restrained, so perfect, so creditable to both participants, could so easily have been spoiled by interruption or facetiousness. He had, indeed, not seen Hope-against-hope since the early departure of the hotel ’bus in which the Dawkinses had gone to catch the train for Rome. Ward Clark had given them letters of introduction to friends in Rome—a city he knew well. He had drawn for Bessie a little map, showing her how to find a wonderful little restaurant where people in the know asked for a bottle of Number Twenty-two with the chill just off. Half apologetically he caught himself enjoying the thought of how immediate would be his memory in her mind as she triumphed over the intricacies of the streets with the help of his map, and found the door he had described to her.

It was long past the time for his eggnog. Though he was now scarcely an invalid, he still took no exercise before noon, and had only dressed this morning in order to see the Dawkinses off. He ought to have been lying on his chaise-longue on the terrace, but Miss Hope had not come in to “lay him out” (daily joke). He still felt enough of an invalid to be a little aggrieved against his nurse for her neglect. The shadow of the mountain had climbed inshore from the sea, was almost swallowed up by the noon sun. The heads of the pine trees glistened a little in the heat; they were gathering their distorted shadows more closely round them as the sun climbed higher. Clark heard the sound of a horse and cart—a rare enough sound in the motor-haunted driveway of this sophisticated hotel. He crossed to the side window of his room.

He saw an amazing sight. Two local fishermen were driving in one of the heavy farm carts of the country, behind a stout furry horse. And on the back seat of the cart sat a distraught disordered figure—Hope-against-hope—hatless—wet hair dripping round a neck to which still clung the limp

remains of her neat collar—shoeless feet set, with toes turned in, in a pool of water on the cart's floor—knees grotesquely protruding from (oh, God) a torn pink artificial silk petticoat, for she had no skirt on. Standing stiffly out round all this was a fisherman's coat, stiff as a basket, open like an anatomical sectional illustration to show every detail of its miserable human contents.

Ward Clark, aching with surprise and annoyance, hurried to the verandah to meet her. There was a twitter of astonishment from a waiter and two chambermaids as Miss Hope, her stony eyes fixed on nothing, stumbled from the cart between the two sheepish-looking fishermen.

“My *dear* Miss Hope . . .” began Clark in a voice of repressed exasperation. She clutched at his shoulder without seeming to see it. He had to put his arm about her to steady her. She could not speak. She seemed abysmally unaware that she was his nurse and he her patient. Clark could not wait to hear the fishermen's explanation; he had to support the staggering dripping woman along the passage to her room. There he left her with the chambermaid while he hurried back to the verandah. He felt quite choked with excitement; his temperature, he was sure, had gone up. Oh, damn the woman—splashing her beastly personality all over the place—was she not paid to be a background?

The head waiter—all the waiters now assembled on the verandah—had now mastered all the facts. The fishermen spoke a dialect that Clark had great difficulty in understanding. He turned to the waiters. It seemed that the fishermen had been mending their nets on the shore when they had seen a woman run along the rocks of the east point and leap into the sea. They had launched their boat and reached her in a few minutes. They had found her clinging to the seaweed of the furthest rock, trying to thrust herself under the sea—even trying, rather feebly, to beat her head against the rock. She had struggled to refuse help. “Na—na—na—” said the younger fisherman, throwing his head back, shutting his eyes and shrieking through bared teeth as he imitated the woman's behaviour. The men feared that they had bruised her obstinate fingers in disengaging them from the weedy rocks. “She *held herself* to die,” said a waiter in English.

“Good Lord, good Lord . . .” groaned Clark, dazed with disgust. “What d'you think I ought to give these fellers?” he asked the head waiter.

“She harries me—she harries me . . .” he thought. “Or do I mean *harrows* . . .?”



She was up next day, the fingers of her left hand neatly bandaged, the rest of her form neatly clad once more in professional linen. Ward Clark found her with her pen poised stiffly over a blank sheet of notepaper. She had made no mark except some poor scribblings representing people coming out of the hotel depicted on the notepaper—little inky spiders straddling on the terrace.

“I’m going—I’m going . . .” she said in a desperately mollifying voice.

Clark’s precarious patience was almost upset at once. No thought for him or for her professional duties. . . . “Well, I should think you *had* better go home—it’s obvious, isn’t it? that you’re not fit, nervously, for what you’ve undertaken. . . . Luckily I’m almost well—I’ll telegraph to my sister to come out . . . so you needn’t worry about me. . . . But for God’s sake, my dear woman—what happened? What on earth possessed you? Haven’t you any dignity—any self-control?”

“Oh—” said Miss Hope, and her pale mouth was pulled into a stiff grin. “Oh—how far away—how far away—men and women are from each other. . . .”

# SUBMARINE

## SUBMARINE

There was a loud squealing in her ears and it was like the translation into sound of the hurried green twilight about her. Her head felt as if it was padded with vacuum like a thermos, but—also like a thermos filled with iced lemonade—cool, acid and lucid inside. She watched Amos in front of her, cannon-ball-headed, waddling grotesquely, sticking out a large creased behind, like an offended rhinoceros, planting his immense feet on gardens and moving creatures and swaying flowers, flapping a portentous hand like a drunkard. “That’s the man I love,” she thought, gaping at him through streaked unflattering space, and as she thought this, his foot moved carelessly and he sprang, sprawling askew, to a point outside her range of vision. She could only see a blinkered view through the window in her helmet.

She was not wearing the full diving-suit but only a headpiece with a rubber “bertha” and her own bathing-dress. She felt like a top-heavy pawn on a drunken chess-board. The air-pipe was under her arm. The helmet was like a diving-bell with only a certain allowance of bubbling squealing air trapped inside it. When she bowed forward to look at a little crab, the air receded up to her mouth; in fright she bent backward and the crisp line of the water slipped down at once to her Adam’s apple. Now she felt braver; she could bend her nervous weightless body a little—not too much—to allow her window to command a view of white coral branches, white craters, anemones like pianists’ fingers, green-black patches of matted weed, crabs and smiling open mussels, little glassy splinters of fish that moved off round her ankles like sun-touched midges round the pillars of a cathedral. Looking at her ankles, slim and pearl-green under a body that felt so top-heavy and undisciplined, she tried to dance a step or two. Instantly she soared by mistake—sideways—backwards—outspread like a spider—outspread like a little boy lifted by the seat of the trousers. . . . She landed on one heel, unable for a moment to retrieve her aspiring right leg, in a white coral crater.

“Who *was* that man like?” came suddenly into her mind as she waved and slanted in the urgent water, unable to stand, unable to fall. She was thinking of the man in charge of the raft above her. “Who *was* he like?” Her eyes remembered the man, standing in his shirt-sleeves in the sun on the raft, scowling at the negroes who worked the pump, turning with an apologetic smile to her and Amos. Her ears remembered him. . . . “It’s not

often we get a lady on this raft, wanting to dive for the fun of the thing, too. But you couldn't wear the outfit, lady, well, look, you couldn't move it—try one of the shoes . . . well, look, there, you see—why, you couldn't carry the weight over the side—three hundred and twenty-five pounds—of course it feels like a feather once you're under water, but it'd be the getting there. Still . . . well, look, I'd like you to go down and see the *Will o' the Wisp*—she lies so pretty, just twenty-eight feet under that buoy there; we shall get the whisky out of her hold by to-morrow night, I guess, if there really are only a hundred cases. No—she's not worth salvaging, herself—she was only a dot-and-carry-one old schooner and she crumpled her bows right in, running into that rock there—the sea was pretty high and the old man must have lost his head. . . . It's only the whisky the owners want out of her; well, look, right here, within a hundred miles of the Yankee buyers, whisky's worth something, I can tell you. Well, look, lady, I'd like you to see her—well, why don't you go down in this gadget here, what the niggers use when they don't want to bother with the whole caboodle?—nothing but the helmet and the tube, you see—works just as well for a short trip.”

*Well, look*, he said so often—who *was* that like?—with that mumbled *well*, like *will*, and the open throaty *look*—“*will lok*.” It was like *Nana*—he might be *Nana*'s son—that was why the connection—or disconnection—in her memory had made her so uncomfortable. Everything connected with *Nana* was wounding. The thought of *Nana* brought in a rush into her mind a young lifetime of croonings and hummings and comfortings and scoldings and rockings and forgivings . . . and then—*crash*—a day when *Amos* discovered that *Nana*, turned from nurse to housekeeper, had during these twenty years stolen eight hundred and thirty pounds out of the money given her for her charge's upkeep. The widow profiting by the orphan's trust. *Nana* turned out of the house. *Amos* shouting, “You're lucky we don't care to prosecute. . . .” *Nana*'s sailor son—who happened to be in *Harwich*—sent for in a great uproar. “Call yesself a gentleman—this is how you reward my old mother's lifetime of service. . . . Wait till I get you alone—I'll get a chance to get even with you some day. . . .” She had only seen *Nana*'s son on that occasion—she had looked over the banisters and seen him shaking his fist. The man on the raft *was* like him. *Amos* would not notice it—he was so short-sighted. Besides, it was ten years ago. But “*will lok*”—it was *Nana*'s exact intonation. Surely the coincidence could be *too* extraordinary. She and *Amos* were only here by chance, yachting in the West Indies—had come here idly to this lonely lagoon, having heard of the wreck of the little smuggler. “Why, there's diving—oh, what fun, *Vi*, let's dive. . . .” So here they were, by chance, at the bottom of the sea, at the mercy of a man on a

raft—who was like Nana’s son. By chance. “I’ll get a chance to get even. . .” *Was* it Nana’s son? Now, suddenly, she remembered that he had said to Amos, “Some people like diving, and some do it once and never do it again.” Amos had said, “We shall never get a chance to do it again, whether we like it or not.” And Nana’s son had replied, “Probably not.” (It *was* Nana’s son.) Then, to the negroes, “You goggling idiots, can’t you—aw hell—well then, get to hell out of here. I’ll do it myself.” He would work the pump himself.

The young woman, alone in a squealing bubbling silence in the crater, looked about her in a panic, moving jointlessly like a cheap puppet. She thought thirstily of the safe dry air—of the light sky—of birds—of England—Oh, to be in England now that April’s here; there’s the wise elm he grows each twig twice over. . . . She tentatively pulled her airtube—the signal for help from the raft. There was no answering pull. She could probably swim upward unaided—indeed she had some difficulty in remaining down. But Amos in his leaden armour. . . . Where was Amos? Where was the wreck of the *Will o’ the Wisp*—?—he would be there. She began to climb prancingly up the side of the crater, a mild slope of perhaps six feet but as difficult as a mountain to her unwieldy feet. At the edge of the crater at last, she could see the wreck quite near, looking very different from her expectation. It looked like a little leaning house with a swinging door; the mast, with flags of blackish seaweed, was like a dying tree over the little house, and the ominous green light added to its menaced look. A waltzing inverted Spanish onion bowing to the crushed bows of the ship was identifiable as Amos. As his wife approached, the unsuspecting Amos, in one flying stride like a slow-motion cinema study, aimed himself at the sloping deck of the schooner, reached it, slipped and fell, and lay in the scuppers. He did all this with absurd suspended ponderousness; his helmet, of course, could not change its expression to a smile, and this immobility gave him the earnest look of a puppy trying unsuccessfully for the first time to climb steps. His wife, however, did not smile at his antics inside her own soberly grinning mask. Somehow she reached the lower side of the ship, bruising her shoulder against a stanchion. She could reach her Amos’ foot as he cautiously tried to get up. She pulled his foot! he sat down again as abruptly as the supporting water would allow him to, and bounced once. (What a field there is for a submarine low comedian!) Amos made a flapping gesture of irritation, like the “Don’t bovver me” of a baby.

“Amos—come quickly—that’s Nana’s son, we’re in danger,” yelled his wife. Her ears cracked. The squealing in her headpiece changed its note and crackled; she felt almost suffocated; she reeled. Amos could not hear a

sound. He flapped foolishly again. “Amos—Amos—” She pulled his ankle in panic—it was all she could reach of him. He tried to draw it away. There was asperity in his flapping. She pointed upward like a Salvation Army preacher. He turned his mask towards her! she half saw his mouth moving behind the glass. He pointed at her and pointed upward as he lay along the rail at an impossible angle. He was evidently saying, “Go up yourself then, but leave me alone.” This squealing instead of silence was a more frightful answer than silence. There he was, wrapped away in his own squealing sound-proof world. A fish swam between him and her. “Amos—Amos!” she screamed, and once more was checked by semi-suffocation. Was the air being cut off from above? Amos withdrew his leaden foot from her reach. He regained a kind of perpendicularity and signed to her once more, peremptorily, that she should soar away from him. He took one step away from her. As a step, it failed. As a flight, it was unexpectedly successful; the steep deck seemed to launch him backwards into space; he flew towards his wife and, for a second, sat lightly on her iron face. She clasped him round the middle; he doubled up like a jointed foot-rule. She was saving him. She bounded about frantically. Amos managed to twist himself out of her grasp but she caught his arm. “It’s Nana’s son up there—an enemy.” She clung with both hands to his rubber wrist, dragging him. Amos, she could see, was now quite alarmed—not suspicious of foul play but dumbfounded by the frenzied behaviour of his wife. He pulled his safety cord. They were instantly caught up to heaven together, floating sideways, intertwined, through the blowing current, like G. F. Watts’ *Paolo and Francesca*. Their two round steel heads collided at the surface, at the foot of the raft’s ladder. Some one lifted our young woman’s false head off; she was herself again—she was herself in her bathing-suit, unarmoured, safe, as though coming aboard after a common swim. A face bent over her. Nana’s son? What *had* she been thinking of? This man was not in the least like Nana’s son; he was short and broad—Nana’s son had been tall and knock-kneed; this man on the raft was obviously Australian—he greeted her with an unmistakable accent, and his first words were not *will lok*, but *lok here, lidy*. . . . What madness of memory had caught her, down there in that new senseless shadowed world?

Amos was being helped up the ladder. Some one opened his little window and his voice leapt out like a bird out of a cage. “Good Lord, Vi, what in the world . . .?” as the raftman helpfully wrenched his iron head off.

# HAIRY CAREY'S SON

## HAIRY CAREY'S SON

“My father,” said Doctor Bligh, “lived on this island about a hundred years ago. . . . Seems a long time ago, doesn't it, but . . . well, let me see . . . where are we now? . . . nineteen hundred—yes—I'm over sixty and my father was over sixty when I was born. He lived here as a boy; he was born in Cardiff in 1785. . . .”

All the way south from New York Doctor Bligh had been carefully *not* saying this. Ridiculously melodramatic though the conclusions were that might be drawn from the information that a harmless elderly passenger's father had lived on Lily Island a hundred years ago—drawn they might be, and especially by a facetious joker like Captain Fink.

“A hundred years ago on Lily Island,” mused the captain in arch meditation. “Why—then he must have been a pirate!”

“There—you see!” said Doctor Bligh to himself. “You see what havoc three brandies and sodas after midnight can do with one's privacy!” However, the confidential impetus was irresistible now. Besides it was such a good retort to the captain's waggishness. “He *was* a pirate,” said Doctor Bligh, leaning dramatically forward and then throwing himself back in his chair as if to watch the resulting excitement.

There was no excitement. The captain of the *Rising Day*, who suffered from a strong quivering spasm of the breath when amused, gave but a faint exhibition of it now, and rubbed his nose. What a silly old man this was, he thought. The old ass had been talking of the criminal frivolity of hospital nurses all the way from New York and now he says his father was a pirate. “We get quite a lot of pirate yarns told us, one way or another,” sighed the captain. “But I don't remember hearing of any famous pirate on Lily Island called Bligh.”

“He changed his name. When Queen Victoria came to the throne. That was when he ceased to be really proud of his past. His real name was Carey.”

“Good Lord! Not Hairy Carey?” cried the captain, checking his tumbler three inches from his lips.

Doctor Bligh looked at him in some alarm. “I didn't know it was such a well-known name on Lily Island. If I had known it was a byword I wouldn't



have told you the name.”

“It’s so long ago,” said the captain. “I don’t think I should trouble to be shy about it, if I were you. Anyway Hairy Carey didn’t leave a scoundrelly reputation, you know—not like the man they called the Old Duke. Carey didn’t have time—he was just a kid, I believe, when piracy was stamped out. The only thing they say about him, as far as I know, is that he grew a beard when he was twelve, and that he fell through a hole in an inland cave once and bobbed up like a cork fifty yards out at sea. There’s a song that the niggers sing about it—that’s the only reason why Lily Island remembers Hairy Carey—because it rhymes with scary and wary and fairy. . . .”

“What are you laughing at?” asked Doctor Bligh rather crossly.

“I’m not laughing,” laughed the captain. “I was looking at Young Rummie here, collecting information about Hairy Carey—and collecting it through his mouth, apparently. . . .”

Doctor Bligh turned irascibly to follow the direction of the captain’s look. Young Rummie, the ship’s boy, with his back to the two men, was fiddling with some glasses on a tray. His innocent young neck was claret-coloured with embarrassment.

“Have you come to Lily Island to hunt for your father’s buried treasure?” persisted the wheezing captain. “Got a chart drawn in blood and everything just so?” Doctor Bligh saw his roguish distorted eye through the bottom of his tumbler, and wished he could throw something at it and distort it for good and all.

“No,” he said shortly. “My father had a good position in the tobacco trade in England. He never made a penny out of the adventures of his boyhood.” How undignified it was, thought Doctor Bligh, for a respectable general practitioner to be mixed up with the kind of story that excites cabin-boys and causes negroes to burst into song. Why on earth had he brought the subject up? It had been perfectly safe in his own mind. Really, of course, it had never been safe at all since he had found that paper. It had seethed so much in his mind that it was bound sooner or later to bubble over the brim before he could stop it. “My father had a sentimental fondness for this island,” added Doctor Bligh. “As a very old man, especially, he often fancied himself on Lily Island. But it was a purely sentimental feeling, and it is on purely sentimental grounds that I have long wished to visit an island that my father held in such happy memory.”

“There isn’t much sentiment on Lily Island,” said the captain. “Or much of anything else either, for that matter.”

“Well, good-night,” said Doctor Bligh, finding to his surprise as he stood up that his feet were a little unsteady, even though the *Rising Day* was at anchor and perfectly motionless. “I have to get up early to-morrow, if I want to get my walk over before the sun gets too hot.”

On the deck, on the way to his cabin, the doctor paused and looked at Lily Island across a stretch of striped glass water polished by moonlight. The low uneven land was blurred black against the sky. Stars floated out of the land to follow the flying moon.

Doctor Bligh was saying this phrase to himself: “Fifty thousand pounds under a Cow’s Lick.” Whenever he thought of that phrase he felt a certainty and then a sort of squirm. What an absurd position to be in—if one wore woollen underclothes and weighed two hundred pounds—to be the reluctant slave of a romantic quest. It was as though he had been mysteriously impelled to find joy in the possession of a popgun and the taste of bull’s-eyes.

“Pleessa,” said a voice near him. He turned to see the tiresome freckled face of Young Rummie. “Pleessa—I couldn’t help hearing what you was talking about in there-sa. Pleessa *please* may I come with you-sa, to look for your father’s treasure-sa? I bin to the island often before-sa, and I’m strong and useful-sa. . . .”

“Good God, boy,” snapped the doctor. “What *are* you talking about? My father’s treasure, indeed! Do I look like a man with a father who had any treasure? My father lived for fifty years after he left this island. If he had any treasure or knew of any treasure why should he have left it here or anywhere else without coming to get it? You go to hell, and stay there.”

“I thought you told the cap’n your father was Hairy Carey-sa.”

“Go to hell,” repeated Doctor Bligh, but a little more doubtfully now. Was it possible that the boy had heard of or found something on the island? “What do you know about Carey?”

“On’y that he was about my age-sa—and that song about him. . . .” And the irritating child began to sing in the creaking voice peculiar to the middle teens.

“Where-a you been, Hairy Carey?  
Down-do-down, I bin drowned.  
You go an’ ask the green growin’ fishes  
Down-do-down  
Down-do-down  
Down-do-down what I found.”

What were boys coming to! exclaimed Doctor Bligh to himself. Butting into the treasure-hunts of their elders and betters and insisting on singing to them, uninvited, in the middle of the night. “Captain Fink was mistaken, if you *must* know. My father was no pirate. He was very much interested in tobacco culture and came here some years ago to make experiments.”

“Yessa,” said the boy with docility.

“There were no pirates in his day.”

“No-sa.”

“Anything else you want to ask me?” asked Doctor Bligh in a withering voice.

“No-sa. On’y—please, *pleessa* let me come with you on your treasure-hunt-sa. . . .”

Doctor Bligh walked furiously away across the deck to his cabin. “Fifty thousand pounds under a Cow’s Lick,” he thought. He carried always in his inner pocket the scrap of unexplained paper found between the pages of an old notebook labelled *Heavens Sugar Farm*. The writing—on the torn-out fly-leaf of a book called *Beauty’s Dower*, published in London by Mr. Atkinson, MDCCXC—was not his father’s writing. It was a mincing deliberate hand, and seemed almost as if idle fingers had gone over it again and again, crossing the super-crossing *t*’s, dotting *i*’s with galaxies of stars, adding frills to the capital letters. There was nothing to explain what it meant, or who scribbled it so, or how it got there among the papers of a reformed pirate. “Fifty thousand pounds under a Cow’s Lick. . . .” Doctor Bligh had first seen this scrap of paper on going through his father’s possessions forty years ago when the old man died. At the time it had made no impression on him at all, for he had been a sober single-hearted young doctor filled with the determination to Do Good and Make Good. Now that the paper had become almost an obsession with him, he found it difficult to understand how he could have seen it so indifferently in his hot youth. But really his youth had never been hot—only in his mysteriously *réchauffé* middle age had Doctor Bligh suddenly become tired of tepid duty. Anything

would have done as a hot sauce for duty—golf—stamp-collecting—the Primrose League—Angora rabbits—only it happened to be buried treasure. An idle rediscovery of the scrap of paper, and some idle speculation upon its meaning had lighted a discreet fuse which led to an explosion of fantastic convictions about an actual buried treasure on Lily Island. And with the thought of buried treasure, all kinds of romantic and grisly half-recollections had found their way into Doctor Bligh’s consciousness. His mind’s ear added ambiguously, fragment by fragment, to his memory of what old Bligh—late Hairy Carey—had said from time to time, fifty years ago. “It wasn’t so much that the Old Duke was a murderer—he didn’t murder people who crossed him, exactly. . . . There were none of the traditional pirate scenes in his ship—she was just dirty and dull and as much like your modern tramp steamers as a schooner can be—with just that wicked freak of speed thrown in. But there was a sort of crooked indirect curse on everything the Old Duke touched—he didn’t murder a man who offended him—but he made a murderer of that man—and in such a way that it wasn’t generally the dead man that was most to be pitied. So his property was always safe; he protected it with the *irrelevance* of his cruelty. It was to everyone’s interest, somehow, not to offend the Old Duke.” Had the old pirate said something like that, or had his son imagined it all, in the light of this new inexplicable romantic brooding? “Am I really on the track of accursed treasure?” Doctor Bligh thought. “Am I to have adventures at last, before I die?”

Doctor Bligh slept and dreamed that he looked from the deck of the *Rising Day* and saw, on the island, a broad road apparently leading up easily to a terrace between the hoofs of a colossal golden cow upon the skyline. And yet, in his dream, he could not start on his walk along the road because there was no boat in which he could be rowed ashore, nor anyone to row him—only, in the distance, so elusive that the frantic dreamer sought him in vain, a singer singing in a faint wild treble voice.

Captain Fink had early breakfast with his passenger in the morning. “Young Rummie can row you ashore,” he said. “And you’d better arrange with him where he shall meet you and at what time. Unless you’d like to take him and walk along to the Cove, three or four miles south, and meet us there. We have to drop down there for a few dozen crates of fruit when we’ve finished the little bunch now alongside. We’ll be there about sunset. We go out at highwater to-morrow.”

“I’ll do that alone,” said Doctor Bligh. “I don’t fancy that Young Rummie much. He follows me about like a dog.”

“He doesn’t want to lose sight of the son of Hairy Carey, eh?” said the captain with an attack of his merry asthma. “Oh, come on, Doctor—even you must have been young once. . . .”

Young Rummie rowed the little boat energetically over the gorgeous green water. Doctor Bligh, looking down, could see half-defined shapes in the water—peacock-coloured shadows that melted before they could be realized. The little beaked garfish skidded, splintering light and spray, from the tip of one wave to another. A great heart-shaped sting-ray slid across a patch of pearl-green sand thirty feet below, with a rolling ripple of its frills. In the distance sober somersaulting fins marked the progress of three or four grampuses, wheeling in slow suspended acrobatics across the roof of their green world.

“Please *pleessa*, let me come with you to-day. Pleessa, I’m sorry to go on botherin’ you, but I can’t bear it—I can’t bear not to go-sa. . . . It may be the last chance I get, goin’ after treasure-sa. I’m *born* to go after treasure-sa—pleessa *please* give me a try-sa. . . . I’m such a resourceful feller-sa—it might just make the difference to finding the——”

“How many times am I to tell you, you young fool——” shouted Doctor Bligh, “that there’s no question of treasure? Didn’t you hear me tell you—my father was here planting pineapples and——”

“Tobacco-sa.”

“I said *pineapples*. As I told you, I am thinking of investing . . . I mean investigating. . . .” He broke off. “What’s the matter with me?” he thought irritably. “Going on lying . . . as if it was worth while explaining anything to this pink rat of a boy. What he really needs is a good whipping.” Yet, looking along the little boat at Young Rummie’s ugly shining face, bobbing backwards and forwards as he rowed, Doctor Bligh, with that inconsequence he was now coming to recognize as one of the perils of middle age, felt unexpectedly tolerant. A tooth was missing in the front of Young Rummie’s broad mouth, and somehow this chink in the otherwise tough rubber armour of his youth made Doctor Bligh conscious of the anxious, desperately expectant heart beating beneath that dirty and childish narrow singlet. As if, with the disclosure of the lost tooth, a tiny window had been opened.

“I don’ cair-sa,” said Young Rummie, after clearing his throat nervously. “I must—I *must* foller you-sa, whatever you say-sa. . . . I hope you’ll forgive me-sa—when I’ve proved me worth. . . .”

“If you want to inform yourself about pineapples under cultivation,” said Doctor Bligh, grinding his teeth with anger, “follow me, and be damned to you. I can’t stop you. Lily Island’s not my property.”

The little village of Corkscrew Bay squatted under its crooked palms and casuarinas on a bend in the narrow harbour. On the striped sand and seaweed beach, as the little boat ran ashore, white and mauve branches of coral lay among petalled shells that were like pink roses. The ragged black village children, fluttering with faded cottons, gathered on the beach to watch strangers arrive. The men of the village were standing in a group round the mate of the *Rising Day*, listening to his curses. That agitated man, his coat off, sweat running into his eyes and dripping from his chin, stood, like a defender, beside a complicated frail fortress built of pineapple crates. He was hoarsely and hopelessly exhorting the crowd of negroes to get to work. The men watched him rather plaintively and passively, as though more of the sense of what he was saying reached them through their wide wet eyes, their broad clumsy polished noses, their thick open mouths—than through the ears that leaned out from their dark skulls.

“Well, all I can say is . . .” said the mate in an exhausted voice when he saw Doctor Bligh. “Give me baboons—give me the blind pups of a cross-eyed bitch—give me half-baked clams—give me——”

“You find the islanders unintelligent?” said Doctor Bligh. “Look here, Mr. Wilkins, why don’t you keep Young Rummie to help you get these crates aboard? . . . He was sent here as a sort of guide for me, but as a matter of fact I can well spare him.”

“Please—pleessa——” Young Rummie’s thin voice was full of real panic.

“There’s only an hour’s work here,” said the mate. “I’d send the boy after you.”

“Oh, I shan’t need him.”

“Pleessa—pleessa—*pleessa*——”

“Damn you, boy—Well. . . . I’ll come back for you in an hour’s time. . . . There’s nothing—there’s *nothing* to look for. . . . You’re making a silly mistake. . . . Oh, all right then, I’ll come back—I won’t forget.”

“Hey, you Rummie,” shouted the mate with alacrity.

Free of his follower at last, Doctor Bligh strode away along a narrow path that led through the high guinea-grass. For the first time he wondered what actual steps he could take to decode the mysterious message and apply

it to the country in front of him. “Fifty thousand pounds under a Cow’s Lick.” The whole affair from beginning to end had been so far contrary to the ordered plans of his life that, for the first time in his life, plans had seemed wholly irrelevant. Here he was, on Lily Island, under a spell, the magic wording of which was—“Fifty thousand pounds under a Cow’s Lick.” Of course it was all nonsense. Surely an elderly retired doctor is free to travel when his work is done. Why should not Lily Island be as good a destination as any other for a slightly asthmatically inclined professional gentleman in search of sea air and sunlight? Doctor Bligh looked uneasily round the horizon, regretting the translucent and candid horizon of last night’s dream. Behind him was the village, scrawled with the shadows of palms and crazy huts; behind the village was a small valley pitted with pineapple holes. Round Doctor Bligh, shoulder-high, was the guinea-grass, varied here and there with dangling angular jumba beans and with prickly pears and organ-pipe cactuses. The low hills all round were furred over with frizzed brush, as evenly as negroes’ heads are capped with wool. A rather higher strip of land in front of the traveller was spiked along the skyline with century palms—some closed like giant asparagus shoots, others opened out into jejune forks and fans. Far beyond this ridge of land was a higher ridge, only one bluff of which could be seen through a cleft in the near ridge. And that far bluff—was it Doctor Bligh’s imagination?—was it perhaps an effect due to the abrupt framing in the near gorge?—the resemblance was very vague—yet *was* it so vague? . . . Doctor Bligh turned away for a moment to give his eyes a chance of blotting out their prejudice in favour of romance. The bluff, he now saw quite clearly, looked like a cow’s head and shoulders—there was a quite bovine hump behind the shoulders. . . . It was a hornless cow, to be sure, unless one counted—but that would be foolishly fanciful—those two tall century palms as horns. The throat of the cow—that narrow receding flapping pendulous throat—was very clearly suggested, thought Doctor Bligh, trying to keep quite cool and unbiased. All the same, he wished he could look at that cow’s head for a second with fresh eyes. If Young Rummie were here, one could say, “What does that bluff remind you of?” Doctor Bligh was afraid of his own judgment now. He remembered how he had deceived his imagination with his pirate-father’s stories—now, though he knew he had deceived himself, he could not say what was false and what was real in that stammering tale.

He drew in his breath as a negro woman, carrying a tall bundle on her head—a bundle crowned with boots and a trussed chicken, padded towards him round a bend in the narrow path.

“Good morning,” said Doctor Bligh.

“Ma-anin’, za.”

“Can you tell me the name of that hill?”

“Aye, za.”

“What *is* its name?”

“Aye, za.”

“Hasn’t got a name, eh?”

“Ya-azza.”

“I was just thinking how like a cow’s head it was. Did that ever strike you or your friends?”

The woman turned her head with smoothness and caution under her balancing bundle to look in the direction his finger indicated. “Ya-azza,” she said, her opaque brown eyes searching the horizon for whatever might be the object of this unintelligible buckra’s gaze.

“Like a cow—do you not think so?”

“Ca-aw, za?”

“Yes, a cow’s head. Can you see it?”

“Ya-azza.”

“You can! Can you not tell me the name of the ridge?”

“Ca-aw’s zed, za.”

“Cow’s Head? Do you really mean that the ridge is called Cow’s Head?”

“Ya-azza.”

He searched her thick simple face with his eyes. Were his ears as well as his eyes biased to the point of self-deception? “Thank you so much. Good morning.” He pushed along the path, combing the coarse yellow grass with his shins.

As he reached the slope up to the near ridge, the grass gave place to thick brush. A little breeze made all the short unkempt palms amid the brush seem to turn their backs. The path, which could barely push between the pale-stemmed bristles of the shrubs, gave a wide berth to the clumps of sisal and the century palm, with their defensive sheaves of spears, but sometimes the detour was not wide enough, and Doctor Bligh’s thin neat tussore trousers were soon torn and the plump neat legs beneath them severely scratched.



When, gasping, he reached the top of the near ridge, one thing was certain—he would not go back for Young Rummie. He had never meant very seriously to do so. He noticed that the Cow's Head had receded—had, apparently, side-slipped to quite a different point of the compass, and to a site at least twice as far away as he had expected. Without its frame, too, it was less arrestingly like—but no! it *was* like a cow's head. Between him and it lay a large lake—probably invisibly connected with the sea. Several of the ridges around this lake seemed to be paltry imitations of a cow's head too, but Doctor Bligh guiltily averted his mind from this suspicion. *His* cow, he told himself firmly, looked more like a cow than ever; it must have been a famous landmark for the pirates, as it evidently now was to the negroes. After a minute's thought, Doctor Bligh decided to walk down to the lake and then follow its western shore. As far as he could see, a broadish rocky ledge formed a more or less continuous rim to the lake; the bands of green thicket that interrupted this rocky strip seemed to him negligible from a distance. He almost ran down the slope to the water. The path he was following led straight into the lake, made no effort to veer to right or left. At its terminus lay the submerged skeleton of an old boat, with small striped fishes whisking between her ribs. Doctor Bligh began to walk along the terrace of rock beside the water. The high sun was giving a more and more breathless quality to the heat. The wind that had disturbed the palms on the ridge was still now. All the air quivered, and from the long spindling rafts of glare upon the lake, splintering spears of light were aimed to pierce the sight. Doctor Bligh found it very much more difficult than he expected, to walk along the waterside. The rock, a coral formation, was pitted with sharp-edged craters. And at every few dozen yards the rock surrendered the shore to mangroves.

Each strip of encroaching mangroves meant an obstacle of almost desperate difficulty. The mangroves sprawled in a sort of angular horizontal scaffolding over the water. Roots sloped tautly into the water, like the legs of spiders. Footholds among these roots were always slanting and slippery, and were treacherously concealed by the bright juicy disks of the leaves. The branches were breast-high. Doctor Bligh, bruised about the shins and wet to the knees, negotiated three mangrove entanglements, and then he felt that he would rather press on in the hope of finding an end to them than return by such an arduous and revolting route. Inviting stretches of firm pale rock in front tempted him with promises of better going presently. But these promises always proved to be illusory; the mangrove strips stretched wider and wider, and finally Doctor Bligh, achieving a strip of rock after an hour's frenzied battle with fifty yards of malevolent swamp roots, gave up. He sank

down almost fainting, his set sweating face buried in his hands. The heat of the sun seemed to throb about his body. He could not keep his face covered, in spite of the glare; his hands suffocated him. He decided to drink half the brandy and water he had in his flask, and to eat one of the biscuits the steward had given him. He looked about wildly as he ate. Where the rock again surrendered to the swamp, a graceful grey bird like a small crane, too young to fly, threaded itself like a silver hook among the angular lacy intricacies of the mangroves. Its parents, less innocent about the dangers of human proximity, flew in the air above it, planing with outstretched neck and legs in a tilted obtuse angle.

“I must strike inland,” thought Doctor Bligh, noticing that a promontory of dry scrub pierced the swamp to a point quite near him. Now he realized that by following the lake shore he had lost his Cow’s Head. The ridge was still there, with its two pin shapes of century palm, but perspective had completely robbed it of any suggestion of a cow. “I must strike west again across country.” Certainly the matted brush could not be more heartbreaking to walk through than the mangroves were. He crossed the intervening yard or two of swamp-growth and struggled in the clawing stubborn brush, like a fly in a spider’s web. At least, as he at first thought, he was spared the glare on the water. Then he realized that he was robbed also of the slight coolness of stirring air that belonged to the lake. He made slowly towards a twisted casuarina tree which, in that low thicket, seemed to stand like a memorial and spread a sanctuary of shade. Not only were the close-growing shrubs difficult to push through, but deep mazy pits continually waylaid the lost man’s steps—pits sometimes ten feet deep—traces of rolling seas long dried—holes made often perfectly circular by the bowling of imprisoned uneasy stones—galleries pierced by long-departed tides between one curvy cell and another. Bananas were planted in the rich black earth that lined such pits. The banana fronds, down in the pit where no wind disturbed them, were virgin and whole, like the pages of unread books, but the topmost plumes, which Doctor Bligh came to appreciate as warnings of the deep traps laid in the wilderness, were tattered and torn by exposure to the creeping hot wind. Doctor Bligh hoped that these bananas, which must have been planted by men, meant that he would presently come upon a path or a cabin. But he reached the casuarina after hours of effort without finding any further trace of men.

The tree stood on the edge of a low knoll, and its roots, mostly exposed, clung to the dusty bank like knuckles. Between the roots was a blackness—the crooked mouth of a cave. Doctor Bligh walked straight across the band of shade he had so ardently longed for, and, in a stride and two stumbles, he

was down in the cave. He found himself in a kind of antechamber in a half-light striped by gaunt and crumbling columns. Behind these columns a black passage led downward. Doctor Bligh felt in his pockets. He had a few matches—seventeen, to be exact. He was so deeply exhausted that he had but little sense, and he started down the black gallery, lighting his first match as soon as he came to the end of level ground. The passage led downward over unsteady red boulders. Some of the stones were set rolling by his tread, but he went carefully and did not fall. By the time the ground became level again, he had used five matches. He tried now to be cautious, not only in actual economy of matches, but also in economy in the glances he threw here and there into each brief dazzle. He tried not to waste glances on the fluted white ceiling, the bats, the sinuous water-carvings on the walls, the fantastic half-articulate friezes of pattern, the pendulous needles of runed coral, the pinnacled pillars aspiring from the floor. He tried to look first and last at the floor before him. It was the fourteenth match that showed a black patch on the floor immediately in front of him. He had noticed these patches before, but since they had not lain actually in his path he had passed them by without investigation. The concentration of light on this last patch seemed to be too much for the poor spirit of the match. He lit another more carefully, as he crouched on the ground. Before him he now saw an abrupt pit, showing bottomless to the scope of matchlight. Doctor Bligh, an already overstrained man, began to quake. "I must get out of this," he thought. "Why did I come down here?" and as he turned to retreat, he heard the sipping rustle of water scores of feet below in the pit. He lit another match. Behind him a ridge of rock not more than two feet across divided the fluted rims of two more pits, between which he must have walked in the fitful light without suspicion. He had one match left now.

Doctor Bligh was, after all, an old man. His whole dilemma, from the beginning of the expedition till now, had been the result of an old man's rebound into youthful irresponsibility from a life spent in arduous and precise duty. The same tired old brain that had re-read so hopefully the scribble on the fly-leaf of *Beauty's Dower*, had now failed to allocate reasonable resources of light and time in the search. Now the thin staff of romantic excitement gave way. He sank down and lay, half-huddled against the wall, for a long time in the dark.

He could hardly have slept, but he must have been sunk in a sort of trance, for when he noticed at last that a distant light shone ahead of him—how far away he could not guess—he realized that his eyes had long been fixed senselessly upon it. He shouted; his heart nearly strangled him as the raucous echoes crashed about him; a rustle began, which he diagnosed after

a moment as the bats waking in the hollows of the ceiling. The distant light did not move. He lit his last match, as an answer and an appeal to the light. No sign of recognition. Groping very cautiously on hands and knees, he felt the rim of the pit in front of him. His hand did not dare to leave the solid stone—he felt that if he should suddenly find clear space beneath his hand he would tip forward and fall headlong into terrible depths. But his hand made sure at last that the rim curved away from him, leaving a shelf several feet wide between the pit and the wall. He crawled along this, inch by inch, never trusting a first scouting hand, but verifying its discoveries with agonized and repeated pressure. He gathered no courage from his successful circumvention of this pit. His imagination bored more frightful shafts of space in every direction in which he moved his tremulous hand. But after some hours of this painful progress, the corner of a curtain of rock seemed suddenly lifted, and a powdering of stars spangled the space thus revealed. The further he crawled, the more widely did this blessed pricked doorway into freedom seem opened. The roaring of the clear sea now drowned the deadly subterranean sucking and moaning of secret channels. He identified the light he had first seen as the reflection of a star in a water-cup formed in the peak of frustrated stalagmite by a too impetuous dripping from the hanging point above it. The little crater full of water, when he reached it, seemed to accumulate more than its share of light; it almost glowed. He thought it looked as brittle and fey as a moon crater. He drank the cool water most gratefully. He tried not to quicken his painful crawl as he found himself facing an apparently unobstructed passage to the stars. There might still be traps. But at last, there he was, on the lip of a cave half-way down an overhanging cliff. The sea knocked at the under surface of a deep shelf below him. Only the stars, the moon and a giddy silvered screen of vertical stone towered above him. He ate his last biscuit, finished what he had in his flask and slept.

When he awoke, after a confused and painful sleep, it was daylight, and the first thing that he realized was the next headland. It was quite close, and it was unmistakably the neck of yesterday's Cow's Head. There was that overhanging fluted flap of stone that had, from a distance, seemed to lead so appropriately from the cow's lower jaw to its chest. The romancer had seen it from a vantage-point that had not been high enough to show him that nothing but the deep sea lay at the foot of the jut. Under the Cow's Lick—under the sea, his imagination had placed the fifty thousand pounds of his vision. Only the slow green waves shone at the foot of that bovine fantasy in stone. Doctor Bligh looked for a time at the hopeless face of the stone, feeling disillusionment pervade his heart. He saw then, pricking out of the

profile of the cliff, a pimple, a hair, a brown wart, the bows of a boat, finally the whole of a little brown fishing-boat tacking along the coast.

When the boat was within hailing distance, Doctor Bligh gave a loud cry. His voice sounded to him like the new voice of a dumb man. The boat turned towards the cliff. An old brown man was sitting in her, picking over some small fish that lay in the wash in her bottom.

“No way da-an from thar, za,” shouted the old man thinly. “You’ll ha-ave to make a dive of it. Best go ba-ack troo the ca-aive.”

Doctor Bligh, who during the first few words had been looking down appalled at the deep swinging water, when he heard the last suggestion, threw himself instantly, all askew, from the lip of the cave into the sea. After several choking centuries, he was able to breathe air instead of water. In a moment he was grasping the old man’s hand and, after a breast-bruising, shin-bruising struggle, he was in the boat, treading on a squirming fish.

“You’d best a gone ba-ack troo the ca-aive, za,” piped the old man.

“I’ll give you anything you like to get me to the Cove before high water.”

“’Z aba-at four hours sa-ail, za,” said the old man. “Yer on the wra-ang shore of Lily A-aland.”

Doctor Bligh sat in the bows, getting gradually dry, looking with incredulous distaste at his scarred and blood-caked legs—one entirely denuded of trouser from the knee down, the other clad only in tatters. He found it impossible to reconcile this sight with the fact that one month ago he had been a medical man in good standing at Monmouth. For a dreaming second it seemed to him that though the blood came, in appearance, from superficial scratches on his legs, really it flowed from a wound in his spirit that was mortal. He dozed a little, presently, and when he woke he began to believe again in a probability he had lost sight of—the hope that he had a future of fastidious old age at Monmouth in front of him—that all this nightmare of melodramatic misfortune was a thing that would pass. Never again would blood flow from this trespassing young spirit in his breast.

As the little boat made the final tack that would bring it round the ultimate headland, Doctor Bligh saw for the last time the corroded overhang that had seemed to him to join his Cow’s Head to boundless treasure below.

“Did you ever hear of a place-name like Cow’s Lick connected with any spot on this island?” he asked the old fisherman.

“Nuzz’n excep’ the Ca-aw’s Lick they fa-and the fifty tha-asand pa-and under,” said the old man.

Doctor Bligh stared at him, paralysed for a moment with astonishment. “*Did* they find Fifty Thousand Pounds under a Cow’s Lick?”

“Na-za—not just like that, they didn’. . . . It’s an a-alanders’ sayin’, that—why, ye must have heard people on the a-aland sayin’ Fifty Tha-asand Pa-and under a Ca-aw’s Lick. It’s a saying fer a piece of luck. . . . My fa-ather he tol’ me the true ta-aile aba-at that sayin’—how a man called Havens had a ca-aw, an’ ca-aw went astray da-an to beach, an’ Havens went a-lookin’ fer the ca-aw an’ fa-and ’er lickin’ at a lomp salt that got thar some way, and all aroun’ the ca-aw thar floated that grease stuff—hunreds a ya-ards of that thar grease stuff—what you call that thar grease stuff that’s worth sa moch money——?”

“Ambergris?”

“Yeah—A guess so—ambergris. . . . An’ Havens made a fortune outa what he fa-and, an’ he built a ha-ase an’ mek a sugar farm—just a ruin now, it is—near the Cove an’ he had his da-ater eddicated—pretty girl, my fa-ather useter say, but spiled wiz bookla-arnin’—though Havens was just ornery tra-ash himself—an’ she married a ja-adge in United Sta-aites. But Havens lost all his money when the sla-aives was freed by Queen Victa-aria. And that’s how the sayin’ comes, my fa-ather useter say—Fifty Thaa-asand Paa-and Under a Caa-aw’s Lick.”

“*Beauty’s Dower*,” thought Doctor Bligh! “It belonged to the pretty daughter of Heavens Sugar Farm. And my susceptible young papa. . . .” And he now saw it all as a romance after all—the last shred of the callow young Hairy Carey’s romance. He said nothing more. The little boat slid on towards the Cove. He had looked for his destination so long, yet he reached it unexpectedly. Tacking round a headland they came abruptly in sight of the *Rising Day*.

“Why—woz goin’ on?” exclaimed the old man, looking not at the ship but at the shore. A group of men stood on the green grassy seam that joined the white sand to the scrub. The old man sailed close inshore and after a moment Doctor Bligh said, “Why—there’s the skipper—there’s Mr. Wilkins—there’s Tom and Veery Joe.”

“Thar’s a ca-affin,” said the old fisherman. “It’s a buryin’.”

“Can you land me on this beach?” asked Doctor Bligh. The boat drew alongside a rough natural pier in the pockmarked rock at the curve of the

bay. As Doctor Bligh, conscious of his tattered trousers and peeling face, drew near to the rigid, Sunday-best-looking group, Captain Fink came to meet him.

“Well, I’m damned,” said Captain Fink, looking unlike himself and certainly more damned than blessed. “Where in hell did you get to, Doctor?”

“Whose grave is that?” asked Doctor Bligh.

“It’s Young Rummie’s. . . . Good Lord, poor little brute, and he’s got a mother in Cardiff and all that. . . . The kid lent a hand loading pines yesterday and Wilkins says he nearly broke his heart over it . . . seemed to think you were coming back to take him on a trip or something. . . . Good Lord, I wish you *had* happened to take him along, Doc. . . . It would have saved his life. . . . Wilkins wasn’t too hard on the little chap about the work—he was kind of sorry for him—the kid fretted so—God knows why—and anyway, there wasn’t more than an hour’s work. He consoled himself eating spoilt pineapples—the niggers say he put away over a dozen—and by midnight he was off his head—raving and screaming with pain. . . . Gosh, I tried every bleeding thing I could think of—but of course I hadn’t an idea really. . . . I thought you’d turn up any minute. I had a couple of men out all night looking for you . . . and one with a boat, up and down the coast. . . . I’m sure a doctor could have saved him. . . . There are three black parsons in this bloody hole and not one doctor—black or white. The kid died at sunrise.”

“So this was the crooked curse,” thought Doctor Bligh, forgetting that his futile search had endangered no pirate’s secret. He said nothing. He walked up the beach and stood by Young Rummie’s grave, dug just where the sand marched with the limit of the red rock-strewn earth. And as he stood, spent and strained, beside the grave, time seemed to spin about him—yesterday seemed almost within his grasp, and youth a thing returning, like a thunderstorm, against the wind. Yesterday—that freak day astray at the wrong end of his life—he saw it glamorously now—it was terribly desirable to him—and only an hour ago he had dismissed it with relief. But—oh, now—come back, deferred bright day—come back, lost gleam—lost youth. . . .

AN OUT-ISLANDER COMES IN



## AN OUT-ISLANDER COMES IN

“You’ll soon get used to it all, girlie,” said Willie. “Everything takes a bit of getting used to—that’s what I always say.” His large perspiring cheeks quivered as the Buick in which he sat quivered splashily through the storm along the main street of Coffee Town. Rose looked at the street full of strangenesses—at the rich shoes, the rich jumpers, the rich white plus-fours, the rich silken calves of the tourists seeking shelter from the storm in the doors of shops full of Hyper-Best dresses.

“One can’t get used to people who are all the same person,” said Rose. “All these people are the same one, dressed up in different funny ways. One can’t get used to a *one*. . . .”

“Folks all look like a buncha freaks when you’re new to ’em,” said Willie, who always confidently mistranslated, in a tone ten times magnified, like a faulty loud-speaker, everything that his bride said.

Still, the honour of having married an American had to be paid for somehow. Rose, a sensible though untutored girl, had realized this from the first. It was most rare for any inhabitant of Liver Island to marry any one except another inhabitant of Liver Island. Sometimes a young man crossed over from one of the Kidney Islands and chose a Liver Island bride. Apart from this, the only other island inhabited by white people within a day’s sailing of Liver Island was Tripe Key, on which only seven people lived, of whom Rose’s cousin had married the only man under fifty. But Rose had fallen right off her planet; she had married an American. Willie, from New York, had been looking for a site for a turtle-shell depot, and had found Rose. Rose had never worn silk stockings or tasted ice-cream, or used face-powder or a lipstick. Her Sunday hat was six years old; it was made of wired imitation lace and lay like a plate on the peak of her mountain of bronze hair. “Better wear nothing on ya head than that fool-thing,” said Willie. “Foller the crowd, that’s what I always say—it’s only crazy folks that try to be different. I’ll buy you a hat in Coffee Town like my sister wears, with a fake diamond swaller in the front.” So Rose had given her dear romantic Sunday hat to a younger sister, and hidden her hair in a tortured tam-o’-shanter bought at the incredible city of Coffee Town. “One-horse burg, this; give me N’York, that’s what I always say to these foreigners,” said Willie—which showed what America must be, since Coffee Town, on Bacon Island, was the great renowned capital of the Marmalado Islands.

Rose looked about Coffee Town through the stripes of the rain. In the hotel lobby, while Willie was in the bar, seeing a man he knew, Rose sat and looked about, feeling as though she were in a trance. On Liver Island, although almost all the white people had the same surname—Leggatt—the other differences between one person and another were marked and known by every one. One knew that Abraham Leggatt's John hated cats, was colour-blind, and dreamt often of his late mother; one knew that Mary Leggatt's Mary's Mollie always lost her temper when she was hungry, and had a mole on her left shoulder-blade. And if a stranger should come and say, "How like Miss Mary Leggatt is to—er—Miss Mary Leggatt—I mean the other one, *not* the one who lives on Bay Street . . ." any inhabitant of Liver Island would have looked at him in astonishment as though at an imbecile. Nobody on Liver Island *could* be like any one else, except in name. Nobody, for instance, shared common catchwords. Liver Islanders didn't talk enough for that. They said *Ah* with an upward inflexion when they meant *yes*, and a downward *Ah* when they meant *no*. Between *Ah* and *Ah* they only stated facts about birth, death, marriage, religion, food, turtles and sponges. But here in Coffee Town, every one seemed to have a different name and yet to be the same person. The tourists stood about the lobby uttering elaborate forms of words in imitation of one another, and yet expressing no facts. "I said, see here, son, I'm a man who . . . What I always say is. . . . That's what I always say. . . . It's a long time between drinks, as the Governor of North Carolina. . . . You ladies are all alike . . . it's the *principle* of the thing I care about. . . . I always say. . . ."

Here was Willie coming towards her, his large opaque brown eyes rolling through horn-rimmed glasses, his beaked nose sniffing this way and that. Rose waved her umbrella at him with rather an out-island expansiveness. Willie looked politely but stonily at her and turned his little fat eagle's nose towards another woman. Good gracious—it was not Willie, after all—he wore Willie's clothes and Willie's nose but he was not Willie. *Here* was Willie, coming now—oh no, that one was wearing white plus-fours and a flame-coloured pullover; Willie couldn't have changed his clothes in the bar. Ah—here was the real authentic Willie—how absurd not to have been sure of one's own husband—though only a two days' husband to be sure. Willie had seemed to be the most *different* person in the world on Liver Island, but here in Coffee Town, every one seemed to be different in the same way.

"Well, girlie, bin kinda lonesome? I couldn't come sooner; there was a guy there who had a very stimulating line of high-grade information about a new material for toilet goods called rubberine something or other; never

pass up a chance to get education, that's what I always say. I didn't take but two highballs, but I've got plenty of the best on my hip. Be prepared for a rainy day, that's what I always say."

"Well, you couldn't have a rainier day than this," said Rose happily, seizing his arm affectionately and leading him to the window.

"Smart baby," laughed Willie. "Knows what she wants and wants it right now. But we haven't got time now, not even for a quick one, cutie, we gotta beat it. The ship can't come into harbour—it's too rough; we gotta get to the tender at South Bay by four."

The wind whined through the flapping chinks of the car's hood as they drove between agitated shockheaded palm groves. From under the wheels came the sharp sound of cloven pools of water.

"Too bad—this gale," said Willie. "I guess we gotta bum trip ahead of us, girlie. But what can't be cured must be endured—that's what I always say."

A perfect suburb of cars had sprung up beside the short pier at South Bay. Scores of stoutish men in grey overcoats and grey hats and expensive sporting shoes—as though all dressed by one divine impulse—stood on the pier watching the sailors' efforts to control the violent movements of several lifeboats. Scores of slim women in biscuit-coloured coats, and brown hats nailed to the skull with diamond ornaments, and thick legs encased in silk, and wine-coloured lips below chalk noses, crouched in the pier shelter. Luggage, in dwindling mountains on the pier, was being tumbled precariously into the leaping boats. "The tender can't come right up to the pier in this sea," said Willie. "Ah, well, this is going to be one bum party." He then mingled with a crowd of other perfect imitations of himself on the pier, and said with them, "You c'n take it from me . . . it's the *principle* of the thing . . . these fellers oughta . . . don't know their own business, that's what I always say. . . ."

Three hours passed, while restive boats full of luggage and passengers bounded with difficulty back and forth. A good many of the waiting male passengers got drunk. The women and children did not, because they had to keep sober enough to be protected from the dangers of the embarkation by their reeling husbands and fathers. A great deal of sobriety was needed for this, as Rose found when it was her turn to leap into the pitching boat from the pier-head. "Weddle I say *jum*," said Willie—was it Willie?—holding her awkwardly and painfully by the upper arm. "Don' *jum* till I say *jum*, f'godsek. . . ." Another Willie, on the bucking edge of the boat below, held

out his arms. The boat rose violently to meet her, all askew. “Jum . . . jump. . . jum. . .” Rose jumped; she was torn from one Willie, was in the arms of another, was passed to a third. She was sitting in the boat. Great slaty waves shut out the shore; the sky reeled; a distant lighthouse whisked a feather of light across the dingy distance till a near wave leapt up and obliterated it.

Rose, an out-islander, was well accustomed to small boats, and to getting wet at the whim of waves. It was the tender that alarmed her, and the distant liner frightened her still more. She had never been in a steamer before—or indeed in anything inexplicably propelled, until yesterday when the Buick carried her across Coffee Town. She watched for the tender intermittently from viewpoints on the tottering peaks of waves. It was nearly dark. The tender looked like a gold-toothed snarl, the far liner like a sneer of lights. She sat feeling sick with fright, wedged tightly in a row of elaborately undaunted women; the bones she sat on seemed to be shifted by some insane pull of gravity inside her wedged flesh, as the boat pitched this way and that. Opposite to her was Willie, and there, two women down on her left, was another unmistakable Willie. In the whirl and the dusk she could, uneasily, see other Willies grouped in the stern. As the boat twitched itself skilfully parallel with the ribs of the tender, Rose realized that the larger vessel was lined with Willies. She felt altogether alone in the midst of this superfluity, and began to cry unobtrusively. Several Willies helped her from the lifeboat. She had quite given up trying to distinguish the right one. They were all kind. Two of them sat down beside her on a bench on the tender. “Feeling kinda lonesome, girlie?” said one, and the other said, “I gotta toothful of the best on my hip. Always hope for the best and be prepared for the worst—that’s what I always say.”

“Why did he say *I*—not *we*?” wondered Rose vaguely.

The tender rose and fell with energy but with more dignity than the little boat. The wind whined between canvas screens. There was a stir among the passengers. “Where is she?” Every one but Rose and one of her immediate Willies moved to the tender’s side. The other Willie came back and said, “Lifeboat’s engine stalled—she’s being blown out to sea. Fourteen passengers on board of her—but don’t get rattled, little lady—they’ll be all right.” Rose, chilled and exhausted, was not at all rattled about the endangered boat; among so many Willies it seemed that some could be spared.

Hurrying clouds tore themselves to shreds on the horn of a crescent moon. The sea tossed and jostled Rose and a tenderful of Willies. Rose was

now, as far as appearances went, the only woman on board. The other women had all shrunk into cracks and crannies of the vessel. Around Rose lay, sat, stood, waved and reeled Willies in all attitudes, at all stages of synthetic sobriety. A line of them leaned against the rail, watching the search for the stray lifeboat, commenting one to another, "Why don't they . . . if I was them . . . know their own business . . . I said to the captain, say, listen, cap, why don't you . . .? He had to admit afterwards, say, listen, he said, that sure was some good advice you handed . . . that's what I always say . . . I just said, say, listen. . . ."

The thick clumsy blade of the tender's searchlight lashed out through the dark, pricking a rock, a flare of spray, a distant palm tree, a searching lifeboat, with light like a quick short dream.

"Found—found—found," said all the Willies suddenly. "Gee—found 'em at last. . . . I knoo they would . . . if they done that right at the start. . . . I said, say, listen, cap . . . isn't that fine? . . . I guess the other boat's picked 'em up. . . . I guess Ed's glad he had a droppa the best on the hip. . . . Be prepared for the worst, that's what I always say. . . ."

Rose, though cramped and cold, was half asleep on her bench. No less than six faithful Willies now guarded her rest, each with a wad of gum inside his large soft cheek, each watching Rose kindly through horn-rimmed glasses. When the tender, drunkenly approaching her mother-ship, ran impetuously into her on an irresistible wave, breaking off large portions of her superstructure, quite a dozen Willies snatched Rose from under a shower of splintered wood. The force of the gangway, craning wildly from the pitching liner to the rolling tender, was broken by the intervening figures of thirty Willies, who threw themselves between it and Rose.

In the liner at last, the passages echoed with the voices of a chorus of Willies asking where was the state-room of Mrs. Willie Gold. Rose felt swallowed up, irrevocably digested, by this monster full of Willies. She rushed into a cabin and sat weeping on the bed. The cabin, arranged by a cabin steward who was himself a flawless Willie, looked, though she was too ignorant to know it, like a cabin steward's ideal cabin—unsleepable-in apple-pie beds—undrinkable-out-of upside-down water-glasses—unwashable-in disappearing basin—unsittable-on folded camp-stool—unhangable-in pegless wardrobe—all bleakly neat, and designed to make the passenger feel nothing but an uncouth intrusion. But Rose disarranged the bed by crying into the pillow. The Willies squeezed in embarrassment and suspended chivalry at the door.

“She’s kinda lonesome, I guess . . . tired . . . no wonder . . . you ladies aren’t used to. . . Wait, sister, I guess I still gotta toothful of the best. . .”

Rose looked at them wildly, pressing in, pressing out, peering short-sightedly over one another’s shoulders, all anxious, kind, stoutish, smooth, all spectacled, all with grey overcoats on. And one of them said, “Why, say, listen, girlie, I bin looking everywhere for you. . .”

“Aw, hell, Rosie, what’s eating you?” added Willie, unclasping his bride’s arms from the neck of the wrong Willie. “She’s an out-island girl . . . she don’t know much about the ways of civilized folks yet . . . everything takes a bit of getting used to, that’s what I always say. . .”

# ON THE CONTRARY

## ON THE CONTRARY

Leonard Lumley had some very good ideas for keeping cool in the Red Sea. "Wear *wool* next the skin," he said, "and drink nothing but very hot tea. . . ." He had many such ideas, but no one could be absolutely certain that he practised what he preached. Hot tea was not served, for instance, in the bar, where Leonard spent a good deal of his time, and it seemed that he had lost his only collar-stud, so that his shirt-collar flapped open in defiance of his dictum that Closed Collars were Coolest. However, the very contrariness of his views was impressive, and Leonard himself was a very impressive, though rather stout, young man. Several people trusted him so much that they went about for a day or two in thick Jaegers, looking like kettles boiling over. Miss Dancey admired him so much that she must have lost several pints in weight, between Suez and Perim.

Leonard, instinctively aware that all that he could say was safe in Miss Dancey's ear, sat very often at the foot of her deck-chair—indeed partly *on* her feet, since he was of spreading figure—but spiritually, as he knew, their positions were reversed! *His* were the feet that were sat at. He believed that every man should have a profession, he would tell her—but not before he is forty. A man should afford himself leisure while he is young and work when he is old.

"Oh—*oh*, what an eggstrawdinarily interesting idea," said Miss Dancey.

Leisure is only useful to the young, according to Leonard Lumley; after forty a man should begin to work, having nothing better to do, and should work harder and harder until the age of ninety or so, when death, the supremely full-time job, should interrupt him at his desk or in the pulpit or on his charger riding into battle or at his stethoscope or what not. For, though Mr. Lumley was just over thirty-five and would soon come to the end of his period of leisure, he had not yet decided on the occupation that would most fruitfully employ his declining years.

"Oh—*oh*—a *doctor*," suggested Miss Dancey. "Doctors are *magnificent*, I think—perfect *saints*. . . ."

"On the contrary," said Leonard, to whose lips this phrase rose almost automatically. "The doctor's profession is the least noble of any. A stockbroker is more saintly than a doctor."

"Oh—*oh*—not *really*—do, *do* tell me why. . . ."



“Well, it’s to a doctor’s interest, you must remember, to live in a sickly world, and also—er—well, if you knew as much about doctors and stockbrokers as I do. . . .”

“Oh—*oh*—” breathed Miss Dancey. “Then *why* not be a *stockbroker*? Then you’d be both *rich* and *saintly*. . . .”

“On the contrary,” replied Leonard. “Stockbrokers never make money. Not a penny. They always die in the workhouse.”

“Oh—*oh*—how eggstrawdinary that is. . . . Can you *explain* it to me?”

“Well, you can take it from me,” said Leonard. And she did. Stockbrokers and doctors being thus thrust beyond the pale, she tried soldiers, clergymen, barristers . . . imagining herself the wife of each in turn. But all, it seemed, were not only unsuitable but impossible; soldiers were slaves, clergymen’s inhibitions invariably landed them in lunatic asylums, barristers, being always corrupt, finished up in gaol.

“*Sailors*, then,” whispered Miss Dancey, a trifle discouraged. “Such *breezy, healthy darlings*, sailors. . . .”

“On the contrary,” said Leonard. “I can always see in a sailor’s eye that introspective, scarcely sane look that tells of a life spent within unnaturally narrow limits. Show me a sailor and I’ll show you a potential homicidal hysteric.”

“Oh, Lord!” said a voice near them.

Leonard looked round, annoyed, to see who this might be that so impertinently appealed from his authority to a Higher Power. He saw Mr. Hospice, s.s. *Meritoria*’s third officer, pausing in a walk round the deck with some unknown fellow-homicidal-hysteric of minor rank.

“Oh—*oh*—Mr. Hospice,” said Miss Dancey. “I’m learning *such* a *lot* of new things.” (There had been a difference of opinion among the passengers as to whether Miss Dancey ever intended sarcasm. Fortunately for her popularity, however, it was finally proved that she never did.)

“Thplendid,” said Mr. Hospice. “Thorry I interrupted. I couldn’t help overhearing Mithter Lumley’th latht remark, and it thurprithed me rather. Thorry.” And he and his friend strode away down the deck.

Mr. Lumley, who whole-heartedly despised the thin undersized third officer, was beginning to tell Miss Dancey how perfect an example was this Hospice of all the Lumley theories—when—something happened.

Really, for the first two or three minutes, the passengers could hardly tell what had happened. It was like an earthquake reversed—a sort of lurch from regular movement into stillness. It had the same deeply disturbing effect on the nerves as has an earthquake—gave feet that had learned to trust their foothold a sense of betrayal. The ship, after a futile churning of propellers, was motionless, but listed very slightly. Passengers streamed out of the smoking-room, to ask Leonard what had happened.

The moonlight, which had long been exhibiting a silver panorama of sea to no audience, now attracted general attention. Everybody crowded to the rail, trying, with anxious gimlet eyes, to bore through the curiously substantial silvered air. Every one expected to see—what? A rock? A whale? Some unthinkable menace? Something, at any rate, to write to one's horrified family about from Colombo. Perhaps, even, something that would get into the papers and enable them all to be called Survivors. But there was nothing to be seen except calm sea and, a mile or so away—by the very keen-sighted—very low unobtrusive land.

“*Don't* look over the rail,” rang Leonard's commanding voice. “In danger, the best thing is *not* to know the worst. Now I propose we all sit down on the deck and play some silly game like Old Maid or something. Better than singing Nearer My God to Thee, what?”

“Oh—*oh*,” quavered Miss Dancey. “Then there really *is* danger?”

“Who's got playing-cards on the spot?” asked Leonard. “Hi, don't go mooning over the rail there, I tell you. Turn your eyes inboard, everybody, and remember you're English.”

“Oh—*oh*—is there anything very *terrible* to be seen over the rail?” asked Miss Dancey hoarsely.

“Cards—cards—cards,” called Leonard gaily.

“Yipp-i-yaddy,” echoed Mr. Hospice, appearing from the direction of the bridge. “We're aground.”

“Don't make such a fuss, man,” said Leonard sharply. “You—an officer—ought to know better than to frighten the ladies like that. But we're not going to be frightened, are we?” he added, looking lovingly at his flock—of which Miss Dancey was the bell-wether. “Not a bit frightened. We're going to play Old Maid sitting on the deck. What a lark!”

“Oh, for the Lord'th thake, don't be tho dam *brave*,” said Mr. Hospice in a low voice. He added more loudly, “We're aground—on thand—till high tide to-morrow morning. No danger whatever.”

Only a dread of being ridiculous restrained Leonard from strangling Mr. Hospice on the spot. For, unfortunately for the landsman, words spoken from above the brassy buttons of a uniform had a completely soothing effect on the listeners. Nobody even dreamed of playing Old Maid. Everybody went back to interrupted bridge and poker. Everybody in due course went to bed and to sleep—though every one kept, as it were, one ear awake for the sound of a change in the ship's condition.

There was no change. Promenaders before breakfast saw still the same sluggish sea, the same sullen low land. Even the jellyfish looked as if they had been there for generations. Leonard was, by the mercy of his gods, enabled to say at breakfast, "I told you so. . . . Off at high tide indeed. . . . Didn't I say that little shrimp of a third officer didn't know his job?"

Meeting Mr. Hospice on deck after breakfast, he said acidly, "In spite of your hopeful promise, Mr. Hospice, we're still aground."

"Why, by jove—*tho* we are!" exclaimed Mr. Hospice blithely.

Leonard had no shyness of asking captains questions. The bluff and buttony spotlessness of captains imposed no humility on him. He felt himself the *moral* captain of every ship he travelled in. Actual captains were sometimes a little irritated by his assumption of a constant right to claim *tête-à-têtes* with them, but Leonard never observed this irritation. The captain of the *Meritoria* admitted, a little fretfully, on being buttonholed by Leonard, that the ship of which they shared the command had taken a firmer seat on the sand than had at first been supposed. "It'll be a matter of shifting cargo," said the captain, as he abruptly took flight.

"It'll be a matter of shifting cargo," retailed Leonard to his flock on deck. "We shall be here—oh . . . er . . . well . . . quite a time. . . ."

"Oh—*oh*—quite a *time*?" echoed Miss Dancey. "What would happen if the sea got rough? The ship would break up. Like in *Robinson Crusoe*."

"On the contrary," said Leonard. "The waves would help to jerk us off—but that's a technical question and I won't go into it now. The—er—south-west typhoon isn't due at this time of year. . . ." Even his hopeful ear detected a flaw in his omniscience here, so he changed the subject. "What do you all say to my suggestion to the captain that we passengers go ashore for the day? Just to get out of the way while they're shifting cargo."

"It would be dam hot," said Bertie Briggs, a slightly mutinous male lamb of his flock, looking at the scarred, heat-dazzled line of land.

“On the contrary,” said Leonard. “It would be far cooler than in the ship. I’ve spent years of my life in the tropics and you can take it from me that the way to keep cool in a hot climate is to *keep out* of whatever breeze there is. Directly I take over a house in India, I immediately scrap all punkahs and electric fans. Immediately. ‘Take the beastly things away,’ I say to the servants. ‘I’m not going to sit and catch pneumonia under those fancy gadgets like a callow tourist. . . .’”

A callow tourist! Every tourist within earshot shuddered, shocked at such an idea. For a tourist to behave like a tourist—how degrading! About twenty tourist passengers felt obliged to disprove their shameful touristhood by consenting to an expedition to the windless shore, if it could be arranged.

Leonard and Miss Dancey had some difficulty in finding the captain. “These sailors simply don’t know their job,” he said to her as they followed rumours of the captain all over the ship. “Look at this so-called captain—gets his ship into a hole like this, and then disappears—can’t be found, it seems, by any of his subordinates. Why, anything might happen—and yet nobody knows where to lay their hands on the man supposed to be responsible.”

“Oh—*oh*—*might* anything happen?”

They finally ran the captain to earth in the chart-room. “I’m afraid, Miss Dancey, I can’t invite passengers to come and see me here—” he began, but Leonard managed, by talking in a very loud voice, to explain the object of their visit. The captain’s attention was caught. “Well,” he said, on a note of hope, “I can’t think why you should want to go to a burnt-up hole like that, but if you *do* want to—far be it from me. . . . We shall probably spend the day shifting cargo and get off at high tide early to-morrow. You going too, little Miss Dancey? Well, ladies do certainly have some odd fancies. I’ll send my third officer, Mr. Hospice, to undertake the expedition.”

“Oh, I’ll undertake the expedition all right, captain,” said Leonard.

“God help it, I know you will,” replied the captain with unexpected vigour. “Let’s say, then, that Mr. Hospice will *overtake* the *undertaker*. . . . Ha-ha. He’ll have the boat ready in half an hour’s time. I’m afraid I’m busy now. Good-bye. Enjoy yourselves.”

“All ships’ captains suffer from a superiority complex,” said Leonard, looking a little ruffled as he helped Miss Dancey down the companionway. “They seem to think their authority is supreme.”

“Oh—*oh*—*so* they do. . . . But *isn’t* it—on board their own ship?”

“On the contrary. In these days of trades unions, the captain is the slave of the humblest stoker on board.”

“Oh—*oh—really?* Then oughtn’t we to have gone and asked the humblest stoker on board if we might. . .?”

Really Miss Dancey was almost silly sometimes, thought Leonard.

However, as the boat, bristling with twenty passengers, was rowed to shore, he felt the joy of creation and domination—even though Mr. Hospice was ostensibly in charge—for certainly no other than Leonard Lumley had led out these bleating Israelites from their Egypt—had set the strong machinery of these rowing Lascars’ arms in motion.

The most beautiful moment of the expedition was the moment of landing. As the wrinkled sea-bottom, sloping lightly upwards under blue space, stopped being sea-bottom and became Arabia—as the keel of the boat gently grooved the ochre sand, it seemed to all the adventurers that they were about to do something wholly new for the first time. In marking that dazzling virgin beach with their feet, they would print some mystic and undreamt-of word on the only really blank page their eyes had ever rested on. One by one they jumped out of their boat, murmuring or shrilling their astonishment. The shore—the whole land as far as eye could see—seemed to be newly created by some brusque movement of the earth, like a great nut newly cracked in haphazard fragments. Jagged rocks lay lightly on the sand; nothing was embedded or rooted. The very vegetation was only laid on the sand’s surface in the form of large round rolling transparencies of dried tangled shrub—like ogres’ thistledowns blown from far roots by some dusty long-dead wind. The uncouth newly-broken rocks were sparsely scattered about the shore, were grouped into a crazy Stonehenge just about highwater mark, and, a little further inland still, were built into a long ridge which had acted as a kind of dam for the low-blown, shifting, sifting sand from the desert. The horizon, therefore, was very close. The Magnificent Infinities which Leonard had promised his flock were shut away by this wave of rock and sand.

“Oh—*oh—*,” cried Miss Dancey. “How eggstrawdinarily eggciting it all is. So *dangerous*-looking, kind of. I believe I saw a man’s head behind that rock. I suppose this country is *crammed* with *sheiks*.”

“On the contrary,” said Leonard. “You may take it from me that there isn’t a living soul within three hundred miles.”

As he spoke, a young dark boy, almost naked, stepped out from behind a rock where he had been hiding to watch the landing of the strangers.

“—Except, of course,” added Leonard with some presence of mind, “a few fisher families scattered along the coast.”

“I suppose they’re practically savages,” said elderly Mrs. Wilkins, looking dubiously at the morose child.

“On the contrary. Like all simple peoples, they are extremely friendly. They haven’t learned to distrust strangers.” He held out his hand with a coin in it. The simple boy seized a rock and threw it at the group—fortunately unskilfully—before he ran away shouting something that, one feared, was an Arabian curse.

“Well, well,” said Leonard, “boys will be boys all the world over. Now, everybody—let’s *enjoy* ourselves. . . . Isn’t it *good* to feel the solid earth under our feet again?”

“Yes *and* no,” said Mr. Briggs rather impudently. “The solid earth is almost burning the soles off my shoes. If you’d told me what we were in for, I’d have brought a pair of stilts along. What’s the next move?”

“*My* next move is into the shade of that pile of rocks,” said Mrs. Wilkins, who was rather stout. “It must be cooler there.”

“On the contrary. . . .” But Leonard’s flock, showing a disquieting independence, moved away from him as one lamb, towards the strip of red quivering shadow.

“We’d better have our cool drinkth now or never,” said Mr. Hospice, who had been superintending two cross-looking stewards in the removal of several hampers into the shade. “The ithed lemonade’ll be hot toddy thoon.”

“I strongly disapprove of iced drinks in hot weather,” began Leonard. “I have often——”

“Oh, thplendid,” said Mr. Hospice. “Tho much more for the retht of uth.”

There was nothing for Leonard to do but to follow the party to the strip of shade. It was a narrow strip, growing narrower, and they were obliged to sit in a long row to enjoy it. The sand here certainly felt cool in contrast to the baked shore. Mrs. Wilkins said, “Really, this is quite pleasant,” in a tone of surprise.

“Yes *and* no,” grumbled Mr. Briggs, for at that moment the flies discovered the party.

“I wonder how long we can thtick thith out,” said Mr. Hospice cheerfully.

Nobody answered, but every one—even Leonard—silently wished that it would not seem ridiculous to leave Arabia after a visit of only nine minutes.

“Oh—*oh*—it’s an *adventure*, anyway,” said Miss Dancey.

“On the contrary. It is a popular fallacy that adventure is found in wild remote places like this. You can take it from me that there is more chance of adventure in the Strand, London, than in the whole of the Arabian desert.”

His luck seemed to be out to-day, for as he finished speaking a startling adventure began happening to them, that certainly would have been unlikely in the Strand. A torrent of dirty and wild-looking men began streaming round from behind the ridge of rocks against which they sat. All were shouting—not apparently to any one in particular—and each carried a naked dagger or a kind of a billhook. They came and stood in front of the long line of seated picnickers—and continued coming—more and more of them—until the travellers’ view of the sea was completely shut out. The heat and smell, within this human stockade, became almost unbearable.

“My hat,” said Mr. Hospice, standing up. “The the beggarth don’t look any too friendly.”

“On the contrary,” said Leonard, “they are no doubt friendly fisherfolk, inviting us to visit their village. I see evidences of native industries. Look at the coloured plaited leather round the hilts of their weapons.”

“Look at their toes,” said Bertie Briggs. “All eaten away.”

Their feet were the easiest part of them to look at, since all the lookers were seated. To stand up against the overhanging boulders, one would have to stand almost nose to nose with the visitors.

“I don’t want to look at anything,” said Mrs. Wilkins. “I shall be sick in a minute.”

Since Mr. Hospice was standing, the Arabs made the mistake of supposing that he was the travellers’ mouthpiece, especially as he spoke a little Arabic. So Leonard sat back trying to smile subtly, like a general leaving the drudgery to his aide-de-camp.

“Well, well,” said Mr. Hospice, after a long bellowing talk with the head man, who wore red and sandy striped draperies. “It theemth thethe beggarth want thome of our good money off uth. No leth than twenty poundth, in fact.”

“Whatever for?” asked Mrs. Wilkins, letting go of her nose for the purpose.

“Well, thtrangely enough, for the privilege of going back on board.”

“Oh—*oh*—are they brigands?” asked Miss Dancey.

“Thomething like it, I’m afraid. But we’re perfectly thafe, really. Only I thuppothe there’th nothing for it but to pay up.”

“On the contrary,” began Leonard, but Mr. Briggs interrupted him, “Can’t we knock some of ’em down and run for it? The’yve got no firearms.”

“Oh—*oh*—*don’t* talk like that. . . . I’m going to faint,” cried Miss Dancey, and she certainly began to cant alarmingly towards Leonard’s shoulder.

“I’ve got eight and sixpence,” said a desiccated Major. Apart from this sum, no one had more than a shilling or so.

“Well, talk—talk, my dear fellow,” said Leonard to Mr. Hospice. “Talk, to gain time while I think out a plan of action. *Bargain* with the brutes. Bargaining is the essence of Oriental business.”

“Very potibly it ith,” agreed Mr. Hospice. “I’ve been bargaining like hell. They athked forty firtht—they now conthent to take twenty. No amount of bargaining’ll bring ’em down from twenty poundth to theventeen and thixpenthe—which ith all we’ve got.”

“Let *me* talk to them,” said Leonard, heaving himself to his feet among the crowding draperies of the Arabs. They began laughing coarsely, for some obscure reason expecting entertainment. “Now then, you scoundrels,” he shouted authoritatively. But he stopped because a lean black hand darted forward and removed his pince-nez from his nose, snapping the little chain that tethered them to his bosom. “Here—I say—drop it—this is too much—this is robbery.”

But the pince-nez were by now straddling a broad black nose at least twenty noses away from their owner’s.



“Better rethign ourthelveh, I’m afraid,” said Mr. Hospice. “They want me to go back to the ship and get the money, and I think I’d better, on the whole. You’ll be quite thafe, ath long ath you don’t annoy them. You’re *money* to them.”

“So damned ignominious,” said Mr. Briggs.

But Leonard did not feel ignominious, though his eyes, without their glasses, had rather a pink wincing look. “Yes, go back,” he said haughtily, “and ask the captain from me to send a party of armed men—all the arms he has, and——”

But Mr. Hospice was hurrying down the beach to where the Lascars—all agog—were waiting in the boat.

“I’d like to see the captain’s face when he gets my message,” said Leonard, looking down his line of wilting followers. “He’ll agree with me, of course, that an armed demonstration would be a better course than tamely paying up.”

“Oh—*oh*—” wailed Miss Dancey. “But if these brigands see men with guns coming, they’ll cut our throats—I’m sure of it. They’ve got us so squeezed up against this cliff.”

“On the contrary,” said Leonard. “We have a strategic position. An Englishman with his back to the wall is the toughest man to beat on God’s earth, you can take it from me.”

“Oh—*oh*—you’re so *brave*. . . . I wish I was *brave*. . . .”

“I wish I had a severe cold in the head,” said Mrs. Wilkins.

Now that Mr. Hospice was gone, the robbers seemed to recognize Leonard’s leadership, though in no very flattering way. They made him the butt of their simple wit, as he stood among them, trying to trip him up with their sinuous black feet, pushing his hat over his nose, tweaking his coat, putting their hands in his pockets and even trying to pinch his ear. From above, a shaggy head looking over a split boulder—like holly on the top of a partly eaten plum-pudding—was engaged in spitting assiduously down on to the captives. Leonard haughtily moved out of the range of this marksman.

“Better stand in the shade, Lumley,” said the Major. “You’re the only one of us without a topee or a sunshade.”

“On the contrary,” said Leonard grimly. “The topee is the cause of more cases of sunstroke than . . . you can take it from me. . . . Oh, *when* is this blasted little sailor coming back? The inefficiency of sailors is simply—” He

covered his burst of petulance with—"I'm longing to have a dozen armed men behind me and put these damned niggers in their places. . . . Excuse my language, ladies."

"Oh—*oh*—you are so *brave*. . . ."

"I can see a boat—no, *two* boats, leaving the ship now," said Mr. Briggs.

"Two boats—that means forty men," said Leonard. "I knew the captain would agree with me. Pay up, indeed—what nonsense!"

There was a pause and then Mr. Briggs said, "The boats are empty, except for Hospice and the men rowing."

"On the contrary," said Leonard, "the armed men are all crouching out of sight. Even Hospice would have too much sense to show his hand too soon."

"The two boats are separating now," continued Mr. Briggs. "One's going to land right away down the beach. Very mysterious."

"Not in the least," said Leonard. "They understood my suggestions perfectly. Lord, I wish I could get my glasses back so that I could see the fun."

But there was no fun to see. The two boats ran ashore about a hundred yards apart, and Mr. Hospice alone jumped out of the nearest one. Even the robbers listened as he began shouting. His voice reached his friends across the hot air with a brittle, almost microphonic sound. "I'm going to walk thlowly up the beach while you walk thlowly down to that further boat. I'll thet the pathe. You mutht all be thafe in the boat by the time I reach the niggerth."

"Must! Must!" exclaimed Leonard furiously. "What does he mean—*must*? Are we to trot about the beach at his orders like a flock of sheep? I shan't move a step."

"Well, I shall," said the Major. "And I advise the ladies. . . ."

But the ladies needed no advice; they were already gingerly filing between the bars of their living prison. A few robbers walked with them, shuffling along packed closely against their victims, treading on their heels, nudging their ribs, thrusting their chins into their back hair—meaning no harm but impelled to this almost lover-like contiguity by their naïve curiosity.

"Not too fatht," shrilled Mr. Hospice. "Keep all together, and watch me." He shouted in pidgin Arabic to the robbers. A group of them left the

picnickers and started to meet him, but he at once retreated towards the boat. The Arabs, understanding the position, stood still, watching their victims receding, their reward approaching. Leonard stood sullenly against the rock, wondering what gesture of valour and authority remained to him to make.

“Oh—*oh*—Mr. Lumley,” Miss Dancey called back. “*Don’t* stay there by yourself. . . . You’ll be *killed*.”

“I must stand by Hospice,” said Leonard. This idea occurred to him one second before he put it into words.

The retreat and approach, regulated to synchronize, were slow, but at last the picnickers were safe in the boat and Mr. Hospice reached the robber group.

“Good Lord, Mithter Lumley—you thtill here? Why didn’t you go with the otherth?”

“Because I’m a man and not a sheep.”

Mr. Hospice said nothing! He was counting out money into the chief robber’s hand. All the Arabs wanted to look at the money; they craned and tiptoed behind each other like excited children. Leonard stood outside the group, trying to keep his looks in keeping with his latest gesture—“Standing By a Fellow Man.” The robbers, finding themselves all bowed by curiosity and avarice to one centre, suddenly awoke to the fact that in the messenger they had another hostage. Why not send Leonard back to the ship for another twenty pounds ransom? And then seize Leonard and send the sailor. What a delightfully easy way of making money, thought the simple fellows. Holding Mr. Hospice by every outlying fold in his clothes, they expounded their idea to him, pointing vigorously to Leonard. But just as Leonard was wondering what this (probably flattering) attention meant, Mr. Hospice, lithe as a fish, burst himself out of his clawed-at coat and kicked the robber chief in the stomach.

“Run for it, Lumley,” he shrieked—and ran.

Mr. Leonard Lumley’s legs ran after him, bearing his reluctant body which still throbbed with the thought—“An Englishman never turns his back on danger.” Luckily, his legs knew better. They had never run so fast since they had had the honour of carrying Leonard.

A few of the Arabs, rather half-heartedly, pursued the fugitives, but most of them at once relinquished their too-complex plan of seizing alternate hostages and earning ransom after ransom to infinity. They had had a remunerative morning’s work, after all. Some of them came, shouting

uncertainly, to the sea's edge, but Mr. Hospice and Leonard were being rowed swiftly away. The picnickers were already safe on board the *Meritoria*.

"I thought there'd be trouble," panted Leonard. "As it turned out, I was quite right to stay and back you up."

"Very noble of you, I'm thure."

"I can't imagine why you didn't bring back a few guns and men as I told you to."

"My dear thir, thothe bruteth would have cut all your throath at the firth shot. They had you penned up like pigth in a thtye. Twenty poundth for the lot of you wath only a pound apiethe, after all. Worth that, to get free without bloodshed. Tho the Thkipper thought, at leatht."

"Pigs in a styee." Leonard was struck dumb by the outrageous description. What a detestable young man this was! He little knew that the kind Mr. Hospice was suppressing the captain's actual message—"Can't you arrange to pay up nineteen pounds nineteen shillings and elevenpence—and let 'em keep that dam-fool Lumley?"

Leonard and Mr. Hospice, on the deck of the *Meritoria*, found themselves the centre of a frenzied group of ex-picnickers and their friends. "Oh—*oh*—OH—*what* an adventure."

"On the contrary—" began Leonard—but his world suddenly played him false. It wavered, whirled, slipped upward, crashed, as he fell flat on the deck in the midst of his flock. Before he became quite unconscious, he heard two voices—good and evil—like the voices described by poets as A Voice and Another Voice.

"Oh—*oh*—poor *darling* Mr. Lumley—he's been so *wonderful*. . . ."

"Sunstroke. That's what comes of being such a —— fool as not to wear a topee. . . ."

"On the contrary," gargled Leonard—but he was obliged to reserve his retort for several days. And by that time it was not necessary, for Leonard's convalescence was brightened by the discovery that it was the intention of his flock to present him with a solid silver cigarette-case, in recognition of his splendid behaviour and competent leadership in the hour of danger. Even Mr. Hospice was to be given a pair of enamel cuff-links.

# THE DESERT ISLANDER

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Constantine hopefully followed the Chinese servant through the unknown house. He felt hopeful of success in his plan of begging this Englishman for help, for he knew that an Englishman, alone among people of a different colour (as this Englishman was alone in this South China town), treated the helping of stray white men almost as part of the White Man's Burden. But even without this claim of one lonely white man upon another, Constantine would have felt hopeful. He knew himself to be a man of compelling manner in spite of his ugly, too long face, and his ugly, too short legs.

As Constantine stumped in on his hobnailed soles, Mr. White—who was evidently not a very tactful man—said, “Oh, are you *another* deserter from the Foreign Legion?”

“I am Constantine Andreievitch Soloviev,” said Constantine, surprised. He spoke and understood English almost perfectly (his mother had been English), yet he could not remember ever having heard the word *another* applied to himself. In fact it did not—could not possibly—so apply. There was only one of him, he knew.

Of course, in a way there was some sense in what this stupid Englishman said. Constantine had certainly been a *légionnaire* in Tonkin up till last Thursday—his narrow pipe-clayed helmet, stiff khaki greatcoat, shabby drill uniform, puttees, brass buttons, and inflexible boots were all the property of the French Government. But the core—the pearl inside this vulgar, horny shell—was Constantine Andreievitch Soloviev. That made all the difference.

Constantine saw that he must take this Didymus of an Englishman in hand at once and tell him a few exciting stories about his dangerous adventures between the Tonkin border and this Chinese city. Snakes, tigers, love-crazed Chinese princesses and brigands passed rapidly through his mind, and he chose the last, because he had previously planned several impressive things to do if he should be attacked by brigands. So now, though he had not actually met a brigand, those plans would come in useful. Constantine intended to write his autobiography some day when he should have married a rich wife and settled down. Not only did his actual life seem to him a very rare one but, also, lives were so interesting to make up.

Constantine was a desert islander—a spiritual Robinson Crusoe. He made up everything himself and he wasted nothing. *Robinson Crusoe* was his favourite book—in fact, almost the only book he had ever read—and he was proud to be, like his hero, a desert islander. He actually preferred clothing his spirit in the skins of wild thoughts that had been the prey of his wits and sheltering it from the world's weather in a leaky hut of his brain's own contriving, to enjoying the good tailoring and housing that dwellers on the mainland call experience and education. He enjoyed being barbarous, he enjoyed living alone on his island, accepting nothing, imitating nothing, believing nothing, adapting himself to nothing—implacably home-made. Even his tangible possessions were those of a marooned man rather than of a civilized citizen of this well-furnished world. At this moment his only luggage was a balalaika that he had made himself out of cigar-boxes, and to this he sang songs of his own composition—very imperfect songs. He would not have claimed that either his songs or his instrument were better than the songs and instruments made by song-makers and balalaika-makers; they were, however, much more rapturously *his* than any acquired music could have been and, indeed, in this as in almost all things, it simply never occurred to him to *take* rather than *make*. There was no mainland on the horizon of his desert island.

“I am not a beggar,” said Constantine. “Until yesterday I had sixty piastres which I had saved by many sacrifices during my service in the Legion. But yesterday, passing through a dark forest of pines in the twilight, about twenty versts from here, I met——”

“You met a band of brigands,” said Mr. White. “Yes, I know . . . you all say that.”

Constantine stared at him. He had not lived, a desert islander, in a crowded and over-civilized world without meeting many rebuffs, so this one did not surprise him—did not even offend him. On the contrary, for a minute he almost loved the uncompromising Mr. White, as a sportsman almost loves the chamois on a peculiarly inaccessible crag. This was a friend worth a good deal of trouble to secure, Constantine saw. He realized at once that the desert islander's line here was to discard the brigands and to discard noble independence.

“Very well then,” said Constantine. “I did *not* meet brigands. I *am* a beggar. I started without a penny and I still have no penny. I hope you will give me something. That is why I have come.” He paused, drawing long pleased breaths through his large nose. This, he felt, was a distinctly self-made line of talk; it set him apart from all previous deserting *légionnaires*.

Mr. White evidently thought so too. He gave a short grunting laugh, "That's better," he said.

"These English," thought Constantine lovingly. "They are the next best thing to *being* originals, for they *admire* originals." "I like you," he added extravagantly, aloud. "I like the English. I am so glad I found an Englishman to beg of instead of an American—though an American would have been much richer than you are, I expect. Still, to a beggar a little is enough. I dislike Americans; I dislike their women's wet finger-nails."

"Wet finger-nails?" exclaimed Mr. White. "Oh, you mean their manicure polishes. Yes . . . they *do* always have wet finger-nails . . . ha, ha . . . so they do. I should never have thought of that myself."

"Of course not," said Constantine, genuinely surprised. "*I* thought of it. Why should *you* have thought of it?" After a moment he added, "I am not a gramophone."

Mr. White thought that he had said, "Have you got a gramophone?" and replied at once with some pleasure, "Yes, I have—it is a very precious companion. Are you musical? But of course you are, being Russian. I should be very lonely without my daily ration of Chopin. Would you like some music while the servants are getting you something to eat?"

"I should like some music," said Constantine, "but I should not like to hear a gramophone. I will play you some music—some unique and only music on a unique and only instrument."

"Thank you very much," said Mr. White, peering doubtfully through his glasses at the cigar-box balalaika. "What good English you speak," he added, trying to divert his guest's attention from his musical purpose. "But all Russians, of course, are wonderful linguists."

"I will play you my music," said Constantine. "But first I must tell you that I do not like you to say to me, 'Being Russian you are musical' or 'All Russians speak good English.' To me it seems so stupid to see me as one of many."

"Each one of us is one of many," sighed Mr. White patiently.

"*You*, perhaps—but *I*, not," said Constantine. "When you notice my English words instead of my thoughts it seems to me that you are listening wrongly—you are listening to sounds only, in the same way as you listen to your senseless gramophone——"



“But you haven’t heard my gramophone,” interrupted Mr. White, stung on his darling’s behalf.

“What does it matter what sounds a man makes—what words he uses? Words are common to all men; thoughts belong to one man only.”

Mr. White considered telling his guest to go to hell, but he said instead, “You’re quite a philosopher, aren’t you?”

“I am not *quite an* anything,” said Constantine abruptly. “I am me. All people who like Chopin also say, ‘You’re quite a philosopher.’”

“Now you’re generalizing, yourself,” said Mr. White, clinging to his good temper. “Exactly what you’ve just complained of my doing.”

“Some people *are* general,” said Constantine. “Now I will play you my music, and you will admit that it is not one of many musics.”

He sang a song with Russian words which Mr. White did not understand. As a matter of fact, such was Constantine’s horror of imitating that the words of his song were just a list of the names of the diseases of horses, learned while Constantine was a veterinary surgeon in the Ukraine. His voice was certainly peculiar to himself; it was hoarse—so hoarse that one felt as if a light cough or a discreet blowing of that long nose would clear the hoarseness away; it was veiled, as though heard from behind an intervening stillness; yet with all its hoarseness and insonorousness, it was flexible, alive, and exciting. His instrument had the same quality of quiet ugliness and oddity; it was almost enchanting. It was as if an animal—say, a goat—had found a way to control its voice into a crude goblin concord.

“That’s my music,” said Constantine. “Do you like it?”

“Frankly,” said Mr. White, “I prefer Chopin.”

“On the gramophone?”

“On the gramophone.”

“Yet one is a thing you never heard before and will never hear again—and the other is a machine that makes the same sound for millions.”

“I don’t care.”

Constantine chewed his upper lip for a minute, thinking this over. Then he shook himself. “Nevertheless, I like you,” he said insolently. “You are almost a person. Would you like me to tell you about my life, or would you rather I explained to you my idea about Zigzags?”

“I would rather see you eat a good meal,” said Mr. White, roused to a certain cordiality—as almost all Anglo-Saxons are—by the opportunity of dispensing food and drink.

“I can tell you my Zigzag idea while I eat,” said Constantine, leading the way towards the table at the other end of the room. “Are you not eating too?”

“I’m not in the habit of eating a meat meal at ten o’clock at night.”

“Is ‘not being in the habit’ a reason for not doing it now?”

“To me it is.”

“Oh—oh—*oh*—I wish I were like you,” said Constantine vehemently. “It is so tiring being me—having no guide. I *do* like you.”

“Help yourself to spinach,” said Mr. White crossly.

“Now shall I tell you my Zigzag idea?”

“If you can eat as well as talk.”

Constantine was exceedingly hungry; he bent low over his plate, though he sat sideways to the table, facing Mr. White, ready to launch a frontal attack of talk. His mouth was too full for a moment to allow him to begin to speak, but quick, agonized glances out of his black eyes implored his host to be silent till his lips should be ready. “You know,” he said, swallowing hurriedly, “I always think of a zigzag as going *downwards*. I draw it in the air, *so . . .* a straight honest line, then—see—a diagonal subtle line cuts the air away from under it—so . . . Do you see what I mean? I will call the *zig* a *to*, and the *zag* a *from*. Now——”

“Why is one of your legs fatter than the other?” asked Mr. White.

“It is bandaged. Now, I think of this zigzag as a diagram of human minds. Always human minds are *zigs* or *zags*—a *to* or a *from*—the brave *zig* is straight, *so . . .* the cleverer, crueller *zag* cuts away below. So are men’s  
\_\_\_\_\_”

“But why is it bandaged?”

“It was kicked by a horse. Well, so are men’s understandings. Here I draw the simple, faithful understanding—and here—*zag*—the easy, clever understanding that sees through the simple faith. Now below that—see—*zig* once more—the wise, the serene, and now a *zag* contradicts once more; this is the cynic who knows all answers to serenity. Then below, once more——”

“May I see your leg?” asked Mr. White. “I was in an ambulance unit during the war.”

“Oh, what is this talk of legs?” cried Constantine. “Legs are all the same; they belong to millions. All legs are made of blood and bone and muscle—all vulgar things. Your ambulance cuts off legs, mends legs, fits bones together, corks up blood. It treats men like bundles of bones and blood. This is so dull. Bodies are so dull. Minds are the only onliness in men.”

“Yes,” said Mr. White. “But minds have to have legs to walk about on. Let me see your leg.”

“Very well, then, let us talk of legs. We have at least legs in common, you and I.”

“Hadn’t you got more sense than to put such a dirty rag round an open wound?”

“It is not dirty; it is simply of a grey colour. I washed it in a rice field.” Constantine spoke in a muffled voice from somewhere near his knee-cap, for he was now bent double, whole-heartedly interested in his leg. “I washed the wound too, and three boils which are behind my knee. This blackness is not dirt; it is a blackness belonging to the injury.”

Mr. White said nothing, but he rose to his feet as though he had heard a call. Constantine, leaving his puttee in limp coils about his foot like a dead snake, went on eating. He began to talk again about the zigzag while he stuffed food into his mouth, but he stopped talking soon, for Mr. White was walking up and down the long room and not pretending to listen. Constantine, watching his host restively pacing the far end of the room, imagined that he himself perhaps smelled disagreeable, for this was a constant fear of his—that his body should play his rare personality this horrid trick. “What is the matter?” he asked anxiously, with a shamed look. “Why are you so far?”

Mr. White’s lazy, mild manner was quite changed. His voice seemed to burst out of seething irritation. “It’s a dam nuisance just now. It couldn’t happen at a worse time. I’ve a great deal of work to do—and this fighting all over the province makes a journey so dam——”

“What is so dam?” asked Constantine, his bewilderment affecting his English.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Mr. White, standing in front of Constantine with his feet wide apart and speaking in an angry voice. “You’re going to bed now in my attic, and to-morrow at daylight you’re going to be waked up

and driven down in my car, by me (damn it!) to Lao-chow, to the hospital—a two days' drive—three hundred miles—over the worst roads you ever saw.”

Constantine's heart gave a sickening lurch. “Why to hospital? You think my leg is dangerous?”

“If I know anything of legs,” said Mr. White rather brutally, “the doctor won't let you keep that one an hour longer than he has to.”

Constantine's mouth began instantly to tremble so much that he could scarcely speak. He thought, “I shall die—I shall die like this—of a stupid black leg—this valuable lonely me will die.” He glared at Mr. White, hungry for consolation. “He isn't valuable—he's one of many . . . of course he could easily be brave.”

Mr. White, once more indolent and indifferent, led the little Russian to the attic and left him there. As soon as Constantine saw the white sheets neatly folded back, the pleasant blue rugs squarely set upon the floor, the open wardrobe fringed with hangers, he doubted whether, after all, he did value himself so much. For in this neat room he felt betrayed by this body of his—this unwashed, unshaven, tired body, encased in coarse dirty clothes, propped on an offensive, festering leg. He decided to take all his clothes off, even though he had no other garment with him to put on; he would feel more appropriate to the shiny linen in his own shiny skin, he thought. He would have washed, but his attention was diverted as he pulled his clothes off by the wound on his leg. Though it was not very painful, it made him nearly sick with disgust now. Every nerve in his body seemed on tiptoe, alert to feel agony, as he studied the wound. He saw that a new sore place was beginning, well above the knee. With only his shirt on, he rushed downstairs, and in at the only lighted doorway. “Look—look,” he cried. “A new sore place. . . . Does this mean the danger is greater even than we thought?”

Mr. White, in neat blue-and-white pyjamas, was carefully pressing a tie in a tie-press. Constantine had never felt so far away from a human being in his life as he felt on seeing the tie-press, those pyjamas, those monogrammed silver brushes, that elastic apparatus for reducing exercises that hung upon the door.

“Oh, go to bed,” said Mr. White irascibly. “For God's sake, show a little sense.”

Constantine was back in his attic before he thought, "I ought to have said, 'For God's sake, show a little *nonsense* yourself.' Sense is so vulgar."

Sense, however, was to drive him three hundred miles to safety, next day.

All night the exhausted Constantine, sleeping only for a few minutes at a time, dreamed trivial, broken dreams about establishing his own superiority, finding, for instance, that he had after all managed to bring with him a suitcase full of clean, fashionable clothes, or noticing that his host was wearing a filthy bandage round his neck instead of a tie.

Constantine was asleep when Mr. White, fully dressed, woke him next morning. A clear, steely light was slanting in at the window. Constantine was always fully conscious at the second of waking, and he was immediately horrified to see Mr. White looking expressionlessly at the disorderly heap of dirty clothes that he had thrown in disgust on the floor the night before. Trying to divert his host's attention, Constantine put on a merry and courageous manner. "Well, how is the weather for our motor-car jaunt?"

"It could hardly be worse," said Mr. White placidly. "Sheets of rain. God knows what the roads will be like."

"Well, we are lucky to have roads at all, in this benighted China."

"I don't know about that. If there weren't any roads we shouldn't be setting off on this beastly trip."

"I shall be ready in two jiffies," said Constantine, springing naked out of bed and shuffling his dreadful clothes out of Mr. White's sight. "But just tell me," he added as his host went through the door, "why do you drive three hundred miles on a horrible wet day just to take a perfect stranger—a beggar too—to hospital?" (He thought, "Now he *must* say something showing that he recognizes my value.")

"Because I can't cut off your leg myself," said Mr. White gloomily. Constantine did not press his question because this new reference to the cutting off of legs set his nerves jangling again; his hands trembled so that he could scarcely button his clothes. Service in the Foreign Legion, though it was certainly no suitable adventure for a rare and sensitive man, had never obliged him to face anything more frightening than non-appreciation, coarse food, and stupid treatment. None of these things could humiliate him—on the contrary, all confirmed him in his persuasion of his own value. Only the thought of being at the mercy of his body could humiliate the excited and glowing spirit of Constantine. Death was the final, most loathsome triumph

of the body; death meant dumbness and decay—yet even death he could have faced courageously could he have been flattered to its very brink.

The car, a ramshackle Ford, stood in the rain on the bald gravel of the compound, as Constantine, white with excitement, limped out through the front door. His limp, though not consciously assumed, had developed only since last night. His whole leg now felt dangerous, its skin shrinking and tingling. Constantine looked into the car. In the back seat sat Mr. White's coolie, clasping a conspicuously neat little white canvas kit-bag with leather straps. The kit-bag held Constantine's eye and attacked his self-respect as the tie-press had attacked and haunted him the night before. Every one of his host's possessions was like a perfectly well-balanced, indisputable statement in a world of fevered conjecture. "And a camp-bed—so nicely rolled," said Constantine, leaning into the car, fascinated and humiliated. "But only one. . . ."

"I have only one," said Mr. White.

"And you are bringing it—for me?" said Constantine, looking at him ardently, overjoyed at this tribute.

"I am bringing it for myself," said Mr. White with his unamused and short-sighted smile. "I am assuming that a *légionnaire* is used to sleeping rough. I'm not. I'm rather fixed in my habits and I have a horror of the arrangements in Chinese inns."

"He is morally brave," thought Constantine, though, for the first time, it occurred to him how satisfactory it would be to slap his host's face. "A man less brave would have changed his plans about the camp-bed at once and said, 'For you, my dear man, of course—why not?'" Constantine chattered nervously as he took his seat in the car next to his host, the driver. "I feel such admiration for a man who can drive a motor-car. I adore the machine when it does not—like the gramophone—trespass on matters outside its sphere. The machine's sphere is space, you see—it controls space—and that is so admirable—even when the machine is so very unimpressive as this one. Mr. White, your motor-car is *very* unimpressive indeed. Are you sure it will run three hundred miles?"

"It always seems to," said Mr. White. "I never do anything to it except pour petrol, oil, and water into the proper openings. I am completely unmechanical."

"You cannot be if you work a gramophone."

“You seem to have my gramophone on your mind. To me it doesn’t answer the purpose of a machine—it simply *is* Chopin, to me.”

Constantine stamped his foot in almost delighted irritation, for this made him feel a god beside this groundling. After a few minutes of self-satisfaction, however, a terrible thought invaded him. He became obsessed with an idea that he had left fleas in his bed in Mr. White’s attic. That smug, immaculate Chinese servant would see them when he made the bed, and on Mr. White’s return would say, “That foreign soldier left fleas in our attic bed.” How bitterly did Constantine wish that he had examined the bed carefully before leaving the room, or alternatively, that he could invent some elaborate lie that would prevent Mr. White from believing this revolting accusation. Constantine’s mind, already racked with the fear of pain and death and with the agony of his impotence to impress his companion, became overcast with the hopelessness and remorselessness of everything. Everything despairing seemed a fact beyond dispute; everything hopeful, a mere dream. His growing certainty about the fleas, the persistence of the rain, combined with the leakiness of the car’s side-curtains, the skiddiness of the road, the festering of his leg, the thought of the surgeon’s saw, the perfection of that complacent kit-bag in the back seat, with the poor cigar-box balalaika tinkling beside it, the overstability and overrightness of his friend in need—there was not one sweet or flattering thought to which his poor trapped mind could turn.

The absurdly inadequate bullock-trail only just served the purpose of a road for the Ford. The wheels slid about, wrenching themselves from groove to groove. Constantine’s comment on the difficulties of the road was silenced by a polite request on the part of Mr. White. “I can’t talk while I’m driving, if you don’t mind. I’m not a good driver, and I need all my attention, especially on such a bad road.”

“I will talk and you need not answer. That is my ideal plan of conversation. I will tell you why I joined the Foreign Legion. You must have been wondering about this. It will be a relief for me from my misfortunes, to talk.”

“I’d rather not, if you don’t mind,” said his host serenely.

“Mean old horse,” thought Constantine passionately, his heart contracting with offence. “It is so English to give away nothing but the bare, bald, stony fact of help—no decorations of graciousnesses and smilings. A Russian would be a much poorer helper, but a how much better friend.”

The car ground on. Constantine turned over again and again in his mind the matter of the fleas. The wet ochre-and-green country of South China streamed unevenly past, the neat, complex shapes of rice fields altering, disintegrating and re-forming, like groups in a country dance. Abrupt horns of rock began piercing through the flat rain-striped valley, and these, it seemed, were the heralds of a mountain range that barred the path of the travellers, for soon cliffs towered above the road. A village which clung to a slope at the mouth of a gorge was occupied by soldiers. "This is where our troubles begin," said Mr. White peacefully. The soldiers were indolent, shabby, ineffectual-looking creatures, scarcely distinguishable from coolies, but their machine-guns, straddling mosquito-like about the forlorn village street, looked disagreeably wideawake and keen. Constantine felt as if his precious heart were the cynosure of all the machine-guns' waspish glances, as the car splashed between them. "Is this safe?" he asked. "Motoring through a Chinese war?"

"Not particularly," smiled Mr. White. "But it's safer than neglecting that leg of yours."

Constantine uttered a small, shrill, nervous exclamation—half a curse. "Is a man nothing more than a leg to you?"

As he spoke, from one side of the gorge along which they were now driving, a rifle shot cracked, like the breaking of a taut wire. Its echoes were overtaken by the sputtering of more shots from a higher crag. Constantine had been tensely held for just such an attack on his courage as this—and yet he was not ready for it. His body moved instantly by itself, without consulting his self-respect; it flung its arms round Mr. White. The car, thus immobilized at its source of energy, swerved, skidded, and stood still askew upon the trail. Constantine, sweating violently, recalled his pride and reassembled his sprawling arms. Mr. White said nothing, but he looked with a cold benevolence into Constantine's face and shook his head slightly. Then he started the car again and drove on in silence. There was no more firing.

"Oh, *oh*, I do *wish* you had been a little bit frightened too," said Constantine, clenching his fists. He was too much of a desert islander to deny his own fright, as a citizen of the tradition-ruled mainland might have denied it. Brave or afraid, Constantine was his own creation; he had made himself, he would stand or fall by this self that he had made. It was indeed, in a way, more interesting to have been afraid than to have been brave. Only, unfortunately, this exasperating benefactor of his did not think so.



The noon-light was scarcely brighter than the light of early morning. The unremitting rain slanted across the grey air. Trees, skies, valleys, mountains, seen through the rain-spotted windshield, were like a distorted, stippled landscape painted by a beginner who has not yet learned to wring living colour from his palette. However, sun or no sun, noontime it was at last, and Mr. White, drawing his car conscientiously to the side of the bullock-trail, as if a procession of Rolls-Royces might be expected to pass, unpacked a neat jigsaw puzzle of a sandwich-box.

“I brought a few caviare sandwiches for you,” he said gently. “I know Russians like caviare.”

“Are your sandwiches then made of Old England’s Rosbif?” asked Constantine crossly, for it seemed to him that this man used nothing but collective nouns.

“No; of bloater paste.”

They said nothing more but munched in a rather sullen silence. Constantine had lost his desire to tell Mr. White why he had joined the Foreign Legion—or to tell him anything else, for that matter. There was something about Mr. White that destroyed the excitement of telling ingenious lies—or even the common truth; and this *something* Constantine resented more and more, though he was uncertain how to define it. Mr. White leaned over the steering-wheel and covered his eyes with his hands, for driving tired him. The caviare, and his host’s evident weariness, irritated Constantine more and more; these things seemed like a crude insistence on his increasing obligation. “I suppose you are tired of the very sight of me,” he felt impelled to say bitterly.

“No, no,” said Mr. White politely but indifferently. “Don’t worry about me. It’ll all be the same a hundred years hence.”

“Whether my leg is off or on—whether I die in agony or live—it will all be the same a hundred years hence, I suppose you would say,” said Constantine, morbidly goading his companion into repeating this insult to the priceless mystery of personality.

“My good man, I can’t do more than I *am* doing about your leg, can I?” said Mr. White irritably, as he restarted the car.

“A million times more—a million times more,” thought Constantine hysterically, but with an effort he said nothing.

As the wet evening light smouldered to an ashen twilight, they drove into Mo-ming, which was to be their night’s stopping-place. Outside the city

wall they were stopped by soldiers; for Mo-ming was being defended against the enemy's advance. After twenty minutes' talk in the clanking Cantonese tongue, the two white men were allowed to go through the city gate on foot, leaving the Ford in a shed outside, in the care of Mr. White's coolie. Mr. White carried his beautiful little kit-bag and expected Constantine to carry the camp-bed.

"What—and leave my balalaika in the car?" protested Constantine childishly.

"I think it would be safe," said Mr. White, only faintly ironic. "Hurry up. I must go at once and call on the general in charge here. I don't want to have my car commandeered."

Constantine limped along behind him, the camp-bed on one shoulder, the balalaika faintly tinkling under his arm. They found the inn in the centre of a tangle of looped, frayed, untidy streets—a boxlike gaunt house, one corner of which was partly ruined, for the city had been bombarded that day. The inn, which could never have been a comfortable place, was wholly disorganized by its recent misfortune; most of the servants had fled, and the innkeeper was entirely engrossed in counting and piling up on the verandah his rescued possessions from the wrecked rooms. An impudent little boy, naked down to the waist—the only remaining servant—showed Mr. White and Constantine to the only room the inn could offer.

"One room between us?" cried Constantine, thinking of his shameful, possibly verminous, clothes and his unwashed body. He felt unable to bear the idea of unbuttoning even the greasy collar of his tunic within sight of that virgin-new kit-bag. Its luminous whiteness would seem in the night like triumphant civilization's eye fixed upon the barbarian—like the smug beam of a lighthouse glowing from the mainland upon that uncouth obstruction, a desert island. "I'm not consistent," thought Constantine. "That's my trouble. I ought to be proud of being dirty. At least that is a home-made condition."

"Yes—one room between us," said Mr. White tartly. "We must do the best we can. You look after things here, will you, while I go and see the general and make the car safe."

Left alone, Constantine decided not to take off any clothes at all—even his coarse greatcoat—but to say that he had fever and needed all the warmth he could get. No sooner had he come to this decision than he felt convinced that he actually was feverish; his head and his injured leg ached and throbbed as though all the hot blood in his body had concentrated in those two regions, while ice seemed to settle round his heart and loins. The room

was dreary and very sparsely furnished with an ugly, too high table and rigid chairs to match. The beds were simply recesses in the wall, draped with dirty mud-brown mosquito-veils. Constantine, however, stepped more bravely into this hard, matted coffin than he had into Mr. White's clean attic bed. As he lay down, his leg burned and throbbed more fiercely than ever, and he began to imagine the amputation—the blood, the yawning of the flesh, the scraping of the saw upon the bone. His imagination did not supply an anaesthetic. Fever came upon him now in good earnest; he shook so much that his body seemed to jump like a fish upon the unyielding matting, he seemed to breathe in heat, without being able to melt the ice in his bones. Yet he remained artistically conscious all the time of his plight, and even exaggerated the shivering spasms of his limbs. He was quite pleased to think that Mr. White would presently return and find him in this condition, and so be obliged to be interested and compassionate. Yet as he heard Mr. White's heavy step on the stair, poor Constantine's eye fell on the fastidious white kit-bag, and he suddenly remembered all his fancies and fears about vermin and smells. By the time Mr. White was actually standing over him, Constantine was convinced that the deepest loathing was clearly shown on that superior, towering face.

"I can't help it—I can't help it," cried Constantine, between his chattering teeth.

Mr. White seemed to ignore the Russian's agitation. "I think the car'll be all right now," he said. "I left the coolie sleeping in it, to make sure. The general was quite civil and gave me a permit to get home; but it seems it's utterly impossible for us to drive on to Lao-chow. Fighting on the road is particularly hot, and the bridges are all destroyed. The enemy have reached the opposite side of the river, and they've been bombarding the city all day. I told the general about your case; he suggests you go by river in a sampan down to Lao-chow to-morrow. You may be fired on just as you leave the city, but nothing to matter, I dare say. After that, you'd be all right—the river makes a stiff bend south here, and gets right away from the country they're fighting over. It would take you only about eighteen hours to Lao-chow, going down stream. I've already got a sampan for you. . . . Oh, Lord, isn't this disgusting?" he added, looking round the dreadful room and wrinkling his nose. "How I loathe this kind of thing!"

"I can't help it. I can't help it." Constantine began first to moan and then to cry. He was by now in great pain, and he did not try to control his distress. It passed through his mind that crying was the last thing a stupid Englishman would expect of a *légionnaire*; so far so good, therefore—he

was a desert islander even in his degradation. Yet he loathed himself; all his morbid fears of being offensive were upon him, and the unaccustomed exercise of crying, combined with the fever, nauseated him. Mr. White, still wearing his expression of repugnance, came to his help, loosened that greasy collar, lent a handkerchief, ordered some refreshing hot Chinese tea.

“You should have known me in Odessa,” gasped Constantine in an interval between his paroxysms. “Three of the prettiest women in the town were madly in love with me. You know me only at my worst.”

Mr. White, soaking a folded silk handkerchief in cold water, before laying it on Constantine’s burning forehead, did not answer. He unrolled the pillow from his camp-bed and put it under Constantine’s head. As he did so, he recoiled a little, but after a second’s hesitation, he pushed the immaculate little pillow into place with a heroic firmness.

“I wore only silk next the skin then,” snuffled Constantine. The fever rose in a wave in his brain, and he shouted curses upon his cruelly perfect friend.

Mr. White lay only intermittently on his camp-bed that night. He was kept busy making use of his past experience as a member of an ambulance unit. Only at daylight he slept for an hour or so.

Constantine, awakened from a short sleep by the sound of firing outside, lay on his side and watched Mr. White’s relaxed, sleeping face. The fever had left Constantine, and he was now sunk in cold, limp depression and fear. Luckily, he thought, there was no need to stir, for certainly he could not be expected—a sick man—to set forth in a sampan through such dangers as the persistent firing suggested. At least in this inn he knew the worst, he thought wearily, and his companion knew the worst too. “I will not leave him,” Constantine vowed, “until I have somehow cured him of these frightful memories of me—somehow amputated his memory of me. . . .” He lay watching his companion’s face—hating it—obscurely wishing that those eyes, which had seen the worst during this loathsome night, might remain for ever shut.

Mr. White woke up quite suddenly. “Good Lord!” he said, peering at his watch. “Nearly seven. I told the sampan man to be at the foot of the steps at daylight.”

“Are you mad?” asked Constantine shrilly. “Listen to the firing—quite near. Besides—I’m a very sick man, as you should know by now. I couldn’t even walk—much less dodge through a crowd of Chinese assassins.”

Mr. White, faintly whistling Chopin, laboriously keeping his temper, left the room, and could presently be heard hee-hawing in the Chinese language on the verandah to the hee-hawing innkeeper.

When he came back, he said, "The sampaneer's there, waiting—only too anxious to get away from the bombing they're expecting to-day. He's tied up only about a hundred yards away. You'll be beyond the reach of the firing as soon as you're round the bend. Hurry up, man; the sooner you get down to hospital, and I get off on the road home, the better for us both."

Constantine, genuinely exhausted after his miserable night, did not speak, but lay with his eyes shut and his face obstinately turned to the wall. He certainly felt too ill to be brave or to face the crackling dangers of the battle-ridden streets, but he was conscious of no plan except a determination to be as obstructive as he could—to assert at least this ignoble power over his tyrant.

"Get up, you dam fool," shouted Mr. White, suddenly plucking the pillow from under the sick man's head, "or I'll drag you down to the river by the scruff of your dirty neck."

Dirty neck! Instantly Constantine sat up—hopeless now of curing this man's contempt, full of an almost unendurable craving to be far away from him—to wipe him from his horizon—to be allowed to imagine him dead. Invigorated by this violent impulse, he rolled out of bed and sullenly watched Mr. White settle up with the innkeeper and take a few packages out of that revoltingly refined kit-bag.

"A small tin of water-biscuits," said Mr. White, almost apologetically, "and the remains of the bloater paste. It's all I have with me, but it ought to keep you alive till you get to Lao-chow to-morrow morning. . . . I'll see you down to the river first and then pick up these things." He spoke as if he were trying to make little neat plans still against this disorderly and unwonted background. He brushed his splashed coat with a silver clothes-brush, wearing the eagerly safe expression Constantine had seen on his face as he bent over the tie-press the night before last. The orderly man was trying to maintain his quiet impersonal self-respect amid surroundings that humiliated him. Even Constantine understood vaguely that his attacker was himself being attacked. "Well, I've done my best," added Mr. White, straightening his back after buckling the last strap of the kit-bag, and looking at Constantine with an ambiguous, almost appealing look.

They left the inn. The steep street that led down to the river between mean, barricaded shops was deserted. The air of it was outraged by the

whipping sound of rifle fire—echoes clanked sharply from wall to wall.

“It is not safe—it is not safe,” muttered Constantine, suddenly standing rooted, feeling that his next step must bring him into the path of a bullet.

“It’s safer than a gangrenous leg.” With his great hand, Mr. White seized the little Russian’s arm and dragged him almost gaily down the steps. Constantine was by now so hopelessly mired in humiliation that he did not even try to disguise his terror. He hung back like a rebellious child, but he was tweaked and twitched along, stumbling behind his rescuer. He was pressed into the little boat. “Here, take the biscuits—good-bye—good luck,” shouted Mr. White, and a smile of real gaiety broke out at last upon his face. The strip of rainy air and water widened between the two friends.

“Strike him dead, God!” said Constantine.

The smile did not fade at once from the Englishman’s face, as his legs curiously crumpled into a kneeling position. He seemed trying to kneel on air; he clutched at his breast with one hand while the other hand still waved good-bye; he turned his alert, smiling face towards Constantine as though he were going to say again—“Good-bye—good luck.” Then he fell, head downward, on the steps, the bald crown of his head just dipping into the water. Mud was splashed over the coat he had brushed only five minutes before.

There was a loud outcry from the sampan man and his wife. They seemed to be calling Constantine’s already riveted attention to the fallen man—still only twenty yards away; they seemed uncertain whether he would now let them row yet more quickly away, as they desired, or insist on returning to the help of his friend.

“Row on—row on,” cried Constantine in Russian and, to show them what he meant, he snatched up a spare pole and tried to increase the speed of the boat as it swerved into the current. Spaces of water were broadening all about the desert islander—home on his desert island again at last. As Constantine swayed over the pole, he looked back over his shoulder and flaunted his head, afraid no more of the firing now that one blessed bullet had carried away unpardonable memory out of the brain of his friend.

THE MAN WHO FELL IN LOVE  
WITH  
THE CO-OPERATIVE STORES

## THE MAN WHO FELL IN LOVE WITH THE CO-OPERATIVE STORES

I had been reading the embittered, yet amorous, memoirs of an old man who called himself the Don Juan of modern times, and reflecting on the odd fact that Don Juans—either ancient or modern—so often pay for delight and receive disappointment, though, of course, they make the best of it, poor dears, when describing their careers to us. The episode that especially rankled in the memory of my adventurer was an arrangement by which a young lady (a renowned beauty of the 'nineties) was persuaded, by means of a present of many tens of thousands of francs, to become our Don Juan's love. A few happy weeks passed, during which the shops of the Rue de la Paix appear to have been ransacked for articles of expensive hardware of a kind that might have been expected to nail down a beautiful young lady's love—and then, alas, our naïf Don Juan fell into the hands of gambling sharpers and lost every sou that he possessed. To his innocent amazement, the beautiful young lady he had bought immediately passed into the hands of a higher bidder. Poor man, for quite six weeks he made no further investments in love. Are not these Don Juans, I thought, more innocent than they suppose? I remembered that most true and dreadful story of Maria Edgeworth's—*Rosamond and the Purple Jar*—which tells of another dare-devil capitalist who deliberately invested—at enormous sacrifice—in a broken heart.

As I was thinking by the fire, I became aware that I had a visitor sitting opposite to me—a drooping, old-young man, with pale, thin hair, and pale, thin bones.

“You were mentioning broken hearts,” he said. “You see before you a broken-hearted man.”

“An unhappy love affair?” I murmured, sympathetically, for I could see that he was the sort of person who would always love one who loved another.

“You see before you,” he said, “the man who fell in love with the Co-operative Stores.”

“With the Co—— Well, well, well. . . . But surely your love was safe in such chaste, substantial, and irreproachable hands?”



“One would have thought so . . . I thought so—poor fool that I was,” he said, with a harsh, bitter laugh. “I was only one and twenty at the time—on the threshold of life. One thinks no evil then; one believes in love.”

“How did it all come about?” I asked, gently, knowing by experience that an attentive ear is the only comfort one can offer to members of that garrulous tribe—unlucky lovers.

“How does love ever come about? I was always rather an aloof sort of chap; I thought I had no heart. Of course, I had dallied with various institutional charmers in my time—I remember one riotous New Year’s Eve spent at Fortnum and Mason’s, and my name—as an eligible young bachelor about town—had been coupled, too, with one or two of the smarter hotels—and even for a few weeks with the Victoria and Albert Museum—but my heart had never been touched and I thought I was safe. How could I dream that I should be so completely bowled over—and by an establishment in a really second-rate district, too—I, who had flirted with Dorchester House! I had missed a train to Redhill and was just strolling aimlessly, putting in a spare hour—when I was knocked endways, suddenly, by meeting the gaze of those bright, soft windows looking out from under level brows. . . . Oh, if only I could make you see—as I saw it at that amazing moment—the *invitation* expressed in the generous, sensuous lines of the doorway—the sweet *come hither* of the steps that led up to the doorway. . . . There was at once nothing else in the world for me; the wisdom or unwisdom of a surrender to such enchantment did not enter my mind. I went instantly to my bank, to see how my credit stood, and——”

“Why did you do that?” I asked crudely.

“Why did I do that? What do you mean? A man doesn’t come penniless to the arms of his love, does he? Well, by a chance that seemed to me most fortunate, my quarter’s allowance had just been paid in by my father—a generous allowance, for he was a rich man and I his only son. I took a taxi back to my adored at once—if flying had been quicker I would have flown. . . . The tenderly voluptuous façade seemed to me, on that second winged approach, more irresistible even than before; what had I done, I thought ecstatically, to deserve such good fortune as finding such a perfect object for my love—and at the same time having the means to secure the return of my passion? I rushed up the steps, suffocated with emotion. . . . It would be impossible to tell you—now, in cold blood—the details of that first morning of rapture. Of course, I threw everything I had at the feet of my charmer; in every department of that matchless organization I spent money like water; I ordered diamonds—champagnes—orchids—silks and satins—

those thousand and one little knick-knacks that lovers love. . . . I paid on the nail by cheque for everything—I demanded no discount—I grudged nothing. . . . And my loved one responded, mark you——”

“I don’t doubt it,” I murmured.

“Yes, my Co-co (I evolved that tender little pet-name, Co-co) responded rapturously. Never can it be said that I had not ample cause to think that my love was returned. In every department I was welcomed most lovingly; I could have sworn that the welcome was genuine; the feeling behind it, I was certain—poor fool that I was—was for me alone, and was prompted by unmercenary passion. . . .”

“But why should you suppose so?” I asked. “Since——” But he pressed on, hiding his sorrow-twisted face in his hands.

“As soon as we were parted that day, I took my pen in hand and poured out my foolish hot heart in writing. Delivery vans blocked the street outside my flat; my rooms were heaped with tangible proofs of my love’s good faith. By the first post next morning I had letters—such sweet little notes—I have them here.” He slapped a bulging inner pocket, and, after a moment’s tender, heartbroken hesitation, handed me a letter.

“Dear sir . . . your esteemed orders of even date . . . our very best attention . . . we shall spare no efforts to give you satisfaction . . . your good self . . . trust you will have no cause to complain. . . . Hoping for the favour of your further esteemed patronage. . . .”

“*Best attention! No cause for complaint! My good self . . .*” cried my visitor with his terrible mirthless laugh; he seemed to know the letter by heart. “I could show you dozens of such letters received by me within the next few days—all in the same tender vein, breathing spontaneous affection in every line, as it seemed to me. Even now, re-reading these artless little outpourings, I can scarcely believe . . . ah, well——” He dashed his hand roughly across his eyes. “The idyll was soon over. That is the one peculiarity all idylls have in common—that they end soon—terribly soon—and end in bitterness. . . .” He was silent for a moment and then continued in a strained voice. “Next day I spent as recklessly as before, with the same enchanting results. It was that evening that the manager of my bank rang me up. I told him some lie about having won a prize in a sweepstake. I tell you I had lost all moral sense. My whole being was canalized into this one passionate groove. I would have forged my father’s name if I had had the skill to do so. It didn’t quite come to that, but I was mad—utterly mad. . . . I spent a fortune that week, and the daily—almost hourly—letters of my love became

rapturous. I could show you—but no, I can't . . . it all hurts too much . . . one phrase ran, I remember, *a most valued customer*. . . . Ha-ha . . . *most valued*. . . . I found afterwards that, after the first day, Co-co had been in constant touch with their *most valued customer's* bank account—to see how deep the poor sucker's pocket was. . . . That's how much the artless Co-co *valued* an ardent lover. Well, to cut a long and miserable story short, I went far beyond those limits—I sacrificed my honour—my good name—my all—for Co-co. The bank began kicking towards the end of that delirious week; I got an overdraft with the greatest difficulty—then I had to borrow from the Jews, on the wildest security. My Co-co was insatiable—invitations to further orgies of spending continually lured me on; my Co-co evidently would love me to distraction—as long as I could pay. The matter naturally came to my father's ears. He paid my debts once—twice—three times. . . . He pleaded with me—reasoned with me—threatened me. I answered him with the violence of youth; death itself, I swore, should not stop my laying all that I had—more, far more, than I had—at the feet of my love. My father took energetic ruthless steps—he cut me off; I was penniless suddenly. There had been for some days a note of acerbity in Co-co's letters to me—and after the crash, when there was no more cash to be screwed out of me, the letters became definitely hostile—finally even threatening. The artless creature had, it seemed, been hoarding my ardent written promises to pay and now trotted them all out, to grind me more deeply into the mire. Never one word of sympathy for a lover whose only mistake was to love too well. . . . My father finally bought Co-co off—and with a cynical brazenness that I found almost incredible, the creature I had loved so well began writing the same alluring little invitations, roguish little declarations, grateful little notes, to *him*. As for me, I never heard a word from Co-co again. I found afterwards—quite by chance—that my charmer was carrying on with a friend of mine—even from the first day of our amour. It broke my life. You see before you a broken man—wholly disillusioned—wholly ruined. My own young passionate warm heart was my undoing.”

“No—your *purse* was your undoing,” I said. “You gave your purse—I beg your pardon, I mean your *heart*—most unwisely. You deliberately——”

“There is no wisdom in the beginning of love,” mourned the unfortunate lover, “and nothing but disillusionment at the end of it.”

“On the contrary—you showed an obvious disillusionment from the beginning, in choosing as an object of your passion, something that could be paid for. Your experience, it seems to me, was a foregone conclusion. Now

had you fallen in love with the British Museum—or with St. Paul’s Cathedral——”

“Oh, but it’s so *cold*—that virtuous love—so austere—so undemanding. . . . A man wants to spend himself on his love—a man wants that spice of extravagance—of danger—of unwisdom in love. . . .”

“Well—you can’t have it both ways,” I said unsympathetically. “If you pay for disappointment you can’t be surprised if you get it. You must pull yourself together—start afresh. . . . What are your plans for the future?”

“I have none,” he said, shrinking from my briskness. “Arrangements have been made to admit me into an almshouse——”

“An almshouse? Why—there you are. There you have an institution willing to give you everything for nothing. Doesn’t that rather dispel your sense of disillusionment?”

“No—why should it?” mourned my visitor. “It was *love* I wanted—it was *love* I made my heroic bid for—it was my *love* that was spurned—trampled in the dust—spat upon. . . . I know now, of course, that there is no such thing as love. . . .”

I started, for I suddenly realized that my visitor had faded away. I shook away sleep and returned to the page of memoirs in front of me. The last words were “. . . so she left me. I had spent at least four hundred thousand francs on her, but what was that to her? On the day of my ruin, she left me for a richer lover. I know now, of course, that there is no such thing as love.”

TCHOTL

## TCHOTL

Nielsen, when he first caught sight of the white topee gliding along the lower limit of his range of vision, thought, here was a fellow-foreigner coming to see him. This would have been very surprising, for, as far as he knew, the Chinese city of Lao-pao was exclusively filled with Chinese; he was himself the only exception. He knew this to his cost, for whenever he moved he was followed about by incredulous crowds, as though time were turned round, and he were a kind of dinosaur of to-morrow, surviving into yesterday. As soon as the visitor reached the steps, however, Nielsen saw that the cleanness of the topee had deceived him; this was simply the kind of visitor that one might expect in Lao-pao—a young Chinese of the business class. Nielsen, who came from Minnesota, was a person of callow friendliness, and he immediately rolled his fat legs from the long chair on which he lay, to greet the guest, a light of alacrity shining in his large hungry protruding eyes.

The face of the newcomer belied the complacency of the perfect topee; it was a melancholy face; its bones seemed to be set at melancholy angles, although—since the face was Chinese—there were no wrinkles to plough furrows of superficial disillusionment.

“You must think me very unconventional,” said the visitor humbly, “but I hope when I acquaint the circumstances, you will excuse me for paying call on you without introduction. My name is Chin Yu-ting; my profession is a bank clerk.” He looked at Nielsen as though he expected to be thrown down the steps at once. But Nielsen was unaffectedly delighted to see any one anywhere, in any circumstances. Nielsen always had a great deal to say, and usually no one to say it to. Repressive years of solitude mellowed this bottled-up fermented wine of words within him, and the result, when the cork was finally drawn, was a generous outpouring of nectar, to which any one was welcome, simply for the asking. No slip was allowed to intervene betwixt this cup and any proffered lip; sometimes he even splashed a few drops of brimming superfluous idealism on to his patient Chinese servants, or into letters on Moral or Social Problems which he wrote to the Shanghai papers. He did not much repine if his generosity was only acknowledged by half-wits, scoffers and buffoons. An arid desert, he knew, absorbs a few priceless drops of water without apparent advantage; yet fundamentally, ideals were good for every one—were never really wasted. Nielsen believed that he was a person who Thought in Wide Terms and was Interested in

Nation-wide Problems. The pressure of his widening horizon, he felt, had burst the limits of the moral panorama seen from Jenkinsville, Minnesota, where he was born and raised. Even the city of Minneapolis, he often thought, would seem provincial to him now that he had seen Manila and Shanghai, and had learned to take for granted such quaint facts as that every one round him spoke Chinese and rode in rickshaws instead of Fords. Nielsen now prided himself on being no Middle Western hick; he despised men who had no Ideals—who talked of nothing but money, drink, women and food. He himself was of course no expert on any of these matters.

“I am very happy indeed to make your acquaintance, Mr. Chin,” said Nielsen. “I don’t know why you should apologize for calling, I’m sure. I’m an American, you know, and Americans despise forms and ceremonies.” For the inorganic principles injected by his Jenkinsville education were still embedded in encysted cells in Nielsen’s mind, just as the bullets from old wars remain lodged in the body. Schooling in Jenkinsville was not a matter of teaching-to-think—it was simply *teaching*. There were about twenty-six persons in Jenkinsville—all those of his classmates, in fact, who enjoyed the full use of their wits—who had *exactly* the same mind as Nielsen to this day—even though the school-mistress who had modelled their common mind had been mercifully lost to them all for fifteen years. Democratic education is an incurable affliction; it informs once and for all.

“I will now tell you,” said Chin Yu-ting, “why I have taken this liberty. Oh, Mr. Nielsen, there has been very great joy in my heart to hear that you—an English-speaking gentleman—has come to live at Lao-pao. For three years I live in this place with a lonely heart. I am from Peking, a student of Y—Mission College; I cannot freely talk the Cantonese language which is here the custom. All the time I long earnestly that some one shall come to Lao-pao speaking either the language of England or of Peking freely, with whom I can discuss the modern developments in comparative theologies—my favourite study. French priests come to Lao-pao—I am speaking no French. German mining engineers also come—but I am not understanding any German. An Italian explorer going to Tibet—a Russian ex-nobleman fleeing from Bolsheviki—I am not able to speak with them one word. My heart is always alone, as though my lips have been dumb—my ears deaf. Then I hear that an American is coming here to open an agency of the Standard Oils, and so my heart is very happy, for though I do not know America and cannot discuss American matters——”

Here, Nielsen saw at once, was a thirsty soul for some of his Ideals. “Why, Mr. Chin,” he said, “you’ve got us Americans quite wrong. You don’t

have to discuss American matters with Americans. I don't know how it is with folks snared in the cloying traditions of the Old World, but Americans are always Citizens of the World. Americans think Internationally, in terms of Uplift—Humanity—Idealism. . . . Wherever you see an American, you may be sure he's got Ideals somewhere back of those horn-rimmed goggles of his. I can tell you right now, if you and me are going to get together it won't be to discuss trivial little home-town gossip about material facts—it'll be to compare notes about the Great Things of Life. Americans feel the urge to get to Soul-grips with the Universe. Comparative Theology, I'll admit, is not much in my line—theology, and all other ologies and ophies, I leave to your half-baked narrow-minded professors who can't see outside their own classrooms. I've worked out a religion and a philosophy of my own, Mr. Chin, a very simple one, and its slogan is Be *Your Best Self* and Help the Next Guy to be *His*. Humanity's *my* theology—it's *Soul* that counts, and the Purpose behind the Soul. Man is the master of—do you know those beautiful lines by one of our American poets?—”

“Yes,” said Mr. Chin, hastily but without irony. “I know them, of course. They are written by the late William Ernest Henley, a noted English author, I believe.”

“I am the Master of my Fate,” chanted Nielsen, who was not to be balked of his quotation—and Chin Yu-ting joined in the chorus—“I am the Captain of My Soul.” They both looked very masterful and captain-like for a minute.

“Strictly speaking,” said Chin Yu-ting, “such beliefs, though very noble, are not to be labelled Theologies. I am myself interested in——”

“Ah, but Americans don't deal in labels,” said the infatuated Nielsen. “Americans think for themselves, regardless of the labels the effete so-called thinkers of the Old World have tied on to——”

“How interesting it is, discussing the matters of the mind in this animated manner,” said Mr. Chin, with a self-conscious laugh. “I feel refreshed already, like a camel that has trodden a long distance across a desert before meeting with an oasis. For indeed, Mr. Nielsen, to see interesting men—perhaps men who could improve my acquaintanceship with the comparative theologies—passing through Lao-pao, and yet, having no mutual language, being not able to exchange any word—has often reminded me of the beautiful words of another English poet—namely, S. T. Coleridge—‘Water, water, everywhere—and not a spot to drink.’ I have often thought——”



“There you touch on one of my pet Ideals,” shouted Nielsen. “I believe I can help you there. I believe our meeting is going to have Results—is going to strike a spark, as human meetings ought to do. We have met with a Purpose, Mr. Chin, I sensed it from the start. Now listen—didn’t you ever hear about Universal Languages? Universal Language is a study of mine, as it ought to be the study of every thinking man who cares about Human Brotherhood. Now listen——”

“I learned English,” said Mr. Chin, “due to being told that it was itself the univ——”

“You’ve heard of Tchotl, I guess,” said Nielsen.

The torrent of Chin Yu-ting’s protest evaporated suddenly, leaving one distilled monosyllable. “No,” he said weakly.

“I wonder you never heard of Tchotl,” said Nielsen, slightly checked in his turn. “I was going to say—I may be a very undistinguished sort of guy in many ways, Mr. Chin, but I have this distinction—and I’m proud of it—that I was raised in that great little city, Jenkinville, in Minnesota—where Tchotl originated—that I was in on the start of that Superlatively World-Wide Movement, and that its famous founders—Trent C. Howells and Oscar T. Lambie—are personal friends of mine. Furthermore——”

“I have warned you in the beginning that I am ignorant of American matters, Mr. Nielsen,” said Mr. Chin. “Most certainly I am unfortunate in having no knowledge of——”

“Tchotl is emphatically *not* an American matter. The very essence of Tchotl is its flaming universality. Tchotl is the Real World Language. Its name, you will notice, is an ingenious combination of the initials of its inventors, Trent Carlos Howells and Oscar Tetworth Lambie—and it is my firm belief that the day will come when the names of those two men will be written in letters of gold side by side with the names of Moses, Thomas à Becket, Emerson, Confucius, George Washington, Homer, Mary Baker Eddy, Shakespeare and other World Regenerators. Tchotl is a——”

“But do many persons really——”

“Tchotl is a superlative brotherhood of World Thinkers; it has an agent—or exponent—or apostle—(call it what you will)—in every country in the world. Would you believe it, Mr. Chin, when I last heard from old Tet (that’s O. T. Lambie), he told me that Tchotl has even secured a footing in the quaint little European state of Montenegro, as a result of a most fruitful tour of Europe by a young Jenkinville matron called Mrs. Zinnia Putney

Wicketts, whose eloquence is inspiring an animated interest in Tchotl wherever she goes——”

“But could a Tchotl-speaker, for instance, in Lao-pao be sure of——”

“The reason why Tchotl has such an instant universal appeal is because the underlying idea is so superlatively simple; a child can grasp it as easily as can the hoary-headed professor. There are no words longer than one syllable in Tchotl, and no consonant or vowel sounds are used that are not common to all world languages. Furthermore—and here is the genuine stunning originality of Tchotl, Mr. Chin—not only the lips are used in speaking, but also the fingers. For instance—*Ta*, one of the key syllables, meaning anything alive. . . . *Ta*, if I hold up one finger, means *man*—two fingers, a non-human mammal—three, a bird of some kind—and so forth. Now if——”

“But if you also erected the thumb?” asked Chin Yu-ting, his eyes almost leaning out of his head.

“Ah, well, there you come to the lesser saurians, as far as I can recall without the textbook,” said Mr. Nielsen in slight confusion. “I don’t pretend to be word-perfect in the language, though of course I’m studying it in my spare time. I have a spare textbook in my bureau upstairs and I’d be tickled pink, Mr. Chin, to enrol you as a member and pupil. I could give you your first few lessons, and then sell you the primer—it only costs five dollars gold and the proceeds all go to the disseminating of the superlative Gospel of World Understanding—and you’d have the satisfaction of being the dean of Tchotl-speakers in Lao-pao—this sleepy little burg’s first member of the vastest World Movement of our day.”

“It is indeed an extremely impressing thought,” said Chin Yu-ting, “to soar over all the barriers of language at one jumping. To be so conveniently in touch with the universe—this would be well worth five dollars gold—(thirteen dollars twenty cents of Lao-pao money). How long time do you think will be needful to make a perfect Tchotl-speaker of me—able (for instance) to discuss (for instance) comparative theologies with a Tchotl professor from (for instance) Montenegro?”

“Three months’ intensive study should be ample. I remember old Tet telling me that his best student—a Christian Science practitioner in Jenkinsville—mastered the elements in three lessons, and by the end of the second week could chatter Tchotl like a native—I mean like a World Citizen—but of course that is exceptional. My dear friend, I’m proud to see you so enthused—I’m proud to think I have the honour to be your teacher of Tchotl

—as a friend, mind you, Mr. Chin—purely as a friend,—there’s to be no question of a teacher’s fee, of course, between friends like you and I. Five dollars gold for the textbook—that’s all Tchotl’s going to cost you—and cheap it is at the price—a small price for the right of entry into a Universal Brotherhood—an insurance, as Trent Howells always says, against the soul-wastage involved in petty nationalism and——”

Chin Yu-ting could hardly contain his enthusiasm. “Let me see this book at earliest convenience, Mr. Nielsen. Let me now repeat my first lesson.”

“I’ll bring the book right down,” said Nielsen.

As he passed through the hall on his way upstairs, he noticed that the mail had come, and, forgetting for a moment his ardent pupil, he hung over the tempting-looking heap of letters and papers—the exile’s bread of life. He opened one of the home newspapers—the *Jenkinsville Morning Examiner*—and skimmed the headlines with a hungry eye as he walked slowly upstairs.

“Howells Bonnet Houses New Bee,” murmured a chatty minor headline, in the “Home-folks at Home” column. “Trent C. Howells and his co-dreamer Oscar Tetworth Lambie admitted to-day that their World Language has proved a flop. Trent, interviewed this morning, faced the death of his World-dream with a laugh like the good sport he is. ‘No doubt about it,’ he confessed frankly. ‘Our roll of members shrank alarmingly—especially after Mrs. Zinnia P. Wicketts, our former silver-tongued booster, lost interest in it and took up with the study of Byzantine architecture instead. Three thousand nine hundred and twelve language professors, social reformers, and elocution wizards failed to reply to our questionnaire that we mailed all over the world six months ago in order to boost Tchotl—and only nine textbooks have been sold—not counting eight hundred and sixty that we distributed free—a daring ad. which provoked no response whatever. Tet—(Oscar T. Lambie) and myself still claim we were on to a whale of a notion in inventing Tchotl—but the world’s not educated up to a Big Thing like that is, and the dead weight of effete Europe has been thrown into the scales against us—we have proof of that. It’s all part of the conspiracy of a sinister aristocratic tradition against free enlightened democracy. No good flogging a dead horse, however, and Tet and I know when we’re whipped. We’ve just got to quit. But we should worry; we’ve got a new scheme that just can’t fail to usher in a new economic era. I don’t want to talk a whole lot about it right now, but I’ll ask you this much—did you ever think why it is that we hand out huge sums all round for foodstuffs—importing fish here—exporting wheat there—canning asparagus here—wearing out our fists pulling milk out of cows there—while all the time right here under our shoe-soles all of

us has got——’ But right there Trent caught my eager optic and stopped short. ‘No, sir,’ he laughed. ‘You aren’t going to pry the secret out of me till the time comes. The world will know all about it soon enough when the details are perfected. It’s a swell scheme, though, you can take it from me and, economically speaking, it’s the biggest thing ever. Tet and me are working night and day to give it a running start. Tchotl, after all, was *words*—this new scheme is *deeds*. . . .’”

Nielsen only ceased reading long enough to allow him to take the Tchotl textbook from a drawer in his desk; the impetus of his errand carried him so far, before he paused to consider the effect of what he had read upon his triumphant act of salesmanship. Still considering the newspaper he walked slowly downstairs. He stood for a moment at the door of the sitting-room. For a second his dim imagination showed, as though on a badly lighted stage, an impossible scene, the cue for which was, “See here, Mr. Chin, I want you to read this newspaper par. I take back all I said. . . .” Take back? To recall spoken ideals from the flattered air—to roll up and put dustily away rosy festoons of words—to turn tamely and retrace his steps to the beginning of that resilient path of words—above all, to unsell something successfully sold—every instinct revolted against such inconceivable tasks. Words were Nielsen’s mark upon the air—nothing must erase the fine bright signature of his words from the air. Words were seeds sown in the soft tilled minds of listeners—was it not treachery to the soil to uproot the springing crops—treachery to the soil—betrayal of the sower—aye, and blasphemy against the Lord of the Manor Himself? Was not the whole duty of man to Put Things Across? Nielsen lifted up his face to the Salesman’s God and knew that his duty was loyalty to the Successful Deal. He entered the room. Mr. Chin, his appetite for immediate universal brotherhood whetted by the delay, came to meet him, with a hand outstretched for the book.

“By opening this book,” said Chin Yu-ting solemnly, “I think I open simultaneously a doorway into the world society. Behind this metaphorical door I think many thousands of world brothers stand ready to cry—in the Tchotl tongue—Welcome, brother Chin. Formerly I have been made deaf and dumb by the disease of national language, but now for ever through the future years I shall be freed from this affliction, and to every newcomer at Lao-pao I can stretch out the hand of freedom and exclaim in Tchotl—Welcome, brother—open to me your thoughts and I shall open mine. . . .”

Nielsen hesitated only long enough to drop the newspaper into the waste-paper basket. “I’ll tell the world you’re right, brother,” he said.

# CHRISTMAS FORMULA

## CHRISTMAS FORMULA

I must have got into the wrong ship in Shanghai, I suppose. I remember thinking vaguely at the time that she looked an odd vessel—quite unlike what I had expected s.s. *Homebound* to look like. She looked blind, somehow—windowless and steely and cold-hearted—much more like a huge submarine than a liner. However, I had a great many things on my mind and my abstraction made me an easy victim to a coolie—a fat funny-looking fellow almost like a Tibetan, I thought—who appeared from nowhere on the wharf, as coolies do, carried my traps on board and into my cabin, and left me. It was certainly his fault if I was on board of the wrong ship. She sailed almost at once, and so engrossed was I throughout the voyage in the solving of a book full of crossword puzzles—(a substitute for mental exercise that had only just reached Tibet, where I lived)—that I only vaguely noticed the oddity of my ship's gait, so to speak. I remember saying to myself that she advanced with a spinning glide rather than with the usual drumming limp of a steamer. When the steward told me we were within sight of Tilbury, it seemed to me that the time of the voyage had been a *hole* in time—a space of such rapt oblivion that it might have been a minute or it might have been a hundred years since we left Shanghai.

“We’re practically home now,” said the steward, in such an American voice that it seemed surprising to hear him say *home* in this English drizzle. “Skipper was determined to get into port by Christmas morning—listen, you can hear the Christmas bells on our loud-speaker. . . .”

So I could. I listened sentimentally for a moment, shutting my eyes to imprison behind the lids a Christmas fancy of robins, and winking lights over the snow from the jewelled windows of a village church on a dark winter morning. “Christmas bells. . . .” I murmured. “How they bring childhood back to me. . . . What church, I wonder, are we hearing?” . . . But it didn’t matter, because of course to me it was the voice of the stumpy little Shropshire church of my youth.

“What church?” echoed the steward—a rather unpleasant man. “How d’you mean—what church? That’s not a church—that’s the wireless.”

“Of course it is,” I said irritably. “But the wireless is only an artificial medium, isn’t it?—a formula for some fact or other. That’s certainly a church peal we hear—though we hear it artificially.”

“I dunno what you mean,” said the steward. “Nothing artificial about a wireless, is there? And what’s a church to do with Christmas anyway?”

I looked at the man haughtily. “Don’t you know what Christmas means?” I asked. “Any Tibetan knows that.”

“’Course I know,” he replied rudely, and gabbled, “Christmas-the-season-a-peason-goodwill. . . . Nothing about churches there, is there?”

I looked at him haughtily and changed the subject. “Well, what do I do about my passport? I want to get ashore quickly and enjoy Christmas.”

“Passports nothing,” said the steward. “You’re talking like a history formula. You don’t want no passport. You only have to Kiss Mother as usual and then you can go ashore.”

“Kiss Mother?” I exclaimed, but the man was gone. I stood in the passage looking after him and saw a distant sight that made my heart yearn for quiet China. The old fat flabby coolie I had seen as I left Shanghai now squatted on the floor, doing nothing except pick his teeth. I approached him, attracted by his serenity. “Wantchee go look-see England-side?” I asked him idiotically, relieved to be near such a slow irrational contrast to my iron-mannered steward.

The man made no answer.

“What for you come this side?” I persisted. He indicated a pile of empty shoe-polish tins near him, but spoke no word. He just sat still, picking his teeth, spitting occasionally, his lids heavy with indolence. I saw that he was the ship’s Boots, and smiled at myself because, for a moment, he had seemed to me a desirable friend.

I went on deck, rather refreshed—I didn’t know why——. The first sight of England, from which I had long been an exile, completely jolted me out of the rut of abstraction to which my mind had been confined during the strange drowsy voyage. For what had happened to my England?

“But this is New York, isn’t it?” I said to a man standing next to me on deck.

“Technically, yes,” said the man. “New York, S.E. 416. But we still keep up the old customs—we like to call it London. But, good heavens, sir, where do you come from, that you don’t know where you are? From Tibet, I suppose.”

“As a matter of fact, I *have* lived for more years than I can count on the borders of Yunnan and Tibet. How did you know?”

“Well, I’ve heard, of course, that Tibet is the only independent state left outside the jurisdiction of the United World Government. I’ve even heard that they have no Board of Salesmen there, and don’t use any of the recognized formulae. So as soon as you spoke, I guessed. . . . I say, this is very interesting—I suppose all this is entirely strange to you. I say, I wish you’d let me come ashore with you and watch your reactions. You probably aren’t ashamed of reacting emotionally to surprise—I dare say you have no formula or substitute for natural surprise. I’m rather a barbarian too, in my way—I’m always getting into trouble for *feeling* as well as *speaking*—quite contrary to the Board of Salesmen’s regulations. So I don’t mind admitting—confidentially—a spontaneous old-world interest in your reactions.”

“I don’t understand you,” I gaped. “Why should you mind admitting? Why should I mind reacting? And why *old-world*?”

“Oh, I can’t explain—you’ll understand soon. . . . Gosh—I feel like a boy again, reacting emotionally to what you say, like this. Your spontaneity is infectious. Did you notice, I haven’t even uttered the correct *Oh* in the fourth tone—the prescribed Surprise-and-Interest Formula? If I uttered an *Oh* at all, it was a *felt* one and quite unorthodox. Get ready for Mother’s Kiss—he removed his hat for a second—and we’ll go and have a Merry Christmas together.”

Mother’s Kiss again! But I had no time to ask questions, for the crowd of passengers began to surge from the deck to the shore along three or four gangways. At the shore end of each gangway stood a white-haired woman, dressed in a rather Pickwickian style, lace cape—check shawl—hair brooch—wearing an armlet labelling her as *Mother*. As I stumbled in the packed crowd down the slope, I had only time to notice that these Mothers were all practically identical, before I arrived at the Mother who corked up the end of my own gangway. She threw a pair of stout arms round me and kissed me abruptly on each cheek, saying in a cross hurried voice, “Welcome-’Ome-my-dear-dear-boy.” Then, deftly unwinding her arms from my neck, she dipped a rubber squirt into a bottle slung from her belt, labelled, “Mother’s Tear of Joy Certified 100 per cent. Pure,” and squirted one drop on to my forehead. “Pass on, please, pass on,” she added instantly. My new friend followed me, wiping the Tear of Joy from his eyebrow.

“You’ll notice we’ve reduced the formalities of homecoming to something quite negligible. I see, as it’s Merry-Christmas, we have to pass the Present-Giving Turnstile to-day, but as a rule, Mother’s Kiss is the only formality, nowadays.”



“Mother’s Kiss indeed,” I snapped, for I had felt a fool in the old woman’s perfunctory embrace. “What’s the good of Mother’s Kiss? It means nothing.”

“Means nothing?” said my friend. “(By the way, I wish you’d remove your hat when using the word Mother. They probably didn’t teach you the correct Filial Formula in Tibet, but that’s Number Five—a very important one—and the police are very strict about it.) What do you mean when you ask what does it mean? Don’t you know that a Mother’s Kiss and a Mother’s Tears are sacred?”

“Not unless they’re genuine, surely,” I argued feebly.

“I don’t know what you mean by *genuine*. I can see the Tear still on your eyelash. You couldn’t want a more genuine Tear than that—brine percentage absolutely correct, you may be sure. But never mind. . . . It’s all very interesting. I ought to introduce myself, by the way. Tom 170009 is my name, from Incubator AZR-14. . . .”

At the next barrier we were obliged to pay a Merry-Christmas-Present Levy of fifty dollars—quite a large sum, I thought. However, I gave it with a good grace. “For the poor, I suppose—a good idea,” I said, trying to look nonchalant.

“The poor? Poor what? Why should Merry-Christmas-presents be given to poor anythings? The money goes to the Business Houses and the Board of Salesmen of course. I should have thought you’d be familiar with that Merry-Christmas custom—it’s a very old one.”

“Well . . . perhaps . . . in a way. . . . But we used to get something in return for our money.”

“You have your receipt, haven’t you? signed by the Board of Salesmen. That’s the Merry-Christmas-Present Formula. Now, here we are, ready for all the enjoyment formulae that London can produce. We’ll have a Merry-Christmas Dinner and then go to Peter Pan.”

I was just beginning to smile delightedly at the dear sentimental memories evoked by these words when a policeman stopped me. “Why-’aven’t-you got-ya-mistletoe-in-ya-button’ole?” he gabbled roughly.

“My mistletoe?” I echoed, smiling archly at him; this was a thorough Christmas indeed if even the police entered so whole-heartedly into the spirit of the fun. “I’ll remember to get some, officer—thanks for reminding me.”

“I’ll have to endorse your Licence-to-Enjoy-Merry-Christmas,” said the policeman. “ ’And it out!”

But Tom 170009 came to my rescue. “Officer-please-overlook-an-unintentional-and-deeply-regretted-breach-of-the-law,” he whined mechanically, evidently uttering some compulsory formula. “This man had only just arrived from Tibet so he knows no formulae. We’re on our way to the Town Hall now, to Enjoy-Merry-Christmas, we’ll get the mistletoe and the Licence there.”

Crowds of men and women, some dragging reluctant children, were pressing up the steps of the Town Hall as glumly as though on their way to a dentist. We fitted ourselves to the tail of a queue—a tail-between-the-legs sort of queue. “We’ll be through with all these Enjoyment Formulae soon, and then we can have a good time,” said Tom, seeing my apprehensive face. At the top of the steps, my licence was given me by a sullen official wearing the rudiments of a Father Christmas disguise—red coat and a cotton-wool stock under his chin—(the debased remnant, I guessed, of dear Santa Claus’s woolly beard). My licence had a smudged robin stamped in one corner, and the words, “Board of Salesmen’s Licence to Enjoy M<sup>Y</sup> X<sup>S</sup> & H<sup>Y</sup> N<sup>W</sup> Y<sup>F</sup> No. 928593.”

Officials herded us impatiently in single file past a big table decorated lamentably with moth-eaten paper rosettes. At one end of it a large effigy of a roast turkey was nailed upon a platter. It was really a registering machine, and every man, woman, or child that passed it was required to press down one of the wooden drumsticks—actually a lever. As one pressed it, a ticket shot out of a slot in a round metal representation of a plum-pudding a few yards further on. “This is to Certify,” said my ticket, “that the holder has Attended One Merry-Christmas Festive Board.”

“Now to Peter Pan, and then we’re finished,” said Tom. “It’s an old official custom so it’ll probably appeal to you.”

“It will indeed,” I said happily, but I was puzzled by the unexpectant expressions of the tired children being dragged towards a door opening out of a corridor into a vast auditorium.

“Nobody quite knows the origin of the Merry-Christmas custom of Peeting Up Ann,” said Tom. “I’ve heard it was a religious rite. You had to do it too, in your day, didn’t you?”

“Peter Pan?” I echoed, a little puzzled. “Well we didn’t have to. . . . At first it was optional, though I admit it became less and less so. . . .”

“Here we are. Reminds you of old times, doesn’t it?”

“More or less,” I said doubtfully, as we sat down on plush seats in the great hall among thousands of our fellow-men. There was certainly something that looked like a stage and a curtain, topped by a great scroll with the words in large gold letters, PEET UP ANN. On to the screen of the curtain a cinematograph apparatus threw a dazzling series of talking pictures. “No More Corns—Get Alf Burman to Remove Your Feet Painlessly—Artificial Aluminium Feet at Cost Price—Absolutely Undetectable—Why Not Give The Neighbourhood Incubator an Electro-Plated Phosphorescent Old-Fashioned Dumb Nanny For the New Year—This Month’s Fashions in Houses—Roofs Must be Worn Lopsided By Order of the Board of Salesmen—Sufferers From Superfluous Hair, Remember, Kollision of Whiskers Kills——”

“Oh, Lord!” I said. “When does Peter Pan begin?”

“What do you mean? We are Peeting Up Ann, aren’t we?”

I rose in panic. “Oh—what has happened? Has everything in this world a name and nothing else?” The silly heartless words of the machine still dinned upon the sad tawdry air as I pressed towards the door. As we passed out, a woman barred our way, dressed rather like the Mother, but labelled Auntie. She presided over a booth labelled “A Merry-Christmas-Present—With Auntie’s Love—To YOU.” I hesitated. “Do we get one?” I asked, for I was hungry for something personal.

“Of course. It’s the custom.”

We were each given a large camera, with an official kiss such as I had already experienced. “Well, really,” I said, pleased. “This is certainly——” but as I spoke, my camera, which was only made of paper, collapsed in my hasty hand. “What—it doesn’t work?”—

“How d’you mean—work?” said Tom. “It’s called a camera.”

“Well, but cameras ought to take photographs.”

“There is a photograph inside each one,” said Tom triumphantly.

I looked inside the ruins of my poor present. There was a photograph—of a human skull—labelled *YOU*. Panic rushed upon me. I stumbled down the steps into the bleak streets, quickly outdistancing the protesting Tom. Instinctively I ran towards the docks . . . towards Tibet. . . . My bewildered mind registered very little, consciously, but now, looking back, I remember numbly noticing severe policemen walking from dark door to door, turning

their flashlights on something limp hanging from each front door-handle. What? A stocking. . . . “Empty—empty—empty—incurably empty. . . .”

I found myself running up the gangway to the ship I had left that morning. As soon as I reached her deck, she cast loose and sailed. There were no other passengers. No one wanted to go back to the old world. Only, at the end of the passage outside my cabin, squatted the old Tibetan boot-cleaner, fat and flaccid, picking his teeth. When he saw me, he pointed at my shoes. They were very dusty and I advanced first one foot and then the other, that he might brush the dust away.

# A DREAM

## A DREAM

This is an exact account of a dream I had last night. It was a dream about a third person; myself did not enter into it. I sometimes have these impersonal dreams, and whenever I do, they give me, while still sleeping, an extraordinary sense of urgency and adventure, and leave me, when awake, with a deep excitement that does not seem to be accounted for by the matter of the dream. I believe that this is the relief of escaping from the burden of personality. I have not consciously invented any details in writing down this dream. But words to express the rarefied and exciting quality of all that happened in the dream are hard to find, and, for this reason, so far from anything being added in this account, it seems to me that much has evaporated.

Mrs. Wander was a chronically frightened person, so it was fortunate that this time, when she really had something to be afraid of, she should have had such a short time to be afraid in. Only an hour or two ago she had been told that she must have an immediate operation to relieve this pain in the side of her head and numbness down one side of her body. And now here she was, holding the hand of her protecting friend, Mary, and facing the surgeon and the nurse, who were both in glittering white. She had hoped that Mary would somehow keep terror away behind the wall of her square prosaic friendliness, but the wall was not thick enough to be a safe shield—arrows of terror glanced round it—terrors, like a horde of cannibals, grimaced from behind the square figure of Mary. Mrs. Wander's own doctor was here, and there was something that Mrs. Wander was absolutely determined to say to him, but her chin was trembling so much that the words twittered out in a silly order.

“Doctor, it isn't my brain you're going to operate on, is it? No, of course it isn't—I'd never consent to that . . . any interference like that. . . . You see, doctor, I'm the only *me* I have, so I'm important to me . . . you can't be expected to feel the same about my *me*, of course . . . so you *must* tell me what you and the surgeon intend to do. . . . I have a right to know. I'm not a fool. I'll bear anything—anything, except, of course, an operation to my brain—you couldn't expect me to consent to that. . . .”

Her doctor said soothing things. “Now, Mrs. Wander, you must *trust* me—you always have trusted me—surely you know I think simply of your good. . . .”

“Yes—yes—but you haven’t told me yet—I’m not distrusting any one—I just want to be sure that this operation is nothing to do with my brain. . . .”

The doctor laid his hand upon her arm; the nurse made gentle cheerful noises; the surgeon drummed his fingers on the table in time to a tune that the anaesthetist seemed to be dumbly whistling. It seemed to Mrs. Wander that they all had a dreadful wily look. It did not once occur to her that they really were going to do the operation she so much feared; this fear was so great that it had no place in her range of possibilities. It simply seemed to her that some unexplained but spiteful obstinacy was restraining them from uttering the words she was determined to wring from them.

“I have a legal right to know. . . . I can bring the matter into the courts. You have no right not to answer. It’s *my* body, not yours. . . . Mary—Mary—help me—just tell me they’re not going to touch my brain—that’s all I ask. . . .”

But Mary was there to be staunch, not subtle. Mary could think of nothing more reassuring than to stroke Mrs. Wander’s hand in silence. Mrs. Wander watched Mary’s closed compassionate mouth incredulously—was there no way to drag the simple words she needed from behind those lips? Such very easy words—they would hardly take ten seconds to say. “No, my dear, of course not—they won’t touch your brain. It’s simply a matter of adenoids . . . teeth . . . glands . . .” What could be easier to give than such comfort? It was all she asked.

“Well, then, I won’t consent,” cried Mrs. Wander in a high strangled voice, amazed at their obstinacy. “I won’t lie down on the table. You can’t make me.”

“Nobody’s going to make you do anything, dear,” said the nurse after a moment. “Just sit down here and relax in this nice comfy chair. Think of something else. Relax. How pretty your hair is, dear—just the colour of autumn leaves.”

But neither Mary nor the doctor let go of Mrs. Wander’s hands, and, looking behind her, she saw the anaesthetist holding something ready.

“I won’t—I won’t—I won’t—” screamed Mrs. Wander. “Mary—Mary—help me—is nobody on my side?” She tore her kimono as she struggled. So great was her hysterical strength that the restraining hands seemed to melt from her arms. She was free; the door was open. She could see the free world. She ran out; her bare feet sprang over the stones without feeling bruises. No one passed her in the road; no one pursued her. “They

understand now . . . they've got to leave me alone." She ran rapturously along a path between burnt and leafless shrubs.

Yet after a moment, she began almost to regret being left so extravagantly alone, for this valley, which she did not recognize at all, seemed to have no air, no contents at all but an intense rarefied loneliness. Not only was there no living thing in sight, but there seemed no possibility of any living thing. To expect to see a breathing creature in this numb burnished light would have been as absurd as to look down through the clear water of the sea and expect to see a child playing among the corals. The sky was a bright lurid gold, and from the sky itself—for there was no sun to be seen—a hot light blazed down. From the sky also seemed to come a metallic rhythmic pulsing sound, which had the same diffused quality as the light, and invoked no breath of an echo, in the same way as the light threw no shadow. The valley lay open like a spread yet slightly bent fan; it widened, fan-like, in front of the traveller; here, shallow red hills bounded it right and left, but, far in front, the path rose to the level of the hills about it—rose, to be sharply cut off at last by a skyline like a copper blade, that was pressed to the armoured brass breast of the sky. No trees were in sight—only the burnt clay-red skeletons of leafless shrubs. Round, riven boulders were sown about the valley.

"If I could only see a rabbit," thought Mrs. Wander, "or a mouse—even the print of a dangerous lion's foot in this sand—even a blade of living grass. . . . If I could only hear a little living sound from *somewhere*—instead of this wide regular clanging from *everywhere*. . . ." She looked sharply and desperately round, but even as she looked, she knew it was hopeless. What lungs could breathe this air—this burning air that was composed only of remote yet imminent sound? "What a long lonely walk!" thought Mrs. Wander, panting, trying to be brave. "Why can't I remember this road, I wonder—why don't I know where it leads to?"

She was quite near the skyline now. The limit of her sight of the path was only a short way in front of her. She could pass the great breathless crouching boulders bravely now, for soon she would be done with them—soon she would see a new view. She would dominate this desolate world, and throw it behind her, soon. "Perhaps I shall see cottages—deer in a park—dogs biting their fleas in the sun—children playing—cats sitting curled on gateposts. . . . Perhaps I shall see home . . . perhaps I shall suddenly know where I am."

She reached the top of the ridge quite as abruptly as she had expected, and the change was as complete as she had hoped. For here in front of her



was a quiet dull green valley under a low rain-threatening sky. The heat had gone instantly out of the earth she trod on; green fields breathed damp air and the scents of damp field-flowers; silence swallowed the pulsing gongs in her hearing. And here, a hundred yards away, was a low cottage, brown as an old leaf. It was sunken among fruit trees, framed in a humble muddled garden smelling of sweet-peas. "I *almost* know where I am now," said Mrs. Wander. "I shall quite know in a minute." And as she reached the garden gate, she found that her hand knew by itself the trick of that defective home-made latch. She ran up the path to the cottage door.

And just before the door was opened, Mrs. Wander knew who was coming to open it. "Zillah, of course," she thought, delighted and comforted. She had time, while an unseen hand fumbled at the door, to know what she would see—Zillah's old gentle seamed face sunk between her fat sagging shoulders and bust—thin hair with yellow skin showing cleanly through it—a clean print dress—a clean apron on which Zillah would be wiping her hands before taking her darling Mrs. Wander's hand in hers. "My lambie," Zillah would say, "you're just in time—the kettle's just on the boil." A thousand times had Mrs. Wander come to this door through the scent of the sweet-peas, and always she was just in time for Zillah.

Directly Zillah had opened the door, Mrs. Wander became conscious that something was wrong. "My lambie," said Zillah, looking just as she used to look. "Just in time . . . the kettle's on the boil." Yet Mrs. Wander could see that Zillah too was conscious of something wrong. They kissed tenderly; they held hands; they uttered no misgiving—yet Mrs. Wander knew more and more certainly that something was wrong. This visit was wrong; something that ought not to be happening was happening. An immorality—a sin? Mrs. Wander asked herself in bewilderment. How could there be anything wrong in a visit to Zillah—this sinless, spotless, loving old woman? Mrs. Wander had so often crossed that red-tiled floor, kissed that soft cheek, settled herself in that lumpy, lame armchair—it had never been wrong before.

Zillah made the tea. There was a deliciously sticky-looking gingerbread cake on the table. "My lambie," murmured Zillah, uneasily yet lovingly, as she poked the fire. Mrs. Wander listened for village gossip; it began—faltered—stopped. Silence fell between them. Zillah averted her eyes from Mrs. Wander's.

"Oh, Zillah," said Mrs. Wander. "I got so badly lost. I feel at home now. . . . But that burning path—I couldn't recognize it at all. You don't know how *lost* I've been feeling. . . . The doctor—Mary—the nurse—they

all suddenly stopped being on my side. Oh, that valley—so dry—so loud—so dead. When I saw your darling garden gate, Zillah, and the yellow curtains drawn across the upstairs windows——” A silence suddenly stepped in upon her words, like a prison warden interrupting one who had tried to believe himself free. Zillah shook her old head from side to side, not meeting Mrs. Wander’s eyes.

*The yellow curtains drawn*—All at once Mrs. Wander knew what was wrong. A channel seemed cleared through her brain for the passage of a thought. “Why—Zillah,” she cried, inexpressibly shocked. “I know what’s wrong. All this *can’t* be true. All this *can’t* be happening. It’s all a mistake. I’m still lost—still alone. You’re not on my side either. You *can’t* be making tea for me—cutting cake for me—you *mustn’t*—it’s wrong. Zillah—don’t you remember? You fell downstairs—you had a stroke—I put white violets by your cheek after the curtains were drawn. . . . Zillah—I know what’s wrong now—you’re *dead*. . . .”

Zillah looked up at last, gravely and urgently.

“So are you,” she said.

# STORY COLDLY TOLD

## STORY COLDLY TOLD

The settlement of Padda had gone down very much in importance by the time I went to live there. The larger world's distresses had at last affected that remote corner; the big firms were withdrawing their representatives, leaving big houses and compounds to be haunted only by white ants and by the silent echoes of vanished beanos. "They say the lion and the lizard keep the courts where Our Mr. Wilkinson of the Imperial Kerosene Company gloried and drank deep."

The Gildis, a flourishing and rather superior negro race who inhabit that part of Outer Lesterland, seem to have got tired of foreign influence. Scrobham, the Vice-Consul, always maintained that the Gildis were a decadent race, because, it seems, in the old days they went in for gold-leaf-covered carvings in wood, and in the new days they go in for smuggling arms and kidnapping English and American travellers. But I am not so sure, myself, that this is a sign of decadence. I don't like the Gildis personally, but then I have the belief that the white man and the negro never can like one another—unless one flatters the other. I don't think liking matters much, anyway, and I get tired of Scrobham's eternal nosing after common denominators and points of contact.

So much had the foreign community at Padda dwindled that, in my time, only the Vice-Consul, Scrobham, a dozen or so of English and American missionaries, a half-caste general-store manager, a very few tourists and commercial travellers, and myself, represented the white colour among the Gildis in Padda city.

The innocent but single-hearted politics of the Gildis had a good deal to do with this withdrawal of European and American patronage. Anglo-Saxon shoulderers of the White Man's Burden have a cold dislike of single-hearted politics. They like double aims; they like native races to be progressive yet docile, clever yet humble, proud yet servile, practical yet sentimental; they like coloured students to absorb education without applying it to facts, to read history without drawing a moral from it. But no imperialist, however confused in his ideals, could possibly approve, consistently, of the goings-on of Orlad, Chief Rak of the Gildis. He was really all of a twitter about modern political methods, and showed such a restless anxiety to profit by all the past and current experiments in government—one after another or all together—that nobody, least of all his subjects, ever knew from one day to

another whether the Gildi nation lived under a Soviet *régime* or under a dictatorship or owed allegiance to a divinely appointed monarch or was trying some other stunt. One could apostrophise Orlad as a second Lenin—a Gildi Mussolini—a reincarnation of George Washington—a Karl Marx—a Tsar of all the Gildis—a sage and self-effacing constitutional prince—and please him with each acclamation, as long as one chose the right title for the right day. I never met Orlad, the Gildi ruler. I don't think he can be a man of very much sense, but I am sure he enjoys himself enormously. Sense in other people is another of the things I don't bother about much, anyway. When I hear people saying, "Now, that's *sense*," it always sounds to me as if they were saying, "*I* might have said that myself." Whether Orlad's methods were sensible or not, the result undoubtedly was that he could not keep order among his subjects or fellow-citizens. The pace was too quick for them, poor devils. Law succeeded law with such dizzy rapidity that the only thing a consistent subject could do was to become an outlaw and remain one; in this way, a man could know where he was. The Gildi notables, therefore, took up brigandage in rather the same spirit as the English barons once took up the Magna Carta—as a defence against government instability and as an assertion of their right, as subjects, to know where they stood.

Padda is a small town, three hundred miles from Tra-aan, Orlad's capital—three hundred very rough miles too. The road had been covered, once, by an adventurous Ford car, but in the ordinary way one travelled to Tra-aan, if one had to, by wagon, and put up for six nights at the filthy fortified inns. In the still more ordinary way, one didn't travel to Tra-aan at all, or anywhere else. One reached Padda by river, and lived there for years without finding any reason to go anywhere else. There was very little reason to go to Padda, of course, either. The sisal-export business had once been of great importance there, however, and these great importances die hard. I was the last survival of that particular Importance—the last English sisal shipper to be stationed at Padda.

Padda, as I knew it, was just far enough away from the inland centre of Gildi activity—Tra-aan—to get the effects of the Chief Rak's political experiments, without any of their advantages. The Communist movement, for instance, which had been initiated in Tra-aan as a neat self-consciously noble plan, organized by "Workers' Soviets"—(in which I believe Comrade Orlad—ex-Chief Rak—was the only worker brave enough to speak)—reached Padda simply in the form of a destructive rabble. Men who left Tra-aan as "Comrades" were simple looters by the time they reached Padda. Communism, in fact, burst upon us like a thunderstorm. Streets in which, for days on end, the dust had only been disturbed by pigs and goats, became

quite suddenly hideous with howling “Communists” rounding up recalcitrant converts at the spear’s point. I watched the first stages of the business from my roof—as I had watched many invasions before, since my arrival in this disturbed land. The new arrivals, who cannot have been more than five or six hundred strong, were breaking into all houses that were not flying the orthodox red flag. Any red shred flapping from the middle bar of a window would save a house—as long as it was seen in time. All Gildi windows are barred, and a shred of rag is always tied to the middle bar—to frighten devils away, they say—so now it was only a matter of suiting the colour of the protecting rag to a new brand of devil.

A crowd of Gildi peasants always seems to me—even after all these years—a queer sight. All peasants in this country dress in black; black is the cheapest dye—made from the bark of the bula shrub that grows all along the river. The combination of black faces, black bodies and black clothes, gives a macabre carnival effect, as though the people were masked mock-revellers at some witch’s funeral. I have that feeling, although of course I know that a crowd of Gildi peasants is just as prosaic and commonplace as a crowd of Manchester shop-assistants. I have no use for that Elemental Pagan stuff.

We have had so many disturbances at Padda, and so few that disturbed us, the foreign community, at all, that, for an hour, I watched, with a feeling of god-like detachment, the “Communist” activities in the streets within sight of my roof. A great deal of cackling, fussing and flapping always accompanies all Gildi activities. To-day it seemed to me that the “Communist” flappings and cacklings were no more alarming than the flappings and cacklings of a group of Gildi merchants bidding at a market auction. No blood was drawn, as far as I could see. I noticed one old woman collecting donkey-manure all the time, most peacefully, threading her way through the agitation, and once gently tapping on the shoulder a ranting Communist orator who was standing over a little heap of the treasure she sought. He moved out of her way at once, with great docility. Presently, I thought, that very leader will probably come and pay a formal call on me, and I shall present him—in accordance with Gildi etiquette—with a basket of melons or a dozen bottles of cider, which he will formally accept and (also according to Gildi etiquette) tactfully forget to take away when he leaves my house. Secure in my reliance on precedents, I leaned over my parapet, like the Blessed Damosel. After a while, I heard a kind of croak, and looking round, saw the head of Scrobham, the Vice-Consul, sticking out of the trap-door which was the only egress from the house to the roof. Scrobham’s face was stiff with fear, and, for a few seconds, he could scarcely speak. “My God, Palmer, what *shall* we do?” he managed to blurt

out. Saying this seemed to ease his utterance a little, and he began stammering out a torrent of really terrifying information. This attack on the city, it seemed, was much more ferocious than anything we had hitherto experienced, and it was particularly directed against us, the foreigners. The invaders had broken into the English mission compound as soon as they arrived, hauled down the Union Jack, locked up all the missionaries, and, after holding some pompous senseless pow-wow they called a Soldiers' Council, condemned them all to death. Whether they would carry out their threat remained to be seen; the whole business was so unlike what we knew of Gildi methods that there seemed nothing to base a surmise on. At any rate, the soldiers were ostentatiously erecting a gallows in the market-place, banners were being paraded with the legend, *Death to the Foreign Traitors*, and an American tourist had been beaten in the street and then hustled away, no one knew where. Scrobham had not been able to get into touch with any other foreigners. He had remained in his office, hoping that some of us would find our way there, until ten minutes ago, when the rabble had broken into his compound and killed his watchman. On which he had escaped over the back wall and come to my house. My house, he said, was entirely deserted; my servants had fled. Up to that point, Scrobham had talked with the fluency and unselfconsciousness of fear; never before had I heard him speak without trying to make some personal impression that seemed to me sentimental—trying to wring some implied tribute out of his hearer. But mention of the flight of the servants brought a spark of the old Scrobham back. "Disloyal brutes," he said, and even in my fright I had time to feel irritated. Loyalty in such circumstances is another of the things that don't seem to me real. I am a *job* to my servants, and there is no more reason for my cook-boy to risk his life for me—his job—than there is for me to risk my life in protecting a shipment of sisal.

My first instinct in any emergency is to do nothing—or perhaps it is not my first *instinct* (for almost everyone's first *instinct* is to run away, I suppose)—it is my first mental decision. It seemed to me, as Scrobham spoke, that if the invaders were killing foreigners, we were done for, anyway. True, they were poorly armed—experience of Gildi arms would lead one to suppose that all importation stopped in the 'seventies—and we had up-to-date revolvers at least, but I never can get up any enthusiasm about this business of "selling one's life dearly." If one is obliged to get out, there seems no sense in making it a group exodus; to be accompanied into oblivion by four or five Gildi heroes wouldn't help one at all. So when Scrobham said again, "What is to be done, Palmer?" I said, "Let's go downstairs and get drunk."

“Let’s go downstairs and get drunk.” Scrobham didn’t like that at all. He wanted to do something safe, or, failing that, something noble. Best of all, he would have liked to do something that *looked* noble and *was* safe. However, he followed me downstairs, and all the way down he was murmuring to himself, between chattering teeth, “It’s incredible—the whole thing’s incredible—incredible.” I sympathized with the feeling from which the words sprang; it was a kind of nostalgia, I knew, for the time when all this hadn’t happened. “It’s incredible” meant “Need I believe it, God—please, please, mayn’t it be a dream?” Anybody might feel this, when his world went to pieces, but only a sentimentalist like Scrobham would put a sort of faith in it, would set an illusion to cancel an accomplished fact, would draw a sort of hope from the word *incredible*.

My house, as Scrobham had said, was quite deserted, but as we went through the hall, my clerk, John Monday, came in hurriedly by the side door, making us both jump. I hardly knew him for a moment, as he was dressed in peasant black, instead of his usual Palm Beach style. Monday was of pure Gildi blood, mission-educated; the fact that he had changed the spelling of his name, Mandi, just about explained him, I had always thought. He was a good clerk; occasionally he dined with me, but there was never any ease between us—there never could be; my effort was to disguise patronage, and his, to disguise servility. Only Scrobham could call the point of contact between these two efforts “friendship.” However, now, I must say, I felt that something important had come on the scene in the mild person of John Monday—something so important that it might be called *hope*—or even *life*. His first words, however, were “Sir, I have brought Miss Sims,” and my heart sank. *Sims* was not a word of hope. She was an old woman, an English missionary; I hardly knew her, though, alas, I knew her voice, raised, at street-corners, in thinly melodious affirmation, “*Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me . . .*” (translated into Gildi, of course). I expect she was right; she was a selfless old lady, very worthy of His love, no doubt, but to me she seemed to be among the things that didn’t matter much. Not that I am against missionaries particularly; it always seems to me that nearly everybody preaches a gospel of some kind—commercial travellers—drunkards—lovely women—golfers—sainted hermits—care-free sinners . . . they all nag at us to listen to their gospels, and the missionaries’ nagging is no more tiresome than that of the others.

I find I am telling this story in a very leisurely way, but the curious thing about it is that up to that point it was a very leisurely adventure. I was so profoundly convinced that there was nothing to be done, that time seemed to



stand still. John Monday, with a gesture like that of a royal prince unveiling a statue, disclosed Miss Sims sitting peacefully in the cloak-cupboard under the stairs. She smiled at us gallantly, but said nothing—I think because she was in the middle of a prayer. But then John Monday began shyly, “Sir, I think my cousin——” and all the wheels of my mind started going round again. John Monday’s cousin, Rak Mandi, after failing in the sisal-growing business owing to the disturbed state of the country, had taken up brigandage and Made Good, as the Americans say. He was one of the most successful brigands in the vicinity of Padda, and owed his success, I think, largely to the fact that he aimed at no sensational *coups*. Small caravans of minor Gildi cotton merchants were his game; he treated his prisoners well and asked—and obtained—moderate ransoms. He never troubled foreigners, and the Chief Rak’s government, therefore, had never been forced to take steps to suppress him. “Where is your cousin, John?” I asked.

“Sir, I have reason to believe I could find him,” said Monday, bridling. He always bridled when he spoke of his cousin. Evidently he had the whole plan arranged, for he at once led the way through my deserted kitchen and outhouses. Scrobham, Miss Sims and I followed. The servants had evidently downed tools in a hurry; a pot of beans still bubbled on the kitchen fire.

It was really very courageous of John Monday. He was certainly risking his skin for us. “Loyalty,” Scrobham would have said; “his Christian training” would have been Miss Sims’s guess. I should diagnose his act, myself, as an example of the instinctive Gildi conservatism. Like dogs, Gildis can’t bear change, they are faithful to a time-table rather than to a man. John wanted life to get back to normal; in saving us, he instinctively hoped to ensure a return to the beloved routine of his life. Still, I can feel grateful, even with a cold heart, and I was certainly very glad of the existence of poor John Monday that day.

At the side-gate we all bumped into one another’s backs, for John, our leader, stopped suddenly and looked both ways along the alley before allowing us to cross. Then, at his heels, we all tiptoed across the alley and into the house of a Gildi carpenter, an old acquaintance of mine, who used to do odd jobs for me. The house was full of the carpenter’s family and friends, and, one and all, they turned their faces away as we appeared. All naïvely affected to be busy over some absorbing employment as we walked through their dark home. It was the Gildi way of disclaiming responsibility. There was a red rag ostentatiously tied to the middle bar of the window, I noticed. The carpenter himself was sawing planks, and I wondered whether he had been commissioned to help with the building of the gallows in the market-

place. We walked out of the back door of the workshop without uttering a word or meeting a glance. As we crossed the wretched little vegetable garden, Scrobham whispered to me, “Did you notice their expressions?”

“Yes, of course. Why not?”

“Absolutely inscrutable,” he murmured. “A marvellous people. An incredible people.” Scrobham was himself again.

When we had scrambled over the mud wall of the carpenter’s little holding, we found the way open before us to the open country, a flat valley, criss-crossed with beanfields, with an occasional square of gaudy golden buckwheat. John Monday handed us over to a couple of strangers, here, dressed in the usual peasant black, but armed with unusually efficient-looking revolvers.

“Are these your cousin’s men, John?” I asked.

“Sir, it is so,” said John, bridling.

“I hope we haven’t far to go,” said Scrobham. “Miss Sims doesn’t look in trim for a long trek.”

“Oh, I’m up to *anything*,” said the old lady vivaciously.

“The Lair is only about six miles distant,” said John pompously.

“Lair!” echoed Scrobham, startled. “Where on earth are we being taken to?”

“We are kidnapped by brigands, Scrobham,” I said solemnly. “Resistance is useless.”

John Monday took off his hat politely to us as we started, and then he disappeared into the carpenter’s house.

I suppose Scrobham thought I was joking, for he walked on without making any comment, chivalrously offering his arm to Miss Sims whenever we came to an irrigation ditch. The old lady tramped on very serenely, tilting her topee over her nose against the sun without the slightest pretence to dignity or grace; she had a silvery moustache and scrawny wisps of grey hair taggling down the back of her tortoise neck, but certainly she had courage. Courage, however, isn’t among the social graces, and I thought, as I walked behind Scrobham and Miss Sims, that I could hardly have chosen two less amusing people to be kidnapped with. They might reasonably have been thinking the same thing, but I don’t suppose they were, for they were both too noble.

Evidently we were making for the Tuli Len (the Twenty Heads)—a low range of wooded hills that rose, in a series of rather abrupt sandstone shelves, from the chequered valley. I expected that the brigands’ “Lair” would be only accessible by means of an arduous climb, and I trembled for the valiant arches of Miss Sims, but it seemed that news of our danger had appealed to all that was Most Chivalrous in Gildi brigand nature, and we found the outlaw, Rak Mandi, and some of his men, awaiting us in a gorge at the very foot of the hills. It was then that we realized for the first time—not only Scrobham, but also I—that we actually were in the hands of brigands—that we could not get away. But even then, Scrobham, with his extraordinary capacity for believing two opposing facts at once, didn’t accept the thing prosaically. There was a curious scene during the first hour of our captivity. Rak Mandi ordered Scrobham to sit down at once and write to the Consul-General at Tra-aan, demanding a ransom of a thousand pounds for each of us. Scrobham wrote what he was told, but he wrote it “in quotes”, as printers say. He added a whimsical statement of his own view of the situation—that Mandi, “a loyal friend to the British,” was putting things in this way to save his own face, but that it need not be taken too seriously. A strong escort should be sent to take us to Tra-aan, and should bring with it a handsome present for the “Loyal” brigand chief—a case of champagne or a good radio set. . . . Rak Mandi asked me to translate this to him (Scrobham was a poor Gildi scholar). I translated Scrobham’s vapourings as “The noble Vice-Consul suggests to his noble-noble superior that the Rak Mandi, being evidently generously inclined, might perhaps finally consider a smaller ransom, or even a valuable present of rare English merchandise.” The Rak directed me coldly to write an additional letter of my own to the Consul-General saying that he would not bargain at all, and that if the full price were not paid by return—(*return* meant about a fortnight)—a finger-tip from each of us would be sent as a reminder.

“He’s more serious than you think, Scrobham,” I said.

“I should never dream of calling the noble-Rak anything but profoundly serious,” said Scrobham, smiling.

We watched the Rak’s messenger start. We all felt fairly cheerful, each for a different reason. Scrobham because he believed in the Chivalry of the Gildi Gentleman, Miss Sims because she relied on the protection of her Maker, I because I believed in the British Consul-General. I happened to know that the Consul-General didn’t think much of Scrobham and would discount his information to a certain extent. I knew he would act for the best—and act on *my* letter.

In short, the thing was no joke—no fiction—in the eyes of Rak Mandi, and, though quite polite, at any rate at first, he was evidently anxious that we should understand this. He was considerate to us, but only in order to keep us fresh and saleable, as it were. He lodged us well. We moved on the second day, and after a fifteen-mile walk, arrived at a herdsman's hut on the lip of a ravine—a breezy place, not half so dirty as you would expect. Indeed, a free man might have chosen it as a week-end camping site; the rising ground behind the hut was carpeted with flowers—yellow lilies—a kind of blood-red balsam—a very delicate wild verbena. Tall pine-woods thirty yards away gave a shade in which our captors allowed us to lie during the worst heat of the day. The food—mostly chicken and eggs, fried in acid batter in the Gildi way—was not bad, though it was monotonous, and one felt the lack of green vegetables. The brigand Rak did us as well as he could, certainly, but only because he was a good husbandman. We were a financial speculation from his point of view—nothing else. At the suggestion of his cousin, John Monday, he had undertaken this speculation; his cousin, he realized, had mysterious missionary motives in recommending the venture, but to him, Rak Mandi, we were just a rather more daring financial flutter than usual. It was impossible for Scrobham to realize this, though, of course, he saw the picturesque value of our seizure and would do full justice to it later, when writing “My Sojourn Among Gildi Brigands” for *Blackwood's Magazine*. Mandi was a “Loyal Gildi” protecting us from “Disloyal Gildis”; the armed men by whom we were always closely surrounded were part of the game, Scrobham thought—part of the “fantastic Gildi instinct for pageantry” that Scrobham so often talked about. Scrobham expected to be treated by Mandi as a gentleman by a gentleman. “These are the descendants, Miss Sims, of the men who wrote *The Gild To-ali*, a saga of chivalry worthy to be ranked with the epics that have been written round King Arthur or Beowulf. The true Gildi gentleman is a *pukka* gentleman; the word *knightly* best describes him, I think, if he isn't spoiled by corrupting European or American influence. He's a gentleman—with something added—something mystic added. There are stories that have never been explained. . . .”

“Well I never!” said Miss Sims, but still she continued to express a wish that the brigands would soon consent to let her rig herself up a little place to sleep, apart from the rest of us. Their knightliness didn't stretch to that, as yet. I spoke to Rak Mandi about it. Miss Sims had a peculiar longing to be left unwatched while undressing and sleeping, I told him.

“Why? Is It deformed?” asked Rak Mandi.

Privacy became even more difficult to obtain for Miss Sims after I had raised the question. The Rak was not himself impressed by her, but his men were, and wherever she went she was followed by a large, deeply interested band. It was impossible for the simple brigands to believe that Miss Sims was a woman. Her too big topee, her scrawny short hair, her large knobby feet, her goggling spectacles, her harsh brisk voice, the silver bristles on her upper lip, suggested nothing of womanhood to them. The fact that she wore an ankle-length dress of faded flowered cotton only led them to suppose that she was a robed priest of some order new to them. After all, they had no sartorial precedents to rely on, in observing white people. If Scrobham had worn a wreath of jasmine round his bald patch, or if I had worn a morning coat, spats, a brown bowler and no shoes and socks, we should have been no more surprising to the brigands than we were already. It was fixed in their minds that Miss Sims was a venerable eunuch, dedicated to some unknown cult; an abrupt silence fell whenever she spoke, and everything she did was worthy of intense scrutiny.

“These poor creatures seem very interested in me,” said Miss Sims on the third difficult day. Unlike Scrobham she was not in the faintest degree interested in them, as people of a foreign race and different civilization—only as *souls*. She had lived thirty-five years among the Gildis without learning the names of one of their gods or devils or hearing a single legend of the country, although, of course, she was aware that they “harboured heathen superstitions.” A professional gleam brightened behind her spectacles as she spoke of their interest in her. “I believe they would be a fruitful soil for my message,” she added. Scrobham smiled superciliously when she said this, and murmured in a self-conscious aside to me, “The old *vandal!* She hasn’t the remotest idea of what she’s up against. I suppose it’s never occurred to her that she’s dealing with a people whose basic knowledge is beyond her conception—whose religion was ancient beyond imagination when Christianity began. Watch the expressions of the men now . . . how incredibly crude her prattle obviously seems to them. . . .”

I watched the brigands’ expressions. Miss Sims talked Gildi fluently, but with an atrocious accent. She was saying something like this: “You boys each had a father and mother, didn’t you?—a Daddy who was Oh so proud of you and called you little pet names . . . a Mummy who loved you tenderly whatever you did, however naughty you were, who held you up when your little toddling feet strayed into danger, who kissed your little aches and pains to make them well, who forgave all your childish sins. . . .” The brigands lapped it up from the word Go. I saw no trace whatever of Mystic Superiority in their gentle rapt faces. It seemed to me quite obvious that each

brigand was obediently sending his dull heart back to the mud hut where he was born—back to the games on the dung-heap—back to the lofty ritual attentions of his father and the other Elders—back to the scrawny pendent breasts of his mother. I felt convinced that Miss Sims’s words seemed to each of her brigand listeners fraught with a clairvoyant significance. Only Rak Mandi held himself physically and spiritually apart. It was obvious that Mummies and Daddies held no glamour for him—that in his eyes Miss Sims was a loathsome oddity rather than a shining revelation. Scrobham, who had meanly hoped to see all the brigands turn their backs on Miss Sims and spit, began by muttering, “They have *perfect* manners, these chaps, haven’t they?—absolutely perfect natural tact . . .”—then he told me an anecdote about a servant of his—an inscrutable Gildi, of course—who had received some mystic information about the death of an aunt of Scrobham’s. . . . “Wise Ingli Lady cross Dark River in far-away High Temple . . .” (Scrobham tried, embarrassingly, to imitate a Gildi looking mystic and inscrutable, and to mimic a dreamy Gildi voice), “and, *at that very hour*, Palmer, my dear aunt had fallen down with heart failure at morning service. . . . You can’t *explain* that sort of thing . . . and we have the parvenu impudence to import our silly little messages. . . .” Everybody has heard this kind of story, told by persons of chronically *tourist* intellect—a big web spun from a little cocoon of coincidence.

As the genuine absorption of the brigands in Miss Sims’s message became more and more unmistakable, Scrobham gave an ostentatious snort and went out of the hut. I was quite glad to be left to listen sleepily to the talk. With two-thirds of my mind I was trying to calculate how long—at the very quickest—it would take Rak Mandi’s messenger to reach Tra-aan. Supposing the Consul-General sent an escort in a caravan of Ford cars. . . . Cars had been used so rarely on that trail that perhaps the possibility had not occurred to the Rak. . . .

I was roused from my calculations by noticing that I had been wrong in supposing all the brigands to be whole-heartedly interested in Miss Sims. One, a big loutish lad near the door, I now saw, had in his hands Scrobham’s sweater, which Scrobham had hung on a nail on the wall. It was a gaudy, diamond-criss-crossed thing, and the brigand and his immediate neighbours were handling it with astonishment, turning it this way and that. Almost as soon as I noticed this, Scrobham came into the hut again and saw where his sweater was. For a second he looked annoyed, then he remembered to put on the smile that he always assumed when dealing with Gildis—the smile of a gentleman among gentlemen. He put out his hand genially to take the sweater. The brigand looked at him with an extremely insolent leer in his

oily black eyes—and, with slow swaggering movements, put the sweater on. For a moment Scrobham looked nonplussed again, but then his face reverted to its smile—a slightly more urgent smile, suggesting, “A joke’s a joke, my dear fellow, and I, for one, am always ready to enjoy a joke against myself, but . . .” In Gildi, he said, “Friend, my garment looks well on you, but you would not wish to leave me with a cold body. . . .” And he actually plucked gently at the shoulder of the sweater. The brigand pushed his hand rudely away and spat on his foot. Scrobham, whose nerves were becoming a little frayed by captivity, suddenly lost his temper and shouted in English: “Give me my sweater, you swine.” The brigand snatched up his gun and rattled it under Scrobham’s nose. There was something very deadly about the sound. Scrobham sprang back against the wall. Miss Sims’s voice ceased. Rak Mandi, at the other end of the hut, said nothing; perhaps he thought it as well that Scrobham should be brought to understand the realities of his position.

The silence lasted only a minute. Then Miss Sims began again. “Up to now, boys, I have been talking of the love of earthly parents, and perhaps some of you may have been thinking there could be no love more unbounded and more beautiful than the love of our dear mothers and fathers. Mothers especially, you will have been thinking; our mothers gave us life out of their own pain, each one of us was sent out into the world by a mother who wept bitter tears when she lost sight of us round the bend of the road, a mother who centred all her hopes on us, and thinks of us night and morning, saying to herself, ‘My little boy came to me—a wonderful gift—a holy mystery . . . my little boy . . . now grown a big boy . . . is he all that I hoped and dreamed? Is he keeping himself clean and right and innocent as he was when I first guided his toddling steps upon the earth?’ Boys, *at this moment*, perhaps, your mothers are thinking in this way of you—yes, even those mothers who have crossed the dark river of death, away from our earthly sight . . . not even death can quench that wonderful thing called mother-love. . . . Are you *sure*, dear boys, is each one of you *sure*, that none of us here is disappointing those pure hopes? Is there not one of you—I can see him now—whose heart is sore with pride and sin? . . . I ask that boy over there, *could he face his mother at this moment?* No. . . . I can see his poor brow, which his mother used to stroke so proudly, all twisted with the sense of sin. . . .” All the brigands turned to stare curiously at the forehead of the writhing lout who wore Scrobham’s sweater. He got up irritably from his squatting attitude and stood with his back to the others, looking ridiculously shy, like a tongue-tied performer at a school speech-day. In that same vein Miss Sims bumbled on, soaring from time to time to the idea of a heavenly

parent, but often returning to the mother theme, with special reference to the mother of the wearer of the sweater. After a particularly harrowing description of that mother's tears on receipt of the news that her son was a thief, a murmur began among the more susceptible brigands, which might be roughly translated as, "Hey, Bill, you better give that sweater up. It'll bring you bad luck." The thief shook his shoulders in obstinate refusal, and continued to stare at the wall, exactly like a stubborn child. Miss Sims talked on. After a few minutes two fellow-brigands came up and murmured anxiously to the thief; they pointed first at Miss Sims, then at the sky, then at the sweater. I could not hear what they said. I heard the erring brother's reply, though. He stamped his foot and shouted something like, "*I shan't give it back, so there. It's mine. I took it. It's mine, so there. . . .*" Then Miss Sims began to pray. She certainly had an extraordinarily telling technique. She seemed to be really alone with a beloved friend, who was, one would almost swear, listening sympathetically to her from somewhere just above the roof. Several brigands looked nervously upwards, and even I found it hard myself to be quite sure that no one was present except ourselves. Miss Sims's hearer was told all about the brigands—their essential goodheartedness—their kindness to their captives—their youth—their mothers' hopes of them—and the sad fact that one of them had "let the side down," as it were, having (for the moment only, no doubt) shut his heart against the light, betrayed the tender love of his mother, denied the unspeakable gift of an even higher love, and blotted the otherwise stainless page that the recording angel had allotted to Rak Mandi's brigand band. I forget the exact point she had reached when the murmurs directed towards the thief by his fellow-brigands became so loud that they almost drowned the prayer. At any rate, at that point the unlucky lout, with a smothered oath, dragged the sweater violently over his head, threw it furiously on the floor at Scrobham's feet and flounced out of the hut.

Scrobham picked the thing up slowly, looking most deeply disgusted. I suppose he felt that all his cherished Gildi illusions were smashed at one blow. While Miss Sims, who—since her eyes were shut—seemed not to have noticed the return of the sweater, uttered the rather long peroration of her prayer, Scrobham, in order to dissociate himself from us commoners, went up to the completely detached Rak Mandi near the further door, and stood there beside him—two Gentlemen among Plebeians. And, in the silence that followed Miss Sims's *Amen*, Rak Mandi, speaking for the first time that afternoon, said to Scrobham, "Leave me," and after a pause added, "You smell."



That last passage with the Rak seemed to break Scrobham's heart. He was a man to whom sympathy was the breath of life, and here there was no sympathy. After that, we three prisoners kept apart. Miss Sims remained surrounded by her squad of devoted desperadoes, Scrobham sat in a corner writing in his pocket-diary notes for the brave, whimsical, reflective account of his experiences that he afterwards contributed to *Blackwood's*. I used to sit a good deal at the edge of the pine-wood, watching ants. It refreshes me to look at insects, though I am not interested in classifying them. I enjoy feeling perfectly free to learn no lesson—perfectly free from any obligation to pass judgment. I can say, "This creature does this or that" without being expected to add, "How wrong—how right—how surprising—how human. . . ." Though a sluggard, I draw no moral at all from Going to the Ant; that's why I go to it.

Two or three days after Miss Sims's first discovery of the brigand susceptibility to her teachings, I was sitting in the shade there, when Rak Mandi came up. I was surprised, for I appreciated the fact that he really had a strong physical distaste for the proximity of white men; he actually did object to our smell, and he would half shut his eyes, sometimes, as if feeling faint with disgust, after studying what must have seemed to him our knobby, uneven, palely blood-tinted faces. Looking at him as he stood over me now, I could see that the Gildi face really is a more perfect face—as a face—than ours, though it is so grossly modelled. It seems to fit more neatly into a more neatly tailored skin; although the skin is blue-black, it is fine, hairless, oiled and exquisite. Certainly Gildi bones are more discreet than ours. I don't like the Gildis, but I rather like their sameness; all this Nordic and Latin physical variety is rather tiresome, since there is so little intellectual variety behind it. Gildis don't seem to bother with individuality much; individuality's one of the things I find it very refreshing to get away from sometimes. "Flesh and blood and bone, that's us," the Gildis seem to say, and God knows that's enough to say—when you come to think of it.

"You must stop that Thing's mouth," said Rak Mandi. (We could hear the drone of Miss Sims's latest message from where we were.) "Otherwise I shall feel obliged . . ."—he gave a little sigh—"to cut Its tongue out."

"Stop Miss Sims preaching!" I echoed. "Why, noble-Rak, surely she is doing no harm. She's happy, the men are happy, you're happy, I'm happy . . . no one's the worse for it. Even if she baptizes them all in due course, I don't see that that need inconvenience you at all. On the contrary, they would probably bring more enthusiasm to their work."

“It is causing my men to be two-hearted,” said Rak Mandi, using a characteristic Gildi expression. “Already two of them have spoken of going away to their own villages—playing traitor to me. My spies have reported to me that It preaches treachery. You must stop Its mouth,” he said on a final note—Gildis have no fear of repeating themselves exactly. “Otherwise I shall be obliged——”

“Oh, I’ll do my best, noble-Rak,” I said hurriedly. “But I’m afraid Miss Sims is very much set on——”

“Stop Its mouth.”

I went there and then to the hut, where the indefatigable Miss Sims was conducting her afternoon talk. I stood in the doorway listening for a moment, and was surprised at the progress Miss Sims had made. One or two of her hearers were now quite articulate, asking naïve questions and applauding the replies with the sharp “*Fla-fla*” of Gildi approval; sometimes one brigand would explain away another’s expressed problem, like a precocious school-child putting a dullard right, in class. Miss Sims, I was sorry to hear, was actually preaching on the sinfulness of the brigand career. They had been led away by love of gain, she said, comfortingly, it was a mistake fortunately easily put right; they had only to listen to the still small voice——

“Miss Sims,” I said. “Sorry to interrupt, but I have an important message for you.”

With a loving smile of apology to her audience, she stumped to my side. I gave her Rak Mandi’s message pretty baldly.

“My dear Mr. Palmer,” she said in a businesslike voice, as she took off her thick glasses and wiped them briskly. (Was there a tear of self-commiseration on them? It was quickly gone.) “You don’t suppose that that man’s threats will stop me doing my duty?”

I said that the fulfilment of his threat would certainly stop the delivery of her message.

“How can one say that?” she said. “It is for a Higher Authority to judge of that. It may be that this trial is required of me. . . .”

Miss Sims’s motives were as completely hidden from me as those of an ant; I must accept her as I would an ant, saying, “She is this—she is that . . .” and making no comment. She demanded no comment of me; she was self-generating, as an ant is. I found her extremely refreshing at that moment, and as I have often saved a drowning ant, because I so much

wanted it to go on, uncoerced, doing its own thing—so I would now have done a good deal to save Miss Sims from interruption in the form of martyrdom. But she would do nothing to save herself. She went back to her place at the end of the room and began talking again about the incompatibility of brigandage with true righteousness.

I heard Rak Mandi shout a word of command outside, and I supposed for a moment that he was trying to withdraw his men from the corrupting influence, but when I turned I saw that he and Scrobham were standing on the edge of the ravine looking down the valley at something exciting. The Rak was holding Scrobham by the arm, and this, for a minute, seemed to me absolutely incredible, until I guessed that some party of rescuers was approaching, and that the prudent Rak was using Scrobham as a protecting shield against rifle-fire. But how could rescuers be in sight? Our letters could scarcely possibly have reached Tra-aan yet—much less have been answered. I ran to the rim of the ravine, and Miss Sims's audience followed me, panting and cackling enquiries.

Up the rough trail that led to our little plateau marched a number of men—quite a hundred or so, I think. Rak Mandi, taken unawares, was obviously at a loss; he was bewildered by the fact that his own sentries were marching quite cheerfully and frankly with the approaching band. And Scrobham—the humiliations of the past forgotten—while trying vainly to wriggle his arm out of the Rak's grasp, further lulled the leader's suspicions by saying, "An escort. . . . I knew they'd send a good escort. You shan't be the loser for our going, noble-Rak—I'll see that your hospitality and loyalty are rewarded. . . ." In any case, the surprise of the sight was too sudden to allow the Rak to organize an effective defence—even had he been sure that he was being attacked.

"But it's much too soon for rescue to be possible, isn't it?" said Miss Sims's precise teacher's croak beside me—and there was an innocently joyful note in it. Martyrdom is no joke, after all. No martyr could help feeling relieved if the Lord should change His plans sometimes.

"We means no harm to nobody," shouted a voice in English from the crowd. I recognized the Chief of Police of Padda—a fat Gildi worthy who had been tactfully out of the way during the "Communist" invasion. I noticed that he, and a good many of the men who accompanied him, were wearing blue sashes diagonally across their black tunics.

I think now that Rak Mandi's men must have been seized by panic. They knew even less than we did what this invasion of strangers meant. But they

saw themselves trapped between a life they had recently learned to be ashamed of, and the mysterious forces of the law. They must assert their innocence—their change of heart; they must play their safest card. As the Chief of Police—puffing—reached the plateau, three of the brigands stepped up to their own leader, Rak Mandi, and shot him through the breast.

For a minute it was difficult to see what was happening. I saw the murderers hasten to the policeman and begin an agitated explanation—pointing at us—pointing at their prostrate chief—pointing again and again at Miss Sims. I heard one of them shout, “The noble-Thing’s words were like fire in our hearts.” I saw Scrobham actually wringing his hands, dancing about, shouting, “You dam swine,” again and again. It was the *caddishness* of the thing that seemed so appalling, he afterwards told me. To me, it was simply the death of a living man that seemed appalling, I don’t quite know why. I don’t think I should have minded at all if it had been Scrobham; that would have been only the death of a skinful of illusions. However, it was Rak Mandi whose clear purposes were thus reduced to nothing.

When we had all calmed down a little, the Chief of Police explained his presence. The kingdom of the Gildi, he explained, was now living under a Fascist *régime*—(I happened to notice at that moment that he was standing in the shade of an immense castor-oil plant, and I thought, idiotically, how unnecessarily neatly events sometimes frame themselves). Indeed it seemed that Fascism was quite an old story in Tra-aan by now; the Chief Rak—now Blue-sash Dictator—had had time to establish this new idea with some promise of permanence. His opening activities in suppressing Communism had resulted in the invasion of Padda by the retreating rabble that had driven us out. The Chief Rak’s Fascist army had arrived next day—just in time to save the condemned missionaries from the gallows. And John Monday, after prudently waiting a few days to see if any further armies arrived to supplant the Blue-sash *régime*, went to the police with the information that his cousin, “a mountain man,” was extending his protection to three more foreign survivors.

“All’s well that ends well, I suppose,” said Scrobham, looking ambiguously down at the limp body of Rak Mandi. I knew he was thinking of the insults that the proud man had so indifferently thrown at him. “He saved our lives . . . but only from love of gain, of course . . . he wasn’t much of a straw to clutch at, poor devil, if the truth were known. . . .”

“Not *really* knightly,” I suggested.

“Well—as I say—we owe our lives to him,” said Scrobham. “Only a cad would speak critically of the dead.”

But as we walked away down the ravine, with a great clatter of clog-shod feet and chatter, I looked up the steep bank to the edge of our plateau, and, just dangling over the broken glassy lip, I saw Rak Mandi’s hand—moving. “I’m going back for something,” I said to Scrobham. “I’ll catch you up.”

Rak Mandi, when I reached him, was rolling his head feebly on the grass. His eyes were open; he was bleeding profusely from the mouth and choking a bit. The black skin of his face looked curiously drained. I thought it would ease him if I propped him up against a pine-tree trunk. I managed to do this, but he seemed in danger of toppling over sideways again, so I squatted beside him, propping him up. He said in a strangled voice, “Go further away,” and after gasping and choking a moment added, “Go very far away.” I left him and stood beneath the next tree. He did not fall over but remained leaning limply against the tree looking at me very coldly. One could see death falling on him, like scarcely visible gossamer veils falling one after another, hiding him very gradually away. I thought how curious it was that we should all have changed our roles—that Scrobham, the gentleman among gentlemen, should have left such a slight epitaph for the man he believed to have saved him—that Miss Sims, the preacher of a gospel of love, should be responsible for this same man’s death—that I, who didn’t believe in any pretty communications between man and man—least of all between white man and negro—should be now, so to speak, smoothing the pillow of a Gildi brigand’s deathbed. And as I was thinking this, Rak Mandi uttered a low word, his chin dropped—and he, too, changed his role. He changed from a man into a thing. I ran after the others, and sent back two of his own men to bury him.

THE END

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## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Collected Short Stories* by Stella Benson]