

Tracy Louis

The Message



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«Public Domain»

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CHAPTER I

DERELICTS

“It’s fine!” said Arthur Warden, lowering his binoculars so as to glut his eyes with the full spectacle. “In fact, it’s more than fine, it’s glorious!”

He spoke aloud in his enthusiasm. A stout, elderly man who stood near – a man with “retired tradesman” writ large on face and figure – believed that the tall, spare-built yachtsman was praising the weather.

“Yes, sir,” he chortled pompously, “this is a reel August day. *I* knew it. Fust thing this morning I tole my missus we was in for a scorcher.”

Warden gradually became aware that these ineptitudes were by way of comment. He turned and read the weather–prophet’s label at a glance. But life was too gracious at that moment, and he was far too well–disposed toward all men, that he should dream of inflicting a snub.

“That was rather clever of you,” he agreed genially. “Now, though the barometer stood high, I personally was dreading a fog three hours ago.”

The portly one gurgled.

“I’ve got a glass,” he announced. “Gev’ three pun’ ten for it, but there’s a barrowmeter in my bones that’s worth a dozen o’ them things. I’ll back rheumatiz an’ a side o’ bacon any day to beat the best glass ever invented.”

All unknowing, here was the touch of genius that makes men listen. Warden showed his interest.

“A side of bacon!” he repeated.

“Yes, sir. Nothing to ekal it. I was in the trade, so I know wot I’m talkin’ about. And, when you come to think of it, why not? Pig skin an’ salt – one of ‘em won’t have any truck wi’ damp – doesn’t want it an’ shows it – an’ t’other sucks it up like a calf drinkin’ milk. I’ve handled bacon in tons, every brand in the market, an’ you can’t smoke any of ‘em on a muggy day.”

“Does your theory account for the old–fashioned notion that pigs can see the wind?”

The stout man considered the point. It was new to him, and he was a Conservative.

“I’m better acquent wi’ bacon,” he said stubbornly.

“So I gather. I was only developing your very original idea, on the principle that

““You may break, you may shatter, the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still.””

The ex–bacon–factor rapped an emphatic stick on the pavement. Though he hoped some of his friends would see him hob–nobbing “with a swell,” he refused to be made game of.

“Wot ‘as scent got to do with it?” he demanded wrathfully.

“Everything. Believe me, pigs have been used as pointers. And consider the porcine love of flowers. Why, there once was a pig named Maud because it *would* come into the garden.”

Had Warden laughed he might have given the cue that was lacking. But his clean–cut, somewhat sallow face did not relax, and an angry man puffed away from him in a red temper.

He caught scraps of soliloquy.

“A pig named Maud!.. Did anybody ever hear the like?.. An’ becos it kem into a garden... Might just as well ‘ave called it Maria.”

Then Warden, left at peace with the world, devoted himself again to the exquisite panorama of Cowes on a sunlit Monday of the town's great week. In front sparkled the waters of the Solent, the Bond Street of ocean highways. A breath of air from the west rippled over a strong current sweeping eastward. It merely kissed the emerald plain into tiny facets. It was so light a breeze that any ordinary sailing craft would have failed to make headway against the tide, and the gay flags and bunting of an innumerable pleasure fleet hung sleepily from their staffs and halyards. Yet it sufficed to bring a covey of white-winged yachts flying back to Cowes after rounding the East Lepe buoy. Jackyard topsails and bowsprit spinnakers preened before it. Though almost imperceptible on shore, it awoke these gorgeous butterflies of the sea into life and motion. Huge 23-meter cutters, such as *White Heather II*, *Brynhild* and *Nyria*, splendid cruisers like *Maoona*, *errymaid*, *Shima*, *Creole*, and *Britomart*, swooped grandly into the midst of the anchored craft as though bent on self-destruction. To the unskilled eye it seemed a sheer miracle that any of them should emerge from the chaos of yachts, redwings, launches, motorboats, excursion steamers, and smaller fry that beset their path. But Cowes is nothing if not nautical. Those who understood knew that bowsprits and dinghies of moored yachts would be cleared magically, and even spinnaker booms topped to avoid lesser obstruction. Those who did not understand – who heard no syllable of the full and free language that greeted an inane row-boat essaying an adventurous crossing of the course – gazed breathlessly at these wondrous argosies, and marveled at their escape from disaster. Then the white fleet swept past the mouth of the river, and vanished behind Old Castle Point on the way to far distant buoy or light-ship that marked the beginning of the homeward run. And that was all – a brief flight of fairy ships – and Cowes forthwith settled down to decorous junketing.

Away to the northwest a gathering of gray-hulled monsters had thundered a royal salute of twenty-one guns, and the smoke-cloud still lay in a blue film on the Hampshire coast. The *Dreadnought* was hauling at her anchors before taking a king and an emperor to witness the prowess of her gunners. The emperor's private yacht, a half-fledged man-o'-war, was creeping in the wake of the competing yachts. Perchance her officers might see more of British gunnery practice than of the racing.

Close at hand a swarm of launches and ships' boats buzzed round the landing slip of the Royal Yacht Club. The beautiful lawn and gardens were living parterres of color, for the Castle is a famous rendezvous of well-dressed women. Parties were assembling for luncheon either in the clubhouse or on board the palatial vessels in the roads. To the multitude, yachting at Cowes consists of the blare of a starting-gun, the brief vision of a cluster of yachts careening under an amazing press of canvas, and, for the rest, gossip, eating, bridge – with a picnic or a dance to eke out the afternoon and evening.

Arthur Warden soon turned his back on the social Paradise he was not privileged to enter. He was resigned to the fact that the breeze which sent the competitors in the various matches spinning merrily to Spithead would not move his hired cutter a yard against the tide. So, having nothing better to do, he sauntered along the promenade toward the main street. On the way he passed the one-time purveyor of bacon sitting beside a lady who by long association had grown to resemble him.

"Now I wonder if her name is Maria," he mused.

Drifting with the holiday crowd, he bought some picture postcards, a box of cigarettes, and a basket of hothouse peaches. Being a dilettante in some respects, he admired and became the prospective owner of the fruit before he learned the price. There were four peaches in the basket, and they cost him ten shillings.

"Ah," he said, as the shopkeeper threw the half sovereign carelessly into the till, "I see you have catered for Lucullus?"

"I don't think so, sir," said the greengrocer affably. "Where does he live?"

"He had villas at Tusculum and Neapolis."

"There's no such places in the Isle of Wight, sir."

"Strange! Has not the game-dealer across the street supplied him with peacocks' tongues?"

The man grinned.

"Somebody's bin gettin' at you, sir," he cried.

"True, very true. Yet, according to Horace, I sup with Lucullus to-night."

"Horace said that, did he?"

The greengrocer suddenly turned and peered down a stairway.

"Horace!" he yelled, "who's this here Lucullus you've bin gassin' about?"

A shock-headed boy appeared.

"Loo who?" said he.

Warden departed swiftly.

"My humor does not appeal to Cowes," he reflected. "I have scored two failures. Having conjured Horace from a coal-cellar let me now confer with Diogenes in his tub."

Applied to Peter Evans, and his phenomenally small dinghy, the phrase was a happy enough description of the ex-pilot who owned the *Nancy*. Evans and his craft had gone out of commission together. Both were famous in the annals of Channel pilotage, but an accident had deprived Peter of his left leg, so he earned a livelihood by summer cruising round the coast, and he was now awaiting his present employer at a quay in the river Medina.

But Warden's pace slackened again, once he was clear of the fruiterer's shop. Sailing was out of the question until the breeze freshened. It was in his mind to bid Peter meet him again at four o'clock. Meanwhile, he would go to Newport by train, and ramble in Parkhurst Forest for a couple of hours. Recalling that happy-go-lucky mood in later days of storm and stress, he tried to piece together the trivial incidents that were even then conspiring to bring about the great climax of his life. A pace to left or right, a classical quip at his extravagance in the matter of the peaches, a slight hampering of free movement because the Portsmouth ferry-boat happened to be disgorging some hundreds of sightseers into the main street of West Cowes – each of these things, so insignificant, so commonplace, helped to bring him to the one spot on earth where fate, the enchantress, had set her snare in the guise of a pretty girl.

For it was undeniably a pretty face that was lifted to his when a young lady, detaching herself from the living torrent that delayed him for a few seconds on the pavement, appealed for information.

"Will you please tell me how I can ascertain the berth of the yacht *Sans Souci*?" she asked.

It has been seen that he was glib enough of speech, yet now he was tongue-tied. In the very instant that the girl put forward her simple request, his eyes were fixed on the swarthy features of a Portuguese freebooter known to him as the greatest among the many scoundrels infesting the hinterland of Nigeria. There was no mistaking the man. The Panama hat, spotless linen, fashionable suit and glossy boots of a typical visitor to Cowes certainly offered strong contrast to the soiled garb of the balked slave-trader whom he had driven out of a burning and blood-bespattered African village a brief year earlier. But, on that occasion, Arthur Warden had gazed steadily at Miguel Figuero along the barrel of a revolver; under such circumstances one does not forget.

For a little space, then, the Englishman's imagination wandered far afield. Instinctively he raised his hat as he turned to the girl and repeated her concluding words.

"The *Sans Souci*, did you say?"

"Yes, a steam-yacht – Mr. Baumgartner's."

She paused. Though Warden was listening now, his wits were still wool-gathering. His subconscious judgment was weighing Figuero's motives in coming to England, and, of all places, to Cowes. Of the many men he had encountered during an active life this inland pirate was absolutely the last he would expect to meet during Regatta Week in the Isle of Wight.

The girl, half aware of his obsession, became confused – even a trifle resentful.

"I am sorry to trouble you," she went on nervously. "I had no idea there would be such a crowd, and I spoke to you because – because you looked as if you might know –"

Then he recovered his self-possession, and proceeded to surprise her.

"I *do* know," he broke in hurriedly. "Pray allow me to apologize. The sun was in my eyes, and he permits no competition. Against him, even you would dazzle in vain. To make amends, let me take you to the *Sans Souci*. She is moored quite close to my cutter, and my dinghy is not fifty yards distant."

The girl drew back a little. This offer of service was rather too prompt, while its wording was peculiar, to say the least. She was so good-looking that young men were apt to place themselves unreservedly at her disposal without reference to sun, moon, or stars.

"I think I would prefer to hire a boat," she said coldly. "I should explain that an officer on board the steamer told me I ought to discover the whereabouts of the yacht before starting, or the boatman would take me out of my way and overcharge."

"Exactly. That officer's name was Solomon. Now, I propose to take you straight there for nothing. Come with me as far as the quay. One glance at Peter will restore the confidence you have lost in me."

Then he smiled, and a woman can interpret a man's smile with almost uncanny prescience. The whiff of pique blew away, and she temporized.

"Is the *Sans Souci* a long way out?"

"Nearly a mile. And look! We can eat these while Peter toils."

He opened the paper bag and showed her the peaches. She laughed lightly. Were she a Frenchwoman she would have said, "But, sir, you are droll." Being English, she came to the point.

"Where is the quay you speak of?"

"Here. Close at hand."

As they walked off together she discovered out of the corner of her eye that his glance was searching the thinning mob of her fellow passengers. She guessed that he had recognized some person unexpectedly.

"Are you sure I am not trespassing on your time?" she demanded.

"Quite sure. When I said the sun was in my eyes I used poetic license. I meant the West African sun. A man who arrived on your steamer reminded me of Nigeria – where we – er – became acquainted."

"There! You want to speak to him, of course," and she halted suddenly.

He smiled again, and held out the bag.

"He is a Portuguese gin-trader – and worse. And he is gone. Would you have me run after him and offer peaches that were meant for you?"

"But that is ridiculous."

"Most certainly."

"I don't mean that. How could you possibly have provided peaches for me?"

"I don't know. Ask the fairies who arrange these things. Ten minutes ago I had no more notion of buying fruit than of buying an aeroplane. Ten minutes ago you and I had never met. Yet here we are, you and I and the luscious four. And there is Peter, sailing master, cook, and general factotem of the *Nancy* cutter. Don't you think Peter's wooden leg induces trust? He calls it a prop, which suggests both moral and physical support. By the way, have you ever noticed that wooden-legged men are invariably fat? And Cæsar vouched for the integrity of fat men."

Though the girl began to find his chatter agreeable, she was secretly dismayed when she compared the gigantic Peter with the diminutive dinghy. She had never before seen so broad a man or so small a boat. But she had grit, and was unwilling to voice her doubt.

"Will it hold us?" she inquired with apparent unconcern.

"Oh, yes. When Peter was a pilot that little craft carried him and his two mates through many a heavy sea. Don't be afraid. We will put you safely on board the *Sans Souci*. Now, you sit there and hold the bag. I'll take my two at once, please, as I find room forrard."

"Not much of a breeze for cruisin', Mr. Warden," grinned Peter, casting an appreciative eye over the latest addition to the *Nancy's* muster-roll.

“We’re not bound for a cruise, Peter, worse luck,” said Warden. “The young lady wishes to reach that big yacht moored abreast of the cutter. So give way, O heart of oak! Thou wert christened stone, yet a good name is rather to be chosen than great riches.”

Peter winked solemnly at the fair unknown.

“He do go on, don’t he, miss?” he said.

The girl nodded, for ripe peach is an engrossing fruit. She was enjoying her little adventure. It savored of romance. Already her slight feeling of nervousness had vanished. In her heart of hearts she hoped that Mr. Warden might prove to be a friend of the Baumgartners.

Under Peter’s powerful strokes the dinghy sped rapidly into the open waters of the Solent. At that hour there was but slight stir in the roadstead. Everybody afloat seemed to be eating. Each launch and yacht they passed held a luncheon party beneath awnings or in a deck saloon. Through the golden stillness came the pleasant notes of a band playing in the grounds of the clubhouse. A bugle sounded faint and shrill from the deck of a distant warship. Sitting in this cockleshell of a craft, so near the glistening water that one might trail both hands in it, was vastly agreeable after a long journey by rail and steamer. From sea level the girl obtained an entirely different picture of Cowes and the Solent from that glimpsed from the throbbing ferry-boat. The sea appeared to have risen, the wooded hills and clusters of houses to have sunk bodily. Already the shore was curiously remote. A sense of brooding peace fell on her like a mantle. She sighed, and wondered why she was so content.

Peter’s airy summary of his master’s habits seemed to have cast a spell on their tongues. For fully five minutes no one spoke. The wondrous silence was broken only by the rhythmical clank of the oars, the light splash of the boat’s movement, the strains of a waltz from the Castle lawn, and the musical laughter of women from the yachts.

Owing to the shortness of the dinghy, and the fact that the girl faced Warden, with Peter intervening, the two younger people were compelled to look at each other occasionally. The man saw a sweetly pretty face dowered with a rare conjunction of myosotis blue eyes and purple eyelashes, and crowned with a mass of dark brown hair. Accent, manner, and attire bespoke good breeding. She was dressed well, though simply, in blue canvas. Being somewhat of an artist, he did not fail to note that her hat, blouse, gloves and boots, though probably inexpensive, harmonized in brown tints. She was young, perhaps twenty-two. Guessing at random, he imagined her the daughter of some country rector, and, from recent observation of the Baumgartners, eked out by their public repute, he admitted a certain sentiment of surprise that such blatant parvenus should be on her visiting list.

For her part, the girl had long since discovered that her self-appointed guide was an army man. West Africa gave a hint of foreign service that was borne out by a paleness beneath the tan of the yachtsman. A regimental mess, too, is a university in itself, conferring a well-defined tone, a subtle distinctiveness. Each line of his sinewy frame told of drill, and his rather stern face was eloquent of one accustomed to command.

These professional hall-marks were not lost on her. She had mixed in circles where they were recognized. And she was prepared to like him. In her woman’s phrase, she thought it was “nice of him” not to question her. She was quite sure that if they met again ashore that afternoon he would leave her the option of renewing or dropping their acquaintance as she thought fit. Yet, for one so ready of speech after the first awkward moment outside the steamer pier, it was surprising that he should now be so taciturn.

When he did address her, he kept strictly to the purpose of their expedition.

“That is the *San Souci*,” he said, pointing to a large white yacht in the distance. “A splendid vessel. Built on the Clyde, I believe?”

“Ay, three hunnerd tons, an’ good for ten knots in any or’nary sea,” put in Peter.

“You know her, of course?” went on Warden.

“No. I have never before set eyes on her.”

“Well, you will enjoy your visit all the more, perhaps. From last night’s indications, you should have plenty of amusement on board.”

“Are there many people there, then?”

“I am not sure. The owners gave a big dinner party yesterday. The launch was coming and going at all hours.”

“What is that?” she asked inconsequently, indicating with a glance a small round object bobbing merrily westward some few yards away.

“It is difficult to say. Looks like a float broken loose from a fishing net,” said Warden.

“No, sir, it ain’t that,” pronounced Peter. “Nets have corks an’ buoys, an’ that ain’t neether.”

“You may think it absurd,” cried the girl, “yet I fancied just now that I caught a resemblance to a face, a distorted black face; but it has turned round.”

The boatman lay on his oars, and they all looked at the dancing yellow ball hurrying to the open sea.

“At first sight it suggests a piratical pumpkin,” said Warden.

“But I have been watching it quite a long time, and I am certain it is black on the other side. There! Surely I am not mistaken. And the people on that yacht have seen it, too.”

The girl’s face flushed with excitement. The thing had really startled her, and the two men were ready to agree that it now presented a mask-like visage, more than half submerged, as it swirled about in a chance eddy. That some loungers on a yacht close at hand had also noticed it was made evident by their haste to run down a gangway into a boat fastened alongside.

“After it, Peter!” cried Warden. “It is the lady’s trover by the law of the high seas. Bend your back for the honor of the *Nancy*. Port a bit – port. Steady all. Keep her there.”

In her eagerness, the girl tried to rise to her feet.

“Sit still, miss,” growled Peter, laboring mightily. “Judging by the position of that other craft, an’ from wot I know of Mr. Warden, there’ll be a devil of a bump in ‘arf a tick.”

“Starboard a point,” cooed Warden, on his knees in the bows. “Steady as she goes.”

Suddenly he sprang upright.

“Hard a–starboard!” he shouted, and leaped overboard.

A yell from the opposing boat, a scream from the girl, a sharp crack as an oar-blade snapped against the sturdy ribs of the dinghy, and the two boats shot past each other, Peter’s prompt obedience to orders having averted a collision.

“My godfather!” he roared, “e ‘ad to jump for it. But don’t you worry, miss – ‘e can swim like a herrin’.”

Nevertheless, the girl did worry, as her white face and straining eyes well showed. Peter swung the dinghy about so nimbly that she lost all sense of direction. It seemed as if the laughing Solent had swallowed Warden, and she gazed affrightedly on every side but the right one.

“Oh, how could he do it?” she wailed. “I shall never forgive myself – “

Then she heard a deep breath from the water behind her, and she turned to see Warden, with blood streaming from a gash across his forehead, swimming easily with one hand. She whisked round and knelt on the seat.

“Quick!” she cried. “Come close. I can hold you.”

“Please do not be alarmed on my account,” he said coolly. “I fear I look rather ghastly, but the injury is nothing, a mere glancing blow from an oar.”

Even in her unnerved condition she could not fail to realize that he was in no desperate plight. But she was very frightened, and grasped his wrist tenaciously when his fingers rested on the stern rail. Yet, even under such trying circumstances, she was helpful. Though half sobbing, and utterly distressed, she dipped her handkerchief in the water and stooped until she could wash the wound sufficiently to reveal its extent. He was right. The skin was broken, but the cut had no depth.

“Why did you behave so madly?” she asked with quivering lips.

“It was method, not madness, fair maid,” he said, smiling up at her. “Our opponents had four oars and a light skiff against Peter’s two and a dinghy that is broad as it is long. To equalize the handicap I had to jump, else you would have lost your trophy. By the way, here it is!”

With his disengaged hand he gave her a smooth, highly polished oval object which proved to be a good deal larger than it looked when afloat. The girl threw it into the bottom of the boat without paying the least heed to it. She was greatly flurried, and, womanlike, wanted to box Warden’s ears for his absurd action.

“You have terrified me out of my wits,” she gasped. “Can you manage to climb on board?”

“That would be difficult – perhaps dangerous. Peter, pull up to the nearest ship’s ladder. Then I can regain my perch forrard.”

But Peter was gazing with an extraordinary expression of awe, almost of fear, at the unusual cause of so much commotion.

“Well, sink me!” he muttered, “if that ain’t Ole Nick’s own himmidge, it’s his head stoker’s. I’ve never seen anything like it, no, not in all my born days. My aunt! It’s ugly enough to cause a riot.”

CHAPTER II

HOW THE MESSAGE WAS DELIVERED

Owing to the return of the rival boat, Peter's agitation passed unnoticed. A superior person was apologizing for the accident, though inclined to tax Warden with foolhardiness.

"You have only yourself to blame for that knock on the head, which might have been far more serious than it is," he said.

"Will you kindly go to – Jericho?" said the man in the water.

The superior person's tone grew more civil when he found that he was talking to one whom he condescended to regard as an equal.

"Don't you want any assistance?" he inquired.

"No, thanks, unless you will allow me to use your gangway in order to climb aboard the dinghy."

"By all means. I am sorry the oar caught you. But you annexed the prize, so I suppose you are satisfied. What was it?"

"A calabash, I fancy. You will see it lying in the boat."

Peter, who was really fascinated by the carved face which drew the girl's attention in the first instance, suddenly kicked it and turned it upside down with his wooden leg. The men in the second boat saw only the glazed yellow rind of an oval gourd, some twelve inches long and eight or nine in diameter.

"The pot was hardly worth the scurry," laughed one of them.

"If Greeks once strove for a crown of wild olive, why not Englishmen for a calabash?" said Warden.

There was an element of the ludicrous in the unexpected comment from a man in his predicament. Every true-born Briton resents any remark that he does not quite understand, and some among the strangers grinned. The girl, still holding Warden's wrist as though she feared he would vanish in the depths if she let go, darted a scornful look at them.

"The truth is that these gentlemen competed because they thought they were sure to win," she cried.

"It was a fair race, madam," expostulated the leader of the yacht's boat.

"Y–yes," she admitted. "My presence equalized matters."

As the men were four to two she scored distinctly.

"Give way, Peter," said Warden. "If I laugh I shall swallow more salt water than is good for me."

He was soon seated astride the bows of the dinghy, which Peter's strong arms brought quickly alongside the *Sans Souci*. By that time, the girl's composure was somewhat restored. Warden obviously made so light of his ducking that she did not allude to it again. As for the gourd, it rested at her feet, but she seemed to have lost all interest in it. In truth, she was annoyed with herself for having championed her new friend's cause, and thus, in a sense, condoned his folly.

It did not occur to her that the *Sans Souci's* deck was singularly untenanted, until a gruff voice hailed the occupants of the dinghy from the top of the gangway.

"Below there," came the cry. "Wotcher want here?"

The girl looked up with a flash of surprise in her expressive face. But she answered instantly:

"I am Miss Evelyn Dane, and I wish to see Mrs. Baumgartner."

"She's ashore," was the reply.

"Well, I must wait until she returns."

"You can't wait here."

"But that is nonsense. I have come from Oxfordshire at her request."

"It don't matter tuppence where you've come from. No one is allowed aboard. Them's my orders."

Miss Dane turned bewildered eyes on Warden.

"How can one reason with a surly person like this?" she asked.

"He is incapable of reason – he wants a hiding," said Warden.

A bewhiskered visage of the freak variety glared down at him.

"Does he, you swob," roared the apparition, "an' oo's goin' to give it 'im?"

"I am. Take this lady to the saloon, and come with me to the cutter yonder. My man will bring you to your bunk in five minutes, or even less."

"For goodness' sake, Mr. Warden, do not make my ridiculous position worse," cried the girl, reddening with annoyance. "Mrs. Baumgartner wrote and urged me to see her without any delay on board this yacht. I telegraphed her early this morning saying I would be here soon after midday. What am I to do?"

"If I were you, I would go back to Oxfordshire," he said.

"But I cannot – at least, not until I have spoken to her. I am – poor. I am practically engaged as companion – another name for governess, I suspect – to Mrs. Baumgartner's daughter, and I dare not throw away the chance of obtaining a good situation."

Warden, who was dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief, did not reply at once, and Evelyn Dane, in her distress, little guessed the irrational conceit that danced in his brain just then. But the presence of Peter, and the torrent of sarcastic objurgation that flowed from the guardian of the *Sans Souci*, imposed restraint. It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest that, under the conditions, it would be a capital notion if they got married, and took a honeymoon cruise in the *Nancy*! – Long afterward he wondered what would have been the outcome of any such fantastic proposal. Would she have listened? At any rate, it amused him at the time to think that there was little difference between a lover and a lunatic.

But he contented himself with saying:

"I fear I am rather light-headed to-day, Miss Dane. Let us appeal to Peter the solid, and draw upon his wide experience. Tell us then, O pilot, what course shall we shape?"

Peter, rapidly restored to the normal by the familiar language coming from the rail of the yacht, glanced up.

"If I was you, sir, I'd ax monkey-face there wot time 'is missis was due aboard. Mebbe the young leddy would find her bearin's then, so to speak."

"Excellent. Do you hear, Cerberus? When does Mrs. Baumgartner return?"

The watchman, taking thought, decided to suspend his taunts.

"Why didn't you ax me that at fust?" he growled. "I'm on'y obeyin' orders. Seven o'clock, they said. An' it didn't matter 'oo kem here, if it was the Pope o' Rome hisself, it's as much as my place is worth to let him aboard."

"That is final, Miss Dane," said Warden. "There are two alternatives before you. I can either gag and bind the person who has just spoken, thus securing by force your admission to the yacht, or I can entertain you on the *Nancy* until seven o'clock."

"But I ought to go ashore."

"It is not to be dreamed of, I assure you. Cowes is overrun with excursionists. You will be much happier with Peter and me, and we are no mean cooks when put on our mettle."

She yielded disconsolately. Dislike of the *Sans Souci* and every one connected with that palatial vessel was already germinating in her mind. If it were not for the considerations outlined in her brief statement to Warden she would have caught the next ferry to Portsmouth and allowed Mrs. Baumgartner to make other provision for her daughter's companionship, or tuition.

"Give me a call when you are let off the chain," said Warden pleasantly to the watchman, as the dinghy curved apart from the yacht's side.

The girl colored even more deeply. Such behavior was not only outrageous, but it supplied a safety valve for her own ruffled feelings.

"I wish you would not say such stupid things," she cried vehemently. "What would happen if that wretched man took you at your word? You would be mixed up in some horrible brawl, and wholly on my account."

"He will not come, Miss Dane," he said sadly. "Let me explain, however, that I prodded his thick hide with set purpose. He is alone on the *Sans Souci*; he blustered because he was afraid we meant to go aboard, aye or nay. Is it not extraordinary that such a vessel should be absolutely denuded of owner, guests, servants, and crew? That man is not a sailor. Unless I am greatly mistaken, he does not belong to the yacht in any capacity. What does it mean? You may take it from me that it is unusual, I might almost say phenomenal, for a valuable steam-yacht in commission to be deserted in that manner."

"But he admitted that 'they,' meaning Mr. and Mrs. Baumgartner, I suppose, would return early this evening?"

"I am sure he is right in that. But where are the twenty odd domestics and members of the crew? When Peter and I went ashore at ten o'clock to-day the *Sans Souci* was alive with people."

"I only know that Mrs. Baumgartner seems to have been thoughtless where I am concerned," said the girl, absorbed in her own troubles.

Nevertheless, she brightened considerably when Warden assisted her to reach the spotless deck of the *Nancy*. By dint of much scrubbing and polishing, that taut little cutter had no reason to shirk the vivid sunlight. At the beginning of the cruise she had been fitted with a new suit of sails and fresh cordage. For the rest, Peter, and Peter's fourteen-year-old son "Chris," roused now from sound sleep in the cabin by his father's loud summons, kept brass fittings and woodwork in a spick-and-span condition that would bear comparison with the best-found yacht in the roadstead.

Miss Dane was accommodated with a camp chair aft, while Warden dived into the cabin to change his clothes. The boy, after a wide-eyed stare at his employer, was about to busy himself with tying up the dinghy, when Peter bade him be off and see to the stove if he wished to escape a rope-ending. Chris was hurt. He had not expected such a greeting from his revered parent; but he disappeared instantly, and Peter imagined that his offspring was thus prevented from investigating the mystery of the gourd, which he took good care to leave in the bottom of the boat.

As for the girl, her mind was occupied to the exclusion of all else by the strange combination of events that brought her a guest on board the *Nancy*. She was not so much perturbed by the absence of Mrs. Baumgartner as by Warden's manifest disapproval of the lady. A railway return ticket, sufficient money in her purse to pay for a room in a hotel, and the existence of a friend of her mother's in Portsmouth, a friend whose good offices might be invoked if necessary, made her independent. But she did not want to go back defeated to Oxfordshire. Her father's carelessness had left her practically at the mercy of a stepmother, who enjoyed the revenue of a fair estate until death. The settlement was not to the liking of either woman, and Evelyn was goaded into an endeavor to escape from it by the knowledge that she was regarded as an interloper in a house that would ultimately come into her possession if she survived the second Mrs. Dane.

The well-paid appointment offered by the Baumgartners was apparently an opening sent by the gods. She had been strongly recommended for the post by a friend, and there seemed to be no reason whatever why it should not prove an ideal arrangement for both parties. Yet Warden, unmistakably a gentleman, if rather eccentric in his ways, evidently did not view the mining magnate's family with favor. That was a displeasing fact. Though she had no personal experience of the section of society which dubs itself the "smart set," she gathered that the Baumgartners belonged to it, and it was a risky undertaking for a young woman to constitute herself part and parcel of the household of one of its leading members.

Her somewhat serious reverie was interrupted by the grateful scent of cooking that came from a hidden region forward. Warden reappeared in dry clothing. The cut on his forehead was covered with a strip of sticking plaster. He was bare-headed, and a slight powdering of gray in his thick black hair made him look more than his age.

“Our glass and china are of the pilot pattern,” he explained, placing a laden tray on the deck, “but we balance deficiencies in these respects by a high tone in our cuisine. To-day’s luncheon consists of grilled chicken and bacon, followed by meringues and figs, while the claret was laid down last week in Plymouth.”

“I am so hungry that I can almost dispense with the glass and china,” she admitted. “But won’t you let me help? I am quite domesticated.”

“What? Would you rob the cook of his glory? You must eat and admire, and thank the kindly gales that wafted Peter to the Indian Ocean when he was putting in his sea service, because he learned there how to use charcoal in the galley instead of an abominable oil lamp.”

“I was born in India,” she said with delightful irrelevance.

“Ah, were your people in the army?”

“No. My father was in the Indian Marine. But he retired when I was two years old – soon after my mother’s death. I lost him eight years later, and, having lived thirteen years with a stepmother, I thought it high time to begin to earn my own living.”

She fancied that this brief biography might encourage him to speak of the Baumgartners, but Warden’s conversation did not run on conventional lines.

“I find your career most interesting,” he said. “Now that we know each other so well I want to hear more of you. Promise that you will write every month until early December, and report progress in your new surroundings. Here is my card. A letter to the Universities Club will always reach me.”

She read: – “Captain Arthur Warden, Deputy Commissioner, Nigeria Protectorate.”

“Why must I stop in December?” she asked, with a smile and a quick glance under her long eyelashes.

“Because I return to Nigeria about that date, and I shall then supply a new address.”

“Dear me! Are we arranging a regular correspondence?”

“Your effusions can be absolutely curt. Just the date and locality, and the one word ‘Happy’ or ‘Miserable,’ as the case may be.”

The arrival of Chris with a grilled chicken created a diversion. Peter had to be summoned from the galley. He explained sheepishly that he thought the meal was of a ceremonious character. They feasted regally, and all went well until the unhappy Chris asked his father if the vegetable marrow was to be boiled for dinner.

“Wot marrer?” demanded Peter unguardedly.

“The big one in the dinghy.”

“By Jove, we have never given a thought to the calabash that created all the rumpus,” cried Warden. “What about that black face you saw on it, Miss Dane? I didn’t notice it afterwards. Did you?”

“No. I was too excited and frightened. Your son might bring it to us now, Mr. Evans.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, miss, we’ll leave it till you’ve finished lunch,” said Peter, regarding Chris with an eye that boded unutterable things.

“But why, most worthy mariner?” demanded Warden.

“Cos it’s the ugliest phiz that ever grew on a nigger,” was the astonishing answer. “It gev’ me a fair turn, it did, an’ I’m a pretty tough subjec’. It’s enough to stop a clock. If the young leddy takes my advice she’ll bid me heave it overboard and let it go to the – well, to where it rightly belongs.”

“It’s only an old gourd,” exclaimed Evelyn, looking from one to the other in amused surprise.

“Peter,” said Warden, laughing, “you have whetted our curiosity with rare skill. Come, now. What is the joke?”

"I'm in reel earnest, sir – sink me if I ain't. It's – a terror, that's wot it is."

"Bless my soul, produce it, and let us examine this calabash of parts."

"Not me!" growled Peter, hauling himself upright with amazing rapidity. "Believe me, sir, I 'ope you won't 'ave the thing aboard the *Nancy*. Get forrard, you," he went on, glaring at the open-mouthed Chris. "Start washin' them plates, an' keep yer silly mouth closed, or you'll catch somethin' you can't eat."

There could be no doubt that the usually placid and genial-spoken Peter was greatly perturbed. To avoid further questioning, he stumped off to his quarters in the fore part of the cutter, and swung himself out of sight, while the girl endeavored vainly to estimate how he could squeeze his huge bulk through so small a hatchway.

Warden also stood up.

"After that there is but one course open to us," he said, and drew in the dinghy's painter until he was able to secure the gourd.

He was on his knees when he lifted it in both hands and turned it round to ascertain what it was that had so upset his stout friend. In reviewing his first impressions subsequently, he arrived at the conclusion that close familiarity with the features of the West African negro must have blunted his mind to the true significance of the hideous face that scowled at him from the rounded surface of the calabash. He paid heed only to the excellence of the artist – none to the message of undying hatred of every good impulse in mankind that was conveyed by the frowning brows, the cruel mouth, the beady, snake-like eyes peeping through narrow slits cut in the outer rind. Were not the lineaments those of a pure negro, he would have imagined that some long-forgotten *doyen* of the Satsuma school had amused himself by concentrating in a human face all that is grotesque and horrible in the Japanese notion of a demon. But there was no doubting the identity of the racial type depicted. Warden could even name the very tribe that supplied the model. A curious crinkled ring that had formed round the gourd near the upper part of its egg-shaped circumference suggested the quoit-shaped ivory ornament worn by the men of Oku. Oku used to be a plague spot in West Africa. It is little better to-day, but its virus is dissipated by British rule.

Warden's kindling glance soon detected other important details. The raised ring, and certain rough protuberances that might have borne a crude likeness to a man's face when the gourd was in its natural state, were utilized with almost uncanny ingenuity to lend high relief to the carving. Indeed, the surface had been but slightly scored with the artist's knife. Half-lowered eyelids, a suggestion of parted lips and broad nostrils, some deep creases across the brutish forehead, and a sinister droop to each corner of the mouth – these deft touches revealed at once the sculptor's restraint and power. The black skin was simulated by a smooth and shining lacquer, the ivory ring by a scraping of the rind that laid bare the yellow pith. No characteristic was over-accentuated. The work offered a rare instance of the art that conceals art.

And Warden felt that none but an artist worthy to rank with the elect could have conceived and carried out this study of some fierce negro despot. That it was a genuine portrait he did not doubt for a moment. It seemed to him that in its creation hate and fear had gone hand in hand with marvelous craftsmanship. The man who exercised such cunning on the inferior material provided by a rough-coated calabash was not only inspired by the pride of conscious power but meant to leave an imperishable record of a savage tyrant in his worst aspect. A great Italian painter, limning his idea of the Last Judgment, gratified his spite by placing all his enemies among the legion of the lost. This unknown master had taken a more subtle revenge. It was possible that the black chief, had he seen it, would have admired his counterfeit presentment. It demanded a more cultured intelligence than Oku society conferred to enable him to appreciate how plainly an evil soul leered from out a dreadful mask.

In no respect was the truth of the image more convincing than in the treatment of the eyes. A minute mosaic of chalcedony was used to portray white and iris and cornea. Small pieces of clear crystal formed the pupils, and the rays of light glinted from their depths with an effect that was

appalling in its realism. Thus might the eyes of a cobra sparkle with vindictive fire. They exercised a diabolical mesmerism. Warden, rapt in his admiration of a genuine work of art, remained wholly unconscious of their spell till he heard a faint gasp of horror from the girl.

He turned and looked at her in quick dismay. All the roses had fled from her cheeks, leaving her wan indeed. Her own fine eyes were distended with fright. She, like Peter Evans, gave no heed to the consummate skill of the designer. She was fascinated at once by that basilisk glare. It thrilled her to the core, threatened her with immeasurable wrongs, menaced her with the spite of a demon.

"This is the most wonderful thing of its kind I have ever seen," said Warden eagerly.

Though he was not yet awakened to the magnetic influence exercised by the vile visage he could not fail to note the girl's consternation. He thought to reassure her by pointing out the marvelous craft displayed in its contriving.

"It is amazing in every sense," he went on, bringing the gourd nearer for her inspection. "Although the calabash is of a variety unknown in West Africa, the face gives a perfect likeness of an Oku chief. There is a man in Oku now who might have sat to the sculptor, though he is far from possessing the power, the tremendous strength, of the original. Yet it seems to me to be very old. I cannot, for the life of me –"

A loud crash interrupted him. Chris, removing the remains of the feast, had gazed for an instant at the astounding object in Warden's hands. The boy backed away, and tripped over a coil of rope, with disastrous result to the crockery he was carrying.

Warden's voice, no less than the laugh with which he greeted Chris's discomfiture, restored the poise of the girl's wits.

"You obtained that for me, did you not?" she cried with a curious agitation.

"Yes, of course," said he.

"Then give it to me, please."

He was certainly surprised, but passed the gourd to her without further comment. She half averted her eyes, took it unhesitatingly, and tried to pitch it into the water. For its size, it was astonishingly light. Were it as heavy as she imagined, it must have dropped into the Solent several yards from the vessel. As it was, it flew unexpectedly high, struck a rope, and fell back on deck, whence it bounded, with the irregular bounce of a Rugby football, right into Warden's hands again.

"That was a mad trick," he said almost angrily.

"Oh, please, throw it away," she pleaded.

"Throw away a rare and valuable curio! Why?"

"Because it will bring you nothing but ruin and misery. Can you not see its awful meaning? Throw it away, I implore you!"

"But that would be a crime, the act of a Vandal. It may be the chiefest treasure of a connoisseur's collection. Would you have me ape some fanatic Mussulman hammering to atoms a statue by Phidias?"

"There is no beauty in that monstrous thing. It is – bewitched."

"Oh really, Miss Dane – we are in England, in the twentieth century."

He laughed indulgently, with the air of an elder brother who had forgiven her for an exhibition of pettish temper. He held out the calabash at arm's length and viewed it critically. He saw immediately that the crown inside the ring was misplaced.

"Hello!" he muttered, "you did some damage, then!"

Closer inspection revealed that the fall had loosened a tightly fitting lid hitherto concealed by the varnish used as a preservative. He removed it, and peered within.

"A document!" he announced elatedly. "Perhaps, after all, your unaccountable frenzy was a blessing in disguise. Now, Miss Dane, we may learn what you termed its 'awful meaning.' But, for pity's sake, don't yield to impulse and rend the manuscript. You have cracked his chiefship's skull – I pray you spare his brains."

CHAPTER III

WHEREIN A STRONG MAN YIELDS TO CIRCUMSTANCES

Curiosity, most potent of the primal instincts, conquered the girl's fear. As it happened, Warden was still kneeling. He sat back on his heels, rested the calabash against his knees, and withdrew a strip of dried skin from its cunningly devised hiding-place. It was so curled and withered that it crackled beneath his fingers when he tried to unfold it. Quite without premeditation, he had placed the calabash in such wise that the negro's features were hidden, and this fact alone seemed to give his companion confidence.

"What is it?" she asked, watching his efforts to persuade the twisted scroll to remain open.

"Parchment, and uncommonly tough and leathery at that."

He did not look up. A queer notion was forming in his mind, and he was unwishful to meet her eyes just then.

"It looks very old," she said.

"A really respectable antique, I fancy. Have you any pins – four, or more?"

She produced from a pocket a small hussif with its store of sewing accessories.

"A genie of the feminine order!" he cried. "I was merely hoping for a supply of those superfluous pins that used to lurk in my sister's attire and only revealed their presence when I tried to reduce her to subjection."

"Oh, you have a sister?"

"Yes – married – husband ranching in Montana."

Meanwhile he was fastening the refractory document to the deck. With patience, helped by half a dozen pins, he managed to smooth it sufficiently to permit of detailed scrutiny. The girl, wholly interested now, knelt beside him. Any observer in a passing boat might have imagined that they were engaged in some profoundly devotional exercise. But the planks were hard. Miss Dane, seeing nothing but wrinkled parchment, yellow with age, and covered with strange scrawls that seemed to be more a part of the actual material than written on its surface, soon rose.

"Those hieroglyphics are beyond my ken," she explained.

"They are Arabic," said Warden – "Arabic characters, that is. The words are Latin – at least to some extent. *Epistola Pauli Hebraicis* has the ring of old Rome about it, even if it wears the garb of Mahomet."

He straightened himself suddenly, and shouted for Chris with such energy that the girl was startled.

Chris popped his head out of the fore hatch, and was told to bring his father's Bible, for Peter read two of its seven hundred odd pages each day in the year.

Warden compared book and scroll intently during many minutes. Miss Dane did not interrupt. She contented herself with a somewhat prolonged investigation of Warden's face, or so much of it as was visible. Then she turned away and gazed at the *Sans Souci*. There was a wistful look in her eyes. Perhaps she wished that circumstances had contrived to exchange the yacht for the pilot-boat. At any rate, she was glad he had a sister. If only she had a brother! – just such a one!

At last the man's deep, rather curt voice broke the silence.

"I have solved a part of the puzzle, Miss Dane," he announced. "My Latinity was severely tried, but the chapter and verse gave me the English equivalent, and that supplied the key. Some one has that – some one has written here portions of the 37th and 38th verses of the eleventh chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. Our version runs: 'They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword ... they wandered in deserts and in mountains, and in dens and

caves of the earth.' The remainder of the text is in yet another language – Portuguese, I imagine – but my small lore in that tongue is of no avail. In any case my vocabulary could not possibly consort with the stately utterances of St. Paul, as it consists mainly of remarks adapted to the intelligence of a certain type of freebooter peculiar to the West African hinterland.”

“What do you make of it all?” she asked.

“At present – nothing. It is an enigma, until I secure a Portuguese–English dictionary. Then I shall know more. Judging by appearances, the message, whatsoever it may be, is complete.”

“What sort of skin is that?”

He lifted his eyes slowly. She was conscious of a curious searching quality in his glance that she had not seen there before.

“It is hard to say,” he answered. And, indeed, he spoke the literal truth, being fully assured that the shriveled parchment pinned to the deck had once covered the bones of a white man.

“The writing is funny, too,” she went on, with charming disregard for the meaning of words.

“It is pricked in with a needle and Indian ink,” he explained. “That is an indelible method,” he continued hurriedly, seeing that she was striving to recall something that the phrase reminded her of, and here was a real danger of the suggestive word which had so nearly escaped his lips being brought to her recollection. “You see, I have been able to identify the gentleman who served the artist as model,” and he tapped the gourd lightly. “Therefore, I am sure that this comes from a land where pen and ink were unknown in the days when some unhappy Christian fashioned such a quaint contrivance to carry his screed.”

“Some unhappy Christian!” she repeated. “You mean that some European probably fell into the hands of West African savages years and years ago, and took this means of safeguarding a secret?”

“Who can tell?” he answered, picking up the calabash and gazing steadfastly at the malignant visage thus brought again into the full glare of the sun. “This fellow can almost speak. If only he could – ”

“Oh, don’t,” wailed the girl. “My very heart stops beating when I see that dreadful face. Please put it away. If you will not throw it overboard, or smash it to atoms, at least hide it.”

“Sorry,” he said gruffly, fitting the loose lid into its place. He disliked hysterical women, and, greatly to his surprise, Evelyn Dane seemed to be rather disposed to yield to hysteria.

“The more I examine this thing the more I am bewildered,” he went on, endeavoring to cover his harshness by an assumption of indifference. “Where in the world did this varnish come from? It has all the gloss and smooth texture and absence of color that one finds on a genuine Cremona violin. The man who mixed it must have known the recipe lost when Antonio Stradivarius died. Are you good at dates?”

The suddenness of the question perplexed her.

“Do you mean the sort of dates that one acquired painfully at school?” she asked. “If so, I can give you the year of the Battle of Hastings or the signing of Magna Charta.”

“The period of a great artist’s career is infinitely more important,” he broke in. “Stradivarius was at the height of his fame about 1700. Now, if this is the varnish he and Amati and Guarnerius used, we have a shadowy clue to guide us in our inquiry.”

“Please don’t include me in the quest,” she said decisively. “I refuse to have anything to do with it. Leave the matter to me, and that nasty calabash floats off toward the Atlantic or sinks in the Solent, exactly as the fates direct. Positively, I am afraid of it.”

“I really meant to take it out of your sight when I caught a glint of the varnish,” he pleaded.

But his humility held a spice of sarcasm. Rising, he tucked the gourd under his coat. He was half-way down the hatch when his glance fell on the little square of skin on the deck. Already the heat of the sun had affected it, and two of the pins had given way. He came back.

“I may as well remove the lot while I am about it,” he said, stooping to withdraw the remaining pins.

“Oh, I am not to be frightened by *that*,” she cried, with a pout that was reminiscent of the schoolgirl period.

He laughed, but suppressed the quip that might have afforded some hidden satisfaction.

“Gourd and document are much of a muchness,” he said carelessly.

The parchment curled with unexpected speed, and caught his fingers in an uncanny grip. Without thinking what he was doing, he shook it off as though it were a scorpion. Then, flushing a little, he seized it, and stuffed it into a pocket. Miss Dane missed no item of this by-play. But she, too, could exercise the art of self-repression, and left unuttered the words that her heart dictated. Being a methodical person, she gathered the pins and replaced them in the hussif. She had just finished when Warden returned.

“You don’t mean to say – ” he began, but checked himself. After all, if he harped on the subject, there was some risk that the girl’s intuition might read a good deal of the truth into what she had seen and heard during the past half-hour. So he changed a protest into a compliment.

“Economy is the greatest of the domestic virtues. Now, a mere man would have waited until one of those pins stuck into his foot as he was crossing the deck for his morning dip, and then he would say things. By the way, Peter believes the breeze is freshening. Would you care for a short cruise?”

A delightful color suffused the girl’s face. “I feel like lifting my eyebrows at my own behavior,” she said, “but I must admit that I should enjoy it immensely. Please bring me back here before six o’clock. I wish to go on board the *Sans Souci* the moment Mrs. Baumgartner arrives.”

In response to Warden’s summons, Peter and Chris appeared on deck. The *Nancy* cast off from her buoy, her canvas leaped to the embrace of the wind, and soon she was slipping through the water at a spanking pace in the direction of Portsmouth and the anchored fleet, for the cutter could move when her sails filled.

Thenceforth the talk was nautical. Peter entertained them with details of the warships or the yachts competing in the various races. Once, by chance, the conversation veered close to West Africa, when Warden gave a vivid description of the sensations of the novice who makes his first landing in a surf-boat. But Peter soon brought them back to the British Isles by his reminiscences of boarding salt-stained and sooty tramps in an equinoctial gale off Lundy. No unpleasing incident marred a perfect afternoon until tea was served, and the cutter ran to her moorings.

The guardian Gorgon of the *Sans Souci* watched their return, and it was evident that his solitary vigil was still unbroken. About half-past six, when a swarm of yachts were beating up the roads on the turn of the tide, a steam launch approached the *Sans Souci* and deposited a lady and gentleman on the gangway. They were alone. The watchman helped them to reach the deck, a financial transaction took place between him and the gentleman, the latter disappeared instantly, and the watchman descended the ladder with the evident intention of entering the launch.

But he hesitated, and pointed to the *Nancy*, whereupon the lady, to whom he was speaking, looked fixedly at the cutter and her occupants.

“That is Mrs. Baumgartner, I am sure,” said Evelyn eagerly. “Will you take me across in the dinghy at once? Then, if necessary, I can reach Portsmouth easily this evening, as I shall have gained half an hour.”

She gave no heed to the astounding fact that if these people were really the yacht-owner and his wife they were absolutely alone on the vessel. Warden, unwilling to arouse distrust in her mind, bade Peter draw the dinghy alongside.

“Good-by,” he said, extending his hand frankly. “The world is small, and we shall meet again. Remember, you have promised to write, and, in the meantime, do not forget that if the *Nancy* or her crew can offer you any service we are within hailing distance.”

“You are not leaving Cowes to-night, then?”

“No. To-morrow, if the wind serves, we go east, to Brighton and Dover, and perhaps as far north as Cromer. After that, to Holland. But no matter where I am, I manage to secure my letters.”

Evelyn gave his hand a grateful little pressure. She was not insensible of the tact that sent Peter as her escort.

“You have been exceedingly good and kind to me,” she said. “I shall never forget this most charming day, and I shall certainly write to you. Good–by, Chris. Good–by, dear little ship. What a pity – “ she paused and laughed with pretty embarrassment. “I think I was going to say what a pity it is that these pleasant hours cannot last longer – they come too rarely in life.”

And with that she was gone, though she turned twice during her short voyage, and waved a hand to the man who was looking at her so steadily while he leaned against the cutter’s mast and smoked in silence.

There could be no doubt that the lady on the *Sans Souci* was Mrs. Baumgartner. No sooner did she realize that Miss Dane’s arrival was imminent than she threw up her hands with a Continental affectation of amazement and ran into the deck cabin. To all seeming, she bade the launch await further orders. Baumgartner and his wife reappeared, they indulged in gesticulations to which Warden could readily imagine an accompaniment of harsh–sounding German, and, evidently as the outcome of their talk, the launch steamed away.

Warden smiled sourly.

“If those people had committed a murder on board, and were anxious to sink their victim several fathoms deep before anybody interfered with them, they could hardly be more excited,” he thought. “Perhaps it won’t do my young friend any good if I remain here staring straight at the yacht.”

He busied himself with an unnecessary stowing away of the cutter’s mainsail, but contrived to watch events sufficiently to note that Mrs. Baumgartner received her guest with voluble courtesy. Baumgartner, a French–polished edition of the bacon–factor type of man, hustled the two ladies out of sight, and thenceforth, during more than an hour, the deck of the *Sans Souci* was absolutely untenanted.

Twilight was deepening; lights began to twinkle on shore; not a few careful captains showed riding lamps, although the precaution was yet needless; launches and ships’ boats were cleaving long black furrows in the slate–blue surface of the Solent as they ferried parties of diners from shore or yachts – but never a sign of life was there on board the *Sans Souci*. Peter, undisturbed by speculations anent the future of the young lady whose presence had brightened the deck of the *Nancy* during the afternoon, cooked an appetizing supper. He was surprised when Warden expressed a wish that they should eat without a light. It did not occur to him that his employer was mounting guard over the Baumgartners’ yacht, and meant to have a clear field of vision while a shred of daylight remained.

The progress of the meal was rudely broken in on by Peter himself. Although the placid silence of the night was frequently disturbed by the flapping of propellers, his sailor’s ear caught the stealthy approach of the one vessel that boded possible danger. Swinging himself upright he roared:

“Where’s that ugly Dutchman a–comin’ to? Quick with a light, Chris, or she’ll be on top of us!”

It was the Emperor’s cruiser–yacht that had so suddenly upset his equanimity. Returning to Cowes after convoying the yacht flotilla, she was now fully a mile away from her usual anchorage. But the *Nancy* was safe enough. The imperial yacht stopped at a distance of three cables’ lengths, reversed her engines, let go an anchor, and ran up to the chain hawser when the hoarse rattle of its first rush had ceased.

Chris lost no time in producing a lantern, and his father slung it in its proper place.

“It ‘ud be just our luck if we wos run down,” Warden heard him mutter. “That nigger’s phiz we shipped to–day is enough to sink any decent craft, blow me, if it ain’t!”

Warden, whose vigil had not relaxed for an instant, saw that some one was hoisting a masthead light on the *Sans Souci*. Her starboard light followed, and soon the yellow eyes of a row of closed ports stared at him solemnly across the intervening water. As the principal living–rooms of such a vessel must certainly be the deck saloons, he was more than ever puzzled by the eccentric behavior

of her owners. Every other yacht in the roadstead was brilliantly illuminated. The *Sans Souci* alone seemed to court secrecy.

It has been seen that, in holiday mood, he was a creature of impulse, nor did he lack the audacity of prompt decision when it was called for. He showed both qualities now by hauling the dinghy alongside and stepping into it.

“Goin’ ashore, sir?” cried the surprised Peter.

They kept early hours on board, and Warden’s usual habit was to be asleep by half–past nine when the cutter was at her moorings.

“No. I mean to pay a call. Got a match?”

“Let me take you, sir.”

“No need, thanks. I’m bound for the *Sans Souci*. I may be back in five minutes.”

He lit a cigar, cast off, and rowed himself leisurely toward the vessel which had filled so large a space in his thoughts ever since he met Evelyn Dane in the street outside the steamer pier. His intent was to ask for her, to refuse to go away unless he spoke to her, and, when she appeared, as his well–ordered senses told him would surely be the case, to frame some idle excuse for the liberty he had taken. She had talked of returning to Portsmouth that evening, and it might serve if he expressed his willingness to carry her imaginary luggage from the quay to the railway station. She was shrewd and tactful. She would understand, perhaps, that he was anxious for her welfare, and it would not embarrass her to state whether or not his services were needed.

He was nearing the yacht when the red and green eyes of a launch gleamed at him as he glanced over his shoulder to take measure of his direction. There was no other vessel exactly in line with the *Sans Souci*, and the thought struck him that this might be the messenger of the gods in so far as they busied themselves with Miss Dane’s affairs. There was no harm in waiting a few minutes, so he altered the dinghy’s course in such wise that the launch, if it were actually bound for the yacht, must pass quite closely, though he, to all outward seeming, was in no way concerned with its destination. His guess was justified. While the tiny steamer was still fifty yards distant, the quick pulsation of her engines slackened. She drew near, and the figure of a sailor with a boat–hook in his hands was silhouetted against the last bright strip of sky in the northwest. She passed, and it demanded all Arthur Warden’s cool nerve to maintain a steady pull at the oars and smoke the cigar of British complacency when he saw Miguel Figuero and three men of the tribe of Oku seated in the cushioned space aft.

He could not be mistaken. He knew the West African hinterland so well that he could distinguish the inhabitants of different districts by facial characteristics slight in themselves but as clearly visible to the eye of experience as the varying race–marks of a Frenchman and a Norwegian. Coming thus strangely on the heels of the discovery of that amazing calabash, the incident was almost stupefying. The presence of Figuero alone in Cowes was perplexing – the appearance of three Oku blacks was a real marvel – that all four should be visitors to the *Sans Souci* savored of necromancy. But Warden did not hesitate. He made certain that the strange quartette were being conveyed to the yacht; he took care to note that their arrival was expected, seeing that Baumgartner himself came down the gangway with a lantern to light the way on board; and then he pulled back to the *Nancy*. Ere he reached her, the launch had gone shoreward again.

“You’ve changed your mind, sir,” was Peter’s greeting.

“You were keeping a lookout, then?” said Warden.

“Ave nothin’ else to do, so to speak, sir.”

“Well, jump in and take the oars. I shall be with you in a moment.”

Warden dived into the small cabin, rummaged in a box, and produced two revolvers. He examined both weapons carefully under the cutter’s light, and ascertained that they were properly loaded, whereupon one went into each of the outer pockets of his coat.

“Now take me to the *Sans Souci*, Peter,” he said. “When I reach the gangway, pull off a couple of lengths, and stand by.”

“What’s doin’?” asked Peter, who was by no means unobservant.

“Nothing, I hope. I may have to talk big, and twelve ounces of lead lend weight to an argument. But I am puzzled, Peter, and I hate that condition. You remember our nigger friend on the gourd?”

“Remember ‘im. Shall I ever forget ‘im?” – and the ex-pilot spat.

“Well, three live members of his tribe, and the worst Portuguese slave-trader and gin-runner now known in West Africa, have just boarded the *Sans Souci*. I don’t consider them fit company for Miss Dane. What do *you* say?”

Peter hung on the oars.

“W’y not let Chris come an’ look after the dinghy?” he said. “You may need a friendly hand w’en the band plays.”

Warden laughed.

“We are in England, Peter,” he replied; but the words had a far less convincing sound in his ears now than when he protested against Evelyn Dane’s unreasoning detestation of the carved gourd. One of the weapons in his pockets was actually resting on the crackling skin of a man who had been flayed alive – and most probably so flayed by ancestors of the negroes who were on board the *Sans Souci* at that instant. The thought strengthened his determination to see and speak to the girl that night. At all costs he would persevere until she herself assured him that she had no wish to go ashore. He even made up his mind to persuade her to return to Portsmouth for the night, and it seemed to him that no consideration could move him from his purpose.

Whereat Lachesis, she who spins the thread of life, must have smiled. Short as was the distance to be traversed by the dinghy under the impetus of Peter Evans’s strong arms, the cruel goddess who pays no regard to human desires had already contrived the warp and weft of circumstances that would deter even a bolder man than Warden from thrusting himself unbidden into the queer company gathered on the yacht.

The pilot was pulling straight to the gangway when a large steam launch whistled an angry warning that he was crossing her bows. He twisted the dinghy broadside on, and both Warden and he saw two officers in the uniform of a foreign navy step on to the *Sans Souci* gangway, where Baumgartner, bare-headed and obsequious of manner, was standing to receive them.

The *Nancy*’s boat was so near that her occupants could hear the millionaire’s words distinctly as he greeted the first of his two latest visitors. He spoke in German, and Peter was none the wiser, but Warden understood, and his errant fears for Evelyn Dane’s welfare were promptly merged in a very ocean of bewilderment.

“The *Nancy* for us, Peter,” he murmured. “As they say in the States, I have bitten off more than I can chew. Do you know who that is?”

“Which? – the little one?”

“Yes.”

“Mebbe he’s the skipper of the Dutchman yonder. That’s her launch.”

“He is skipper of many Dutchmen. Mr. Baumgartner addressed him as ‘emperor.’ Give way, Peter. We must watch and eke pray, but there are affairs afoot – or shall I say afloat – that it behooves not a simple official in the Nigeria Protectorate to meddle with. God wot! I have earned a captaincy and a year’s leave by serving my country in a humble capacity. Let me not lose both by an act of *lèse majesté*, and it would be none else were I to break in on the remarkable conclave now assembled on board the *Sans Souci*!”

CHAPTER IV

FIGUERO MAKES A DISCOVERY

“You don’t mean to say – ” gasped Peter.

“I do. And the less notice we attract during the next five minutes the better I shall be pleased. Bear away to the nearest yacht, and let me apologize for being late.”

So, if there were eyes on board the *Sans Souci* that paid heed to aught save the coming of an august visitor, they would have seen nothing more remarkable than a small boat visiting at least two vessels in seemingly unsuccessful quest of one among the hundreds of yachts in the roadstead.

Following a devious route, the dinghy reached the cutter from the port side. Warden secured a pair of night binoculars, seated himself on the hatch, and mounted guard over the *Sans Souci*. The cruiser’s launch was still alongside, and the time passed slowly until the two officers descended the gangway and were borne swiftly in the direction of the Royal Yacht Club landing-slip. They had been on board three-quarters of an hour.

There was now so little movement afloat that the pulsation of the screw could be heard until it was quite near the private pier. Finally it was dominated by the strains of the Castle band beginning the evening programme with the “Boulangier March,” and Warden smiled as he thought how singularly inappropriate the lively tune must sound in the ears of the potentate hurrying shoreward.

The band broke off abruptly; after a brief pause it struck up again.

“The King, Gord bless ‘im!” said Peter loyally.

“No. That is not for the King. They are playing *Heil dir im Sieger Krantz*” said Warden, still peering at the *Sans Souci*.

“Well, it’s the fust time I’ve ever heerd ‘Gord save the King’ called *that*,” expostulated the pilot.

“Same tune, different words.”

Peter sniffed in his scorn.

“They’ll be sayin’ the Old Hundredth is a Dutch hornpipe next,” he growled.

The Prussian National hymn might have acted as a tocsin to Mr. Baumgartner, for a light was hoisted forthwith over the poop of the *Sans Souci*, and Warden discerned the tall forms of the three West African natives standing near the tubby man who manipulated rope and pulley. Figuero was not visible at first. Warden began to be annoyed. Could it be possible that such a social outcast could be left in Evelyn Dane’s company? Developments soon relieved the tension. A launch puffed up and took away the visitors, Figuero being the last to step on board. The noisy little vessel was succeeded by two boats filled with sailors and servants. Within a few minutes the yacht’s officers arrived, the deck saloons were brilliantly illuminated, and the *Sans Souci* became a jeweled palace like unto the host of her congeners in the Solent.

By this time Peter was as interested as his employer in the comings and goings of their neighbors.

“There’s more in that than meets the eye, Mr. Warden,” he said, rolling some tobacco between his palms preparatory to filling his pipe.

“Yet a good deal has met our eyes to-night,” was the quiet answer.

Peter worked his great hands methodically. He was not a man of many words; and when he expressed an opinion it was the outcome of calm deliberation.

“Tell me who them niggers an’ the other party wos, an’ I’ll do some fair guessin’,” he said. “Rum thing, too, that such a gazebo as that murderous-lookin’ swab on the calabash should cross our course just when it did. Were did it come from – that’s wot I want to know. Has there bin an earthquake? If looks count for anythink, it might have risen straight up from – ”

“Peter,” broke in Warden, “I hope Chris is in bed?”

The pilot laughed.

"Time we wos, too, sir. May I ax w'ere his black nibs is stowed?"

"Among my traps. Forget it. I shall send it to London in the morning."

"An' a good job to be rid of it. I've seen some queer fish in the sea, from bottle-nosed whales an' sharks to dead pigs who 'ad cut their own throats with their fore feet by swimmin' from a wrecked ship, but never before 'ave I clapped my peepers on a fizzy-mahog like that."

Twice had an unusually long speech betrayed his irate sentiment. He was deeply stirred. Warden, smoking and listening in silence, but never relaxing his vigilant scrutiny of the *Sans Souci*, felt that, in very truth, there must be some malign influence in the carved head on the gourd ere it would arouse the intense repugnance of two such different natures as those of the bluff, good-tempered sailor and the dainty, well-bred girl who had come so suddenly into his life.

He did not pursue the conversation. Though Evans was quite trustworthy, there was no need to make him a confidant in matters which might have the gravest bearing on an already troubled position in West Africa. The pilot's carefully charged pipe was nearly empty when Warden surprised him with an abrupt question.

"What time does the first train leave for London in the morning?"

"Round about seven o'clock," he said.

"You ain't thinkin' of chuckin' the cruise, I hope, sir," he went on, and the dejection in his voice showed that he was prepared for the worst.

"For a few hours, perhaps a night – that is all."

"So you b'lieve they mean mischief?" growled Peter, jerking a thumb toward the yacht.

This direct and forcible reasoning was unexpected. Yet any level-headed man might have reached practically the same conclusions from the night's happenings. They were clear enough to one versed in most of the intricacies and pitfalls of West African politics, nor did Warden endeavor to evade the point.

"I believe that there are people in London who should know what you and I know," he said slowly. "Anyhow, let us turn in. Miss Evelyn Dane evidently sleeps on board. Perhaps the morning's light may dispel some of the vapors that cloud our brains to-night."

The early train from Cowes did not, however, carry Arthur Warden among the London-bound passengers.

A glimpse of Evelyn on the deck of the *Sans Souci* altered that portion of his plans. She waved a pleasant greeting, held up both hands with the fingers spread widely apart, and nodded her head in the direction of the town. He took the gesture to mean that she was going ashore at ten o'clock, and he signaled back the information that he would precede her at nine. Not until he found himself dawdling on the quay, killing time as lazily as possible, did the thought obtrude that he was extraordinarily anxious to meet her again. Of course, it irritated him. A smart soldier, with small means beyond his pay – with a foot just planted on the first rung of the administrator's ladder in a land where life itself is too often the price asked for higher climbing – he had no business to show any undue desire to cultivate the acquaintance of young ladies so peculiarly eligible as Evelyn Dane. He knew this so well that he scoffed at the notion, put two knuckles between his lips, and emitted a peculiarly shrill and compelling whistle.

For its special purpose – the summoning of a boy selling newspapers – it was a sure means toward an end. It drew the boy's attention, even evoked his envy. But it chanced also to be a krooboy call on the Upper Niger, and in that capacity it brought a lean, swarthy face to the window of a bedroom in a quiet hotel overlooking the quay.

Señor Miguel Figuero looked annoyed at first. His dark, prominent eyes searched the open space for one of the negroes whom he expected to find there, but his wrathful expression changed to blank incredulity when he saw Warden. The phase of sheer unbelief did not last long. He darted out of the room, and rapped sharply on a neighboring door.

“O Loanda, M’Wanga! you fit for get up one–time,” he shouted.

Crossing the corridor, he roused another dusky gentleman, Pana by name, with the same imperative command. Soon the four were gathered at a window and gazing at Warden.

“Dep’ty Commissioner Brass River lib,” whispered the Portuguese eagerly. “You savvy – him dat was in Oku bush las’ year. Him captain Hausa men. You lib for see him.”

“O Figuero,” said one of the negroes, seemingly their leader, “I plenty much savvy. I see him palaver in village.”

“S’pose we fit for catch ‘im?” suggested another.

“That fool talk here,” growled Figuero. “You lib for see him to–day – then we catch him bush one–time. I hear him give boat–boy whistle. Stick your eyes on him, you pagans, an’ don’t you lib for forget – savvy?”

They grunted agreement. The West African bushman has to depend almost exclusively on his five senses for continued existence, and there was little doubt that Arthur Warden would be recognized by each man at any future date within reason, no matter what uniform he wore, or how greatly his features might be altered by hardship or fever.

“Why he lib for dis place?” asked Loanda, the chief, who remembered Warden’s part in the suppression of a slave–raid and the punishment subsequently inflicted on those who aided and abetted it.

“No savvy – yet. I lib for watch – then I savvy,” said the Portuguese.

“O Figuero, I fit for chop,” murmured Pana, who found little amusement in gazing idly at an Englishman through a window when there were good things to eat in the hotel.

“All right. Go an’ chop, but remain in room till I come. Then I dash you one quart gin.”

Pana grinned.

“I chop one–time,” he said, and, indeed, the three looked as though they could tackle a roasted sheep comfortably.

Meanwhile, Warden opened his paper and took more interest than usual in the news. He learned that the emperor dined on board the imperial yacht and subsequently visited the Castle, being accompanied by Count von Rippenbach as *aide–de–camp*.

Warden did not pretend to have more than a passing knowledge of foreign politics, but he noted the name, the Count having undoubtedly been a party to the conference on the *Sans Souci*.

Another paragraph was of more immediate import, inasmuch as it tended to solve the mystery of the calabash. It ran:

“The emperor’s yacht, after watching the British fleet at gun practice off Selsey Bill yesterday, returned to the island and followed the racers during several hours. An alarming incident occurred when rounding the Foreland. Though a course was laid close in–shore, both charts and lead showed ten fathoms of water. Suddenly the cruiser struck. At first it was believed that she had run into some unknown sandbank formed by a recent gale, but examination revealed that she had collided with a sunken wreck, invisible even at low–water spring tide. No damage whatever was done to the stately vessel, which continued the cruise after a delay of a few minutes.

“A Sandown gentleman, passing the same spot later in his launch, found some floating wreckage. The pieces he brought ashore are believed to be parts of a ship dating back at least a couple of centuries, as there is no record within modern times of any wooden ship foundering in the locality. The gentleman in question decided to mark the exact spot with a buoy, and a diver’s services will be requisitioned when tide and weather are suitable, so there is some possibility that a number of antiques, together with a quantity of very old timber, will be recovered.”

Warden read the item twice. He found that the emperor was not on board his own yacht at the time. The remainder of the newspaper was dull. He threw away all but the page referring to Cowes, which he stuffed in a pocket, and, although he held his nerves under good control, he almost swore aloud when his fingers touched the roll of skin, whose very existence he had forgotten for the hour.

The minutes passed slowly until a gig from the *Sans Souci* deposited Miss Dane on the wharf.

Not wishing to become known to any of the yacht's people if he could possibly avoid it, Warden strolled away a little distance as soon as the boat appeared in the Medina. Figuero, whose eyes had never left him for an instant since he emitted the telltale whistle, hurried to the door of the hotel and narrowly escaped being discovered when Warden turned on his heel.

The Portuguese, an expert tracker in the bush, was out of his element in Cowes, but he managed to slip out of sight in good time. He was safer than he imagined. Warden was looking at Evelyn Dane, and she made a pretty enough picture on this fine summer's day to keep any man's glance from wandering.

It gave him a subtle sense of joy to note the unfeigned pleasure of her greeting. Her face mantled with a slight color as she held out her hand.

"I am on my way home," she cried, "but my train does not leave for half an hour. It is so good of you to wait here. I was dreading that you might row across to the yacht – not because I did not want to see you again, but Mr. Baumgartner made such a point of excluding me from any knowledge of his visitors last night that he would be positively ill if he guessed I had friends on board the *Nancy*."

"And Mrs. Baumgartner –"

"She is a dear creature, but much in awe where her husband's business affairs are concerned. She and I passed the evening together. She would not hear of my departure, but she warned me not to say a word about my afternoon's adventures. Mr. Baumgartner is of a nervous disposition. I suppose he thinks all the world is watching him because he is a rich man."

"There is method in his madness this time," laughed Warden. "Let me tell you quite candidly that if some one told him my name and occupation and added the information that I kept a close eye on the *Sans Souci* between the hours of 5.30 and 9 p. m. last night, he, being of plethoric habit, would be in danger of apoplexy."

They were walking to the station. Evelyn, unable to decide whether or not to take his words seriously, gave him a shy look.

"You knew I was safe on board," she said.

For some reason, the assumption that he was thinking only of her caused the blood to tingle in Warden's veins.

"That is the nicest thing you could have said," he agreed, and she in turn felt her heart racing.

"Of course you are very well aware that I did not imagine you might not be differently occupied," she protested.

"Let us not quarrel about meanings. You were delightfully right. It is the simple fact that before you were many minutes in the *Sans Souci's* cabin – by the way, where were you?"

"In Mrs. Baumgartner's state-room."

"Ah. Well – to continue – I was nearly coming to take you away, *vi et armis*."

"But why?"

"You have no idea whom Mr. Baumgartner was entertaining?"

"None."

"The first person to reach the *Sans Souci* after yourself was the Portuguese land-pirate I mentioned to you yesterday. He was accompanied by three chiefs of the men of Oku. Do you recollect my description of the mask on the gourd?"

She uttered a startled little cry.

"Are you in earnest?" was all she could find to say.

"I was in deadly earnest about eight o'clock last evening, I assure you. Had it not been for a most amazing intervention you would certainly have heard me demanding your instant appearance on deck."

"Then what happened?"

"I must begin by admitting that I was worried about you. I got into the dinghy, intending to see you on some pretext. A launch containing this precious gang crossed my bows, and I returned to the *Nancy* to – to secure Peter's assistance. We were near the *Sans Souci* on the second trip when another launch arrived, and there stepped on board the yacht a gentleman whose presence assured me that you, at least, were safe enough. You will credit that element in a strained situation when I tell you that the latest arrival was the emperor."

"The Emperor!" she almost gasped. "Do you mean – "

"Sh–s–h! No names. If walls have ears, we are surrounded by listeners. But I am not mistaken. I saw him clearly. I heard Baumgartner's humble greeting. And the really remarkable fact is that Peter and you and I share a very important state secret."

"I – I don't understand," she said, bewildered.

"Of course you don't. Not many people could guess why the most powerful monarch on the Continent of Europe should wish to confer with four of the ripest scoundrels that the West African hinterland can produce. Nevertheless, it is true."

"Then that is why Mrs. Baumgartner kept me closeted in her state-room nearly two hours?"

"Yes. By the way, has she engaged you?"

"Yes. She was exceedingly kind. The terms and conditions are most generous. I rejoin the yacht and meet her daughter at Milford next Wednesday. Then we go to Scotland for some shooting, and the *Sans Souci* returns to Portsmouth to be refitted for a cruise to Madeira and the Canaries during the winter months. Altogether, she sketched a very agreeable programme. But you have excited my curiosity almost beyond bounds by your description of the goings-on last night. My share of the important state secret you spoke of is very slight. It consists in being wholly ignorant of it. Can you enlighten me?"

"There is no reason why I should not. It will invest the Baumgartners with a romantic nimbus which, judging solely from observations, might otherwise be lacking."

The girl laughed.

"They are pleasant people, but rather commonplace," she said.

"Well, we can talk freely in the train."

"You are not leaving Cowes this morning on my account?"

Perhaps her voice showed a degree of restraint. Though she was beginning to like Captain Arthur Warden more than she cared to admit even to herself, he must not be allowed to believe that their friendship could go to extremes.

"If you don't mind enduring my company as far as Portsmouth, I propose to inflict it on you," he explained good-humoredly. "Circumstances compel me to visit London to-day. Chris is now waiting at the station with my bag. I would have left the island by the first train had I not been lucky enough to see you earlier and interpret your signal correctly."

"I only intended to tell you – "

"The time you would come ashore. Exactly. Why are you vexed because we are fellow-travelers till midday?"

"I am not vexed. I am delighted."

"You expressed your delight with the warmth of an iceberg."

"Now you are angry with me."

"Furious. But please give me your well-balanced opinion. If peaches are good in the afternoon should they not be better in the morning?"

"I *could* eat a peach," she admitted.

Figuro, who did not fail to pick up the newspaper thrown aside by Warden, followed them without any difficulty. When they stopped at a shop in the main street he took the opportunity to buy a copy of the torn newspaper. Mingling with a crowd at the station, he saw them enter a first-class carriage. His acquaintance with the English language was practically confined to the trader's tongue

spoken all along the West African coast, and he had little knowledge of English ways. But he was shrewd and tactful, and his keen wits were at their utmost tension. Hence, he was not at a loss how to act when he found that a ticket examiner was visiting each compartment. Seizing a chance that presented itself, he asked the man if he could inform him where the pretty girl in blue and the tall gentleman in the yachtman's clothes were going, and a tip of five shillings unlocked the official lips.

"The lady has a return ticket to Langton, in Oxfordshire, and the gentleman a single to London," said the man.

Figuro did not trust his memory. He asked the name of the first-named town again, and how to spell it. Then he wrote something in a note-book and hurried back to the harbor. It was essential that he should find out what vessels these two people came from, for the presence of a Southern Nigeria Deputy Commissioner in Cowes was not a coincidence to be treated lightly.

Seated in a tiny boat in the harbor was a rotund, jolly-looking personage of seafaring aspect. He and the boat were there when the larger craft which brought the girl ashore came to the quay, but Figuro had taken no notice of Evelyn then, because he had not the least notion that Warden was awaiting her. Possibly the sailor-like individual in the small boat could slake his thirst for knowledge.

So he hailed him.

"You lib for know Capt'n Varden?" he asked, with an ingratiating smile and a hand suggestively feeling for a florin.

"I wot?" said the stout man, poking out a wooden leg as he swung round to face his questioner.

"You savvy – you know Capt'n Varden, a mister who walk here one-time – just now – for long minutes."

"There's no one of that name in these parts," replied Peter, who thought he identified this swarthy-faced inquirer.

"Den p'raps you tell name of young lady – very beautiful young lady – who lib for here in ship-boat not much time past? She wear blue dress an' brown hat an' brown boots."

"Oh, everybody knows *her*," grinned Peter. "She's Miss Polly Perkins, of Paddington Green."

"You write 'im name, an' I dash you two shillin'," said Figuro eagerly.

Peter was about to reply that if any dashing was to be done he could take a hand in the game himself, but he thought better of it. Taking the proffered note-book and pencil, he wrote the words laboriously, and pocketed his reward with an easy conscience.

"When Chris heaves in sight I'll send him back for two pounds of steak," he communed. "It was honestly earned, an' I figure on the Captain bein' arf tickled to death when I tell 'im how the Portygee played me for a sucker."

Figuro hastened to the hotel, saw that his sable friends were well supplied with gin and cigarettes, bade them lie *perdu* till he came back, and made his way to the quay again. Peter was still there, apparently without occupation.

"You lib for take me to yacht *Sans Souci* an' I dash you five shillin'?" he said.

"Right-o, jump in," cried Peter, but he added under his breath, "Sink me if he don't use a queer lingo, but money talks."

He used all his artifices to get Figuro to discuss his business in Cowes, but he met a man who could turn aside such conversational arrows without effort. At any rate, Peter was now sure he was not mistaken in believing that his fare was the "Portuguese slave-trader and gin-runner" spoken of by Warden, and he had not failed to notice the hotel which Figuro had visited so hurriedly.

There was a check at the yacht. Mr. Baumgartner had gone ashore, but would return for luncheon. So Peter demanded an extra half crown for the return journey, and met a wondering Chris with a broad smile.

"You're goin' shoppin', sonny," he exclaimed. "I've been earnin' good money to-day. Sheer off for 'arf an hour, an' I'll tie up the dinghy. I've got a notion that a pint would be a treat."

Thus it came to pass that while Señor Miguel Figuero was puzzling, even alarming the millionaire yacht-owner with his broken talk of Captain Varden, Dep'ty Commissioner and leader of bush expeditions – alarming him so thoroughly that he never dreamed of associating Miss Evelyn Dane with the Polly Perkins of Peter's juvenile memories – Arthur Warden himself was driving in a hansom from Waterloo to the Foreign Office, and wondering what new phase of existence would open up before him when his news became known to the men who control the destinies of Outer Britain.

CHAPTER V

A MAN AND A STORY – BOTH UNEMOTIONAL

Warden, running the gauntlet of doorkeepers and other human watch-dogs, was finally ushered into the presence of an Under Secretary. To him he detailed his business, and, lacking neither the perception nor the modesty that often characterize men of action, he had barely begun to speak ere he fancied that his recital did not command a tenth part of the interest it warranted. Few talkers can withstand the apparent boredom of a hearer, and Warden happened not to be one of the few. Condensing his account of the proceedings on board the *Sans Souci* to the barest summary, he stopped abruptly.

The Under Secretary, leaning back in his chair, rested his elbows on its comfortable arms, and pressed together the tips of his outspread fingers. He scrutinized his nails, and seemingly was much troubled because he had not called in at the manicurist's after lunch. Nevertheless, being an Under Secretary, he owned suave manners, and the significance of Warden's docket-like sentences did not escape him.

"Is that all?" he asked, turning his hands and examining their backs intently.

"Practically all."

There was silence for a while. A clock ticked softly as if to emphasize the peace that reigned on the park side of Whitehall.

"But you make certain deductions, I take it?" murmured the official.

"I could hardly fail to do that, knowing West Africa as I do," was the curt answer. Warden was really annoyed with the man. Without wishing him any positive evil, he wondered how far the Foreign Office cult would carry such an exquisite through a Bush campaign, with its wasting fever, its appalling monotony, its pathless wanderings midst foul swamp and rain-soaked forest – perhaps a month's floundering through quagmire and jungle with a speedy end under a shower of scrap iron fired from some bell-mouthed cannon.

"Will you be good enough to favor me with them?" purred the other, now absorbed in his palms.

"If I had a map – " began Warden, almost contemptuously.

The Under Secretary rose with a certain languid elegance. He was really tired, having worked at the Macedonian gendarmerie regulations until three o'clock that morning. High on the wall, behind Warden's chair, were several long, narrow, mahogany cases, each fitted with a pendent cord. The Under Secretary pulled one, and a large map of Africa fell from its cover.

"I am fairly well acquainted with the Protectorate, but now you can talk to scale," he said, going back to his seat and resuming his nonchalant attitude.

Warden, still smarting under a sense of the evident insignificance of Britain beyond the seas in the eyes of its home-dwelling custodians, spoke brusquely enough.

"On the Benué river, a tributary of the Niger, four hundred miles from the coast," he said, "you will find the town of Giré in the Yola District. You see it is just within the sphere of British influence. Germany claims the opposite bank. Well, Oku is near Giré. Oku is not on the map – "

"I put it there myself yesterday," broke in the Under Secretary.

Warden was gifted with keen sight. He swung round and gave the huge sheet on the wall a closer scrutiny. A great many corrections had been made on it with pen and ink. They were carried out so neatly that they resembled the engraved lettering.

For an instant his eyes met those of the Under Secretary; thenceforth a better understanding reigned.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Since you gave attention to the position of Oku so recently, I am half inclined to believe that not only my information but my opinions are forestalled."

“We have been at cross purposes,” murmured the tired voice. “You are Captain Arthur Warden, who commanded the Oku punitive expedition thirteen months ago. Since early yesterday morning the Colonial Office, at my request, has been trying to discover your whereabouts – trying in vain, I gather – or you would have mentioned the fact. I really wished to consult you with reference to this very topic. It is all the more gratifying that chance should have led you to be a witness of events which were surmises on our part, and that your sense of duty should bring you here at the earliest possible moment.”

Warden positively blushed. It was a relief that the Under Secretary was obviously inclined to visit his manicurist that afternoon rather than wait till the morrow. Such preoccupation gave him time to recover. But he devoted no more time to silent theories anent the disgraceful apathy of the home authorities with reference to West African affairs.

“I cannot insist too strongly on the efforts that are being made by our neighbors to undermine British influence in that quarter,” he said. “Their traders pander to native excesses and humor their prejudices. Their pioneers are constantly pushing northward toward the shores of Lake Tchad. Arms and ammunition are being smuggled across the boundary at many points. Preparations are quietly in progress for a transfer of power if ever British authority shows signs of weakening. Therefore, I draw the worst auguries from the presence in Cowes of a clever and unscrupulous filibuster like Figuero, especially when he acts as bear-leader to three disaffected chiefs. Oku, as you know, is an insignificant place, but it has one supreme attribute that gives it among the negroes the importance of Mecca in the Mohammedan world. It is the center of African witchcraft. Its ju-ju men are the most noted in the whole continent. Their fetish is deadly and irresistible. They can compass the ruin of tribal leaders who are immeasurably more wealthy and powerful than any of their own men. I do not pretend to explain the reason – I can only state the fact – but there can be no gainsaying the simple truth that if men of Oku place their ban on any tribe or individual, that tribe or that man is doomed.”

“Can you give instances?”

“Yes. As far away as the river Akini, in the Yoruba District” – and this time Warden did not point to the map, though his words bridged six hundred miles – “there was a quarrel between the up-country traders and the shippers at Lagos. The merchants in the interior tried to close the trade routes, but the local chiefs refused to help them. By some means the traders secured the Oku ban on their side. The Yoruba natives resisted it.

“By Jove! both they and the factors at Lagos were glad enough to come to heel when every ounce of stuff was diverted into French Dahomey. There was no overt act or threat. Oku methods are too clever for that. The authorities were powerless. Hunger coerced the natives, and financial loss brought the people on the coast to terms. And this took place where we were paramount! Heaven only knows what excesses the Oku fetish has caused in inter-tribal wars. Why, when I attacked them, I had to break with my own hands every ju-ju token on the road. Not even our Hausa troops would pass them otherwise.”

“They had no ill effect on you, then?” said the other, smiling a little.

“None – at present.”

Warden himself was surprised when his lips framed the qualification. For no assignable cause his mind traveled to the lowering face on the gourd, then reposing in his portmanteau at Waterloo Station, and he remembered the curled scrap of tattooed skin in his pocket. He had not mentioned the calabash to the official. Though it bore curiously on the visit of the men of Oku to the Isle of Wight, he believed that such a far-fetched incident would weaken his statements. Since he was inclined at first to err so greatly in his estimate of the Under Secretary’s knowledge of West African politics, he was now more resolved than ever not to bring an extravagant toy into a serious discussion. Any reference to it would be ludicrously out of place. He was beginning to entertain a deep and abiding respect for the Foreign Office and its denizens.

The Under Secretary asked a few additional questions before he rose to fold up the map. Warden took the hint, and was about to depart when he received an unlooked-for piece of news.

“By the way, it is almost a certainty that Count von Rippenbach accompanied the Emperor in the visit paid to the *Sans Souci*?” said the official.

“I assume his identity solely from paragraphs in the newspapers.”

“It will interest you to learn that the Count has just returned from an exploring and hunting trip in the Tuburi region.”

Now, Tuburi lies in the no-man’s land that separates Lake Tchad from German West Africa, and Warden met the Under Secretary’s bored glance a second time with quick comprehension.

“I think,” went on the quiet voice, “I think it would be well if you kept the Colonial Office posted as to your movements during the remainder of your furlough. Personally, I expect no immediate developments. The Emperor is a busy man. He can only devote half an hour each year to affairs that affect the Niger. But, keep in touch. You may be wanted. I am exceedingly obliged to you. One learns so much from the men who have passed their active lives in lands which one has never seen except in dreams. I dream here sometimes, in front of that map – and its companions. Oh, I had almost forgotten. Do you know Mr. Baumgartner?”

“Only by sight.”

“That is useful. It might help if you were to meet him in some unexpected locality. And his yacht, the *Sans Souci*, you have noted her main features, such as the exact number of windows in her deck houses, or the cabin ports fore and aft of the bridge?”

“I watched her closely many hours last night, but I fear I missed those precise details,” laughed Warden. “I shall correct the lapse at the earliest opportunity.”

“That sort of definite fact assists one’s judgment. Paint and rig can be altered, but structural features remain. I recall the case of the *Sylph*, a foreign cargo-steamer loaded to the funnel with dynamite, and about to pass Port Said at a time when it was peculiarly important to the British fleet that the canal should remain open. She resembled a hundred other disreputable-looking craft of her class, but a lieutenant on the *Cossack* had seen her a year earlier at Bombay, and noticed a dent in the plates on the port bow. His haphazard memory settled a delicate and complicated discussion in Peking. Good morning! Don’t forget to send your address.”

Standing in Downing Street to light a cigar, Warden glanced up at the stately building he had just quitted. His views on “red-tape” officialdom had undergone a rapid change during the past hour. It was borne in on him that generations of men like himself had come from the ends of the earth to that storehouse of secrets, and each was convinced that he alone could reveal the solemn tidings which might be the forerunner of modern Europe’s Battle of Armageddon. And the Under Secretary was called on to hear every prophet! From such a standpoint the presence in England of a half-caste Portuguese and three full-blooded negroes dwindled to insignificance. True, the Under Secretary had listened, and Warden almost shivered when he realized how narrow was his escape from committing the grave error of discounting his hearer’s sympathy and measure of comprehension.

It was not his business to ask questions, but he gathered that others than himself were alive to the dangers that might spring from a conference between semi-rebellious subjects of Britain in West Africa and the ruler of a mighty nation pent within cramped confines for want of colonies. Oddly enough, the bent plates of the dynamite-laden *Sylph* suggested a strange connection between the carved gourd and the strained position of affairs in the Cameroons. He had no manner of doubt that when the royal yacht crashed into a sunken wreck the previous day it liberated the calabash, which forthwith drifted into the Solent, and escaped notice until discovered by Evelyn Dane. Suppose she had not seen it? All their subsequent actions would have been affected. He might never have known of the strange gathering on board the yacht.

“Queer train of circumstances!” he thought. “If only I could use a pen, what a romance I might contrive with that as a beginning – and this,” he added, when, in searching for a box of matches, his fingers closed on the crisp roll of skin, “this as the frontispiece.”

He hailed a cab. He wanted to open the bag left at the railway terminus and deposit the gourd with the rest of his belongings in a small flat hired months ago as a *pied-à-terre*. His stock of cigars needed replenishing, and the weird document that had just made its presence felt reminded him that a Portuguese dictionary was lacking. A glance at his watch showed that he could not reach Cowes until a late hour, so he resolved to pass the night in town, go to a theatre, and return to the *Nancy* next morning.

From Waterloo, therefore, he telegraphed to Peter:

“Remaining here until to-morrow. Keep your weather eye open.”

He was sure that his friendly factotum would grasp the full meaning of the second sentence, but he would have been the most surprised man in London could he have known that Peter at that moment was plying the three men of Oku with gin.

An accident brought about a slight variation of his plans. It happened that no other passenger claimed the attention of the luggage-room clerk at Waterloo when the portmanteau was unlocked. Warden deposited the gourd on the zinc counter and groped among his belongings for something to cover it.

The attendant, who was watching him, uttered a gasping exclamation.

“Good Lord! sir,” he cried, “what sort of horrible thing is that?”

It was then that a hitherto undiscovered property in the gourd brought itself in evidence. No sooner was it placed on a smooth surface than it promptly wobbled into a half upright position, with the negro’s face on the upper part. Chance could hardly accomplish this movement. It was the designer’s intent, brought about by concealed weights, and Warden instantly remembered that the calabash floated much deeper in the water than would have been the case otherwise. A shaft of sunlight came through a broken pane in the glass roof, and fell directly on the scowling apparition.

The effect on the clerk was phenomenal. He grew livid, and backed away from the counter.

“Well, that’s the limit,” he muttered. “If I’d ha’ known old Hoof an’ Horns was so near to me since I kem on duty I’d ‘ave gone sick.”

Warden laughed, stuffed the gourd into the portmanteau, and hurried to the waiting cab. So preoccupied was he with other matters, he had not realized earlier that under the new conditions he would be in need of some portion of the bag’s contents.

It was no easy task to find a Portuguese–English dictionary. He tried half a dozen booksellers in vain, but ultimately unearthed a serviceable volume at a second-hand shop in Charing Cross Road. By the time he reached his flat, five o’clock, he was desperately hungry, having eaten nothing since breakfast.

His rooms looked dismal, and an apologetic hall-porter explained that if the gentleman ‘ad on’y sent a wire he’d ha’ tidied the place up a bit. Warden went to a restaurant, dined well, and returned at half-past six. There was still an hour or more of daylight, so he began to decipher the unsolved section of the strange manuscript. It was a longer job than he anticipated. Arabic characters, being largely phonetic, do not give a literal rendering of European words. Many pages of the dictionary were searched ere he hit upon the exact rendering of the blurred phrases. But the quest fascinated him. Before it was ended he found it necessary to consult an atlas and an encyclopedia.

At last, allowing for a margin of error in his guesses at tenses and other variants of root words, he completed a translation, and this is what he had written:

“I, Domenico Garcia, artist and musician in the city of Lisbon, am justly punished for my sins. Being desperate and needy, I joined in an attack on the *Santo Espirito*, homeward-bound from the Indies, and helped in the slaying of all the ship’s company. We attacked her when she left Lisbon on the voyage to Oporto, but a great gale from the northeast drove us far out to sea, and then the wind

veered to the northwest, and cast us miserably ashore on the African desert. We abode there many days, and saw no means of succor, so we buried most of our ill-gotten gains in that unknown place and turned our faces to the north, thinking to find a Portuguese settlement in the land of the Moors. We died one by one, some from hunger, some from fever, some from the ravages of wild beasts. Six out of fifty-four men reached the town of Rabat in the train of a Moorish merchant. There we were sold as slaves. Three were dead within a month. We who were left, Tommaso Rodriguez, Manoel of Serpa and myself, were sent as presents over the caravan road to that cruel tyrant the black king of Benin. Rodriguez went mad, and was flayed alive for refusing to worship a heathen god. This message is written on his skin. Manoel of Serpa was drowned in the river which these monsters term 'Mother of Waters,' while I, though my life is preserved by reason of my skill in carving, am utterly bereft of hope in this world while filled with fear of God's justice in the next. Christian, you who read these words, for which I have devised a cunning receptacle that may long survive me, if you would help an erring brother to regain salvation, go yourself, or send some trusty person, to the above-named town of Rabat. I hid there a great ruby which I took from a golden pyx found on board the *Santo Espirito*

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