

**BUCK CHARLES  
NEVILLE**

THE PORTAL OF DREAMS

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*The Portal of Dreams:*

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# Charles Neville Buck

## The Portal of Dreams

### CHAPTER I

#### A VISION UPON A WARNING

The doctor was so small and frail that his narrow face was rescued from inconsequence only by a trimly cropped Van-Dyck with a dignified sprinkling of gray. I always felt that, should I ever see him in a bathing suit, I would have to seek a new physician. I could never again think of him as sufficiently grown-up to practise an adult vocation. Yet when the doctor spoke his mentality issued out of its small habitation of flesh and expanded to commanding proportion.

The little doctor was in fine a very great doctor, and on this occasion he was bullying me with the large authority of a Bonaparte.

"But, Doctor – " I began protestingly.

He raised a small hand which suggested the claw of a delicate bird and fixed me with quizzical eyes that had the faculty of biting sharply through a man's unspoken thoughts.

"Don't assume to say 'but' to me," he sternly enjoined; and since we had long known each other, not only as physician and

patient, but also as men who breakfasted at the same hour and the same club table, I momentarily heeded.

"Once upon a time," he continued, "the German Kaiser presumed to question a pilot on his imperial yacht. Do you recall the result?"

"No," said I, "I don't, but – "

Again the doctor eyed me, basilisk fashion, across the bacon and eggs of our belated morning meal, as he continued:

"He very properly reminded the Emperor that upon a vessel in the high seas, a pilot acknowledges no superior this side of Eternity. In matters of health I take the bridge. You obey."

"But – " I weakly insisted.

"You presume to think because you house your nerves in a well-muscled body that they are infallible," he implacably continued. "I've seen rotten motors in excellent garages. I've seen unhappy wives immured in palaces, and I've seen finer figures of men than you in lunatic asylums."

"My nerves are simply of the high-strung type," I argued.

"Those are the kind that snap," retorted the sage. "If you were a racehorse, it might be a matter of reasonable pride to you to be bred in the purple. Being a man with no avocation except the spending of unearned money, it means that you are perilously over-sensitized."

"What unpleasant pedantry are you leading up to?" I demanded. "Out with it."

"I mean to. You have the artistic temperament which, without

genius, is worse than useless. You choose to regard yourself a failure and grow morose because you have found the law uncongenial and because editors earn their salaries by returning your manuscripts. The durability of your nervous system depends entirely on how you utilize the next five years."

"Go on," I encouraged him, "don't mind me. Sentence me to death if it amuses you."

"It won't be death, but unless you fortify those nerves," he calmly went on, "there probably will be disaster. It may take any one of several forms."

"As, for instance?" I inquired, with pardonable curiosity.

"Oh, arterio-sclerosis, paralysis, insanity, something of that sort."

"Thank you kindly," I murmured, as I reached for the matches. "Can I have my choice of the lot?"

"However," went on the big little doctor, "if you devote the next few years to a program of diversified travel, you ought to lay up an account of nerve-strength upon which you can draw *ad lib.* for forty or fifty years to come. You should even have a surplus against the unfortunate exigency of living on when you are old and useless."

"But I have traveled," I argued. "I've been to –"

He interrupted me with a snort, and swept my declarations aside, unfinished.

"You have dabbled at travel, like a school-girl nibbles at chocolates. Get out on the hike and stay out for a year or two.

Build into your artificial self something of the out-door animal. You have a fair start – you were once an athlete." He rose to go down to his motor, and I shouted after him contemptuous and profane criticism. Nevertheless within the week I booked passage for the Mediterranean.

I found once more that Europe and the African fringe of the land-locked sea have to offer to the hunger of the wanderlust only a stereotyped table-d'hôte. Shortly it cloys. Within several weeks one thing only had promised to break the stagnant surface with a ruffle of interest. And that one thing puzzled me in no small degree, since it was not such a matter as would ordinarily have challenged my attention. I have passed with a glance many beautiful women, and felt no need to turn my head for a further inspection. I am not of the cavaliering type, and yet here I was finding myself interested, in a strange and indefinable way, in a woman whose face I had not seen, and whose name I did not know. That, I told myself, was the secret of it. It was exactly because she was elusive, mysterious in fashion, that I found my flat interest piqued. I never had more than the swish of her skirt or a glimpse of her retreating figure, until it came about that sheer inquisitiveness gave her an augmented importance. At all events, she had eluded me over southern Europe from Genoa to Constantinople, and thence into Egypt, and I wanted to see her face. It was at Naples that I had my first hasty and imperfect view of her. I was hurrying through the Galleria Umberto, on my way to a luncheon appointment for which I found myself late. As

I passed Merola's a young woman was sitting before a counter, with her back to the street, trying on gloves. I could appreciate the gypsy grace of her figure, which was slender, because one of the avocations into which I have essayed without distinction is painting. The single thing at which I have not failed, except the success of having selected parents who bequeathed me money, is an appreciation of the beautiful. That appreciation, despite my hurry, brought me to a stop for a full glance at her; but there was no mirror at any part of the shop which gave me a reflection of her averted face, and as my appointment was imperative, I refrained from going in to buy gloves. But there was something so exquisite in her bearing, and in the tasteful lines of her simple traveling gown, that I caught myself thinking of her. Then as I went down to the quay a day later to say farewell to some friends, just as the gangplank of an outgoing steamer was about to be drawn up, I saw her hurrying across it. Her face was still averted. I strained to catch a feature, but a wayward gust of bay breeze wrapped a filmy veil about the profile which was for a moment turned my way – and hid it. She did not house at the deck rail but disappeared as the gangplank came up and cut off pursuit. But I had added to my first impression the knowledge that she did not merely walk. She soared as though her feet were the sandals of Hermes, and she carried herself with the splendid grace of a slender young queen.

The luncheon appointment, which had thwarted my impulse to turn into the glove shop, and so end the mystery in its

incapacity, brought a long trail of complications and caused me to envy those fortunate men who are not handicapped by the possession of relatives. I have sometimes thought that the truly ideal existence would be to be born an orphan unhampered by cousins, aunts or any of those human beings who are privileged to make demands upon our times and thoughts.

From the moment when I watched the skyline of New York sink slowly behind the horizon until I reached Naples I had at least been a free agent. But hardly had I signed my guest card at Parker's Hotel and strolled out to hail a crazy Neapolitan hack when the angular and purposeful figure of my Aunt Sarah loomed up in the near foreground and – saving her grace – eclipsed the picturesqueness of the town and the distant cone of Vesuvius. I had known vaguely that this estimable lady was beating her way about Europe, guide-booked and grimly set upon self-improvement, but I had hoped to keep the area of two or three monarchies between us.

I knew that from one to the other of the Cook's Agencies she would be flitting with the same frantic energy that characterizes the industry of the ant. That I should myself pass within hailing distance of her party or be recruited in her peregrinations was a disaster which I had not anticipated. None the less the blow had fallen and I had walked unwarned into the ambush of her fond embrace. Aunt Sarah would now converse voluminously of cathedrals and old masters, and all the things upon which tourists are fed to a point of acute mental dyspepsia.

She had ordered me to luncheon with much the same finality as that with which royalty commands the attendance of guests at court. I had gone meekly though doing so involved passing Merola's and opened up a series of events which were destined to alter for the worse my immediate future. But the luncheon had been only the beginning, and greater misfortunes were to follow in due order.

I have never since been able to understand precisely what form of paresis seized upon me, and paralyzed my normally efficient power of lying, when she instructed me to attach myself to her party for a motor trip to Villefranche and Nice. I do know that no available mendacity occurred to my shocked brain and I found myself murmuring an acceptance. The acceptance was again meek and spineless. I had discovered at luncheon that Aunt Sarah, with that motherly obsession which appears to characterize many maiden ladies of fifty and beyond, had under wing a party of three young ladies who were capping off their educations with the post graduate "advantages" of the grand tour. That these young ladies possessed all the homely virtues, I have not the slightest doubt. Their faces and figures attested the homeliness and their virtue was such that they seemed always wondering whether their halos were on straight. Theirs was an insatiate greed for intellectual feeding. They browsed through their Baedekers with a seeming terror lest something erudite escape them. They pursued and captured and assimilated every fleeting fact which might improve their minds. Until my captivity

they had no man with their party. That was probably because Aunt Sarah had made the strategic mistake of permitting all those, whom she might otherwise have annexed, to see her girls. She should have enlisted her male escort first and held back the introductions until desertion was impracticable. At all events, I had, like the imbecile I was, "fallen for it," and surrendered my liberty. When the boat bearing the unknown divinity set sail I was merely a satellite of Aunt Sarah's constellation and no longer a free agent.

Because I happened to be, in a superficial way, familiar with the tourist-tramped sections of the Continent, I became a sort of gentleman courier, without recompense, and because I had once undertaken to be a painter, I was expected to give extemporaneous lectures on the art treasury of the museums. We walked several thousand miles, or maybe it was millions, over those peculiarly hard floors which make art galleries penitential institutions. I saw the three plain faces in every phase of soulful rapture that can be elicited by the labors of the masters, from Michelangelo to Murillo.

When this had gone on for several centuries, or maybe it was æons, I discovered that every art gallery has two or three truly interesting features, though the full enjoyment of these was denied me. I speak of the exits. Perhaps to the unintimidated mind of the outsider it may appear that whatever agonies I underwent were the deserved result of my own abjectness. It is easy to say that I might have pleaded other plans and gone on my

way enfranchised. To such a critic my only and sufficient reply is that he or she does not know my Aunt Sarah. My Aunt Sarah says to whomsoever she chooseth, "Go," and he goeth; "Come," and he cometh. She knew perfectly well that I had no other plans. She correctly assumed me to be a derelict floating without purpose and with my chart lost over-side. She virtuously resolved that for once I should be made of use, in assisting to improve the minds of the three plain young ladies. Lying would have been quite futile. Consequently she said, "Come," and I came. When I learned that we were to make the tour to the Riviera towns by motor, I welcomed the suggestion as a less evil than cathedrals and art galleries. At least we should be out of doors and in the exhilaration of rapid motion one might hope to forget the three young ladies at brief and blessed intervals. One could not at the same time think of the culture-pursuing trio and anything rapid.

It has been my curse in life that I have dabbled at so many things that I can be made of smattering use in almost any circumstance. Our chauffeur discovered this three and one-half minutes after the occurrence of our first blow-out, when Aunt Sarah, taking pity upon his sweating and dust-grimed brow, told me off to help him patch the puncture. After that it was impossible to feign ignorance as to the interior workings and deviltries of motor cars.

The Upper Corniche Road is perhaps the most charming driveway of the world – and I say this with due reverence to Amalfi. By a road as white as a fresh tablecloth and as smooth as

a bowling alley one speeds to the purring of his motor along the way thrown up for the tramping feet of Bonaparte's battalions. From a commanding height the traveler looks down, as from the roof of the world, with close kinship of peaks and clouds, upon a panorama a-riot with breadth and depth and color. Fascinating road-houses of stucco walls curtained behind a profusion of clambering roses tempt one to pause and take his ease to the tinkle of guitars and mandolins. But Aunt Sarah and the girls, ever bent upon reaching the next cathedral with a stained glass window or the next dingy canvas of a saint sitting on a cloud, were scarcely amenable to the lure of road-house temptation.

They seemed to regard Europe as a transitory effect which might fade like the glories of sunset before they had finished seeing it, and anything savoring of the dilatory aroused their suspicion.

Far below us lay the outspread Mediterranean, blue beyond description and upon her placid bosom sailboats shrunk to the size of swallows and yachts seemed no larger than nursery toys.

One gracious afternoon, while I was occupying the front seat beside the driver, I almost attained a state of contentment. I was pretending that I had forgotten all about the human freight in the tonneau. My eyes were drinking in the smiling beauty framed by the wide horizon, when suddenly the droning of the motors fell quiet and with no warrantable reason the automobile slid to a halt and declined to proceed farther.

## CHAPTER II

# PURSUING A WILL-O'-THE-WISP

Aunt Sarah and the girls were much annoyed and their annoyance did not grow less when, after a half-hour of diagnosis, the chauffeur emerged, grease-stained and exhausted from under the car, shaking his head. He frankly admitted that his worm's eye view had failed to enlighten him as to the trouble. Aunt Sarah turned upon me eyes mirroring a faith sufficient to move even stalled motor cars.

"I am sure, my dear," she said, sweetly, "your mechanical aptitude can find a remedy for this difficulty."

It was, of course, an order to burrow into the confined space between the road bed and the bottom of the car, and of course I burrowed. For a time I was out of touch with all matters transpiring in the great outer world, but finally I saw the inverted face of our chauffeur gazing in upon me and heard his bellowing voice. I have hitherto neglected to mention that our chauffeur was neither French nor Italian, but Irish. He was, in fact, an excellent fellow, and the only member of our party whom I found companionable.

"Sure, sor," he yelled, "there's another car in trouble just around th' turn av' th' road."

I supposed that he was imparting this information only out

of the assumption that misery loves company, and inasmuch as my reply was profane, it need not be quoted. In a moment more, however, his grinning visage reappeared at the road level. "They wants to know if you can't be afther lending 'em a tire-iron?"

"What do they think this is?" I roared back, squirming far enough to clear my face for utterance, but not far enough to see what was going on. "This isn't a repair crew."

It was hardly a gracious response to a fellow motorist in trouble, but my point of view was oppressed with the weight of a paralyzed car, and Aunt Sarah and the girls, and I was misanthropic to the degree of sourness. From my position whatever conversation ensued was merely an incoherent babble of voices. Palpably, despite my discourtesy, Mr. Flannery had supplied the inquirers with whatever they needed, and they had gone their way. I, in the course of the next few minutes, emerged from my hedge-hog isolation, tinkered with the carburetor, and crawled back again into concealment. Then someone returned the borrowed tire-iron. I did not have the opportunity to speak to the Someone, and I should not have seen the Someone at all had I not happened to catch the shouted words of Mr. Flannery. Mr. Flannery had so accustomed himself to pitting his voice against machinery that even in moments of quiet he hurled his words like the roar of a bull. So, as he spoke now to the unknown person, I recognized an allusion to myself. The words which set me to extricating myself as speedily as possible from my humble position were as follows:

"Sure, ma'am, th' boss would be afther bein' more polite to yer, only the car is layin' a little heavy on his stummick, and it gives him a bit of a grouch."

The word which excited me was the "ma'am," and my excitement was no means allayed when I stood clear in the road and saw just disappearing around a curve a figure which I recognized. It could be no other figure, for no other figure that I had ever seen could walk with the same triumphant and lissome grace. Again the face was turned away from me, and about her hat floated a confusing cloud of veil. But she had been there within a few feet and possibly had even heard my surly responses to her request for assistance. Possibly she had seen my wriggling feet while I, who would have esteemed it the greatest possible privilege to have assisted her in any way, had lain there surrounded by dust and profanity. I was seized with a mad impulse to run after her, but I knew that the return of my iron signified that their tire-mending was finished and they were on their journey.

My own repairs were not finished, and I stood there with streaks of grease across my face, caked with dust and by no means presenting the appearance with which a man might hope to appear acceptable in the eyes of divinity. Aunt Sarah and her bevy of young intellectuals, I found, had withdrawn to the greater comfort of a near-by road-house, and could give me no information, while Flannery's description was on the whole, unsatisfactory. The idiot had not asked her name, and in answer

to all my questions could only assure me vaguely that the young lady was "a peach." One thing he had noticed. The car, which had passed us a quarter of an hour before was a large blue touring car, of high horse-power. It is strange what details impress certain minds and what goes unseen. So again I had missed my chance, and the incident had not served to reconcile me to my serfdom.

Several days later I had succeeded in gaining a brief leave of absence from my duties as courier, and was spending an interval of sadly needed rest.

I had the hope that the unknown girl and her party would be stopping for a while in one of the closely grouped towns along the coast: Nice, Cannes, Mentone, Monte Carlo – it mattered little which one it might be. If she was in any of these, I should eventually find her, and I haunted the dazzling whiteness of the Boulevard des Anglais, with a buoyant pulse beat of expectancy. At any moment I might again catch a glimpse of her in a shop or café, and if I did, I meant that it should be more than a glimpse, and that she should not again escape until I had at least seen her face. I spent most of my time wondering what she was like. Would the full view bring a greater sense of fascination or the pang of disillusionment? It might be that when I saw her I should find myself harshly awakened from a dream, but at all events, there would be certainty, and an end to the tantalizing sense of following a will-o'-the-wisp which constantly eluded. She gave me one very anxious afternoon. I had been taking a horseback ride near town when I came upon a wrecked and

empty automobile. The physical facts showed clearly what had happened. The car had evidently skidded while speeding, in an effort to turn out for some passing vehicle, and had tried to climb a stone wall. There must have been a very ugly moment, as the twisted front wheels and crumpled hood attested. What frightened me was the fact that it was a large, blue touring car of the same sort, if not identical, with the one described by Flannery. I was commencing my ride when I saw it, but I turned back at once to town and began an investigation. I finally learned that the chauffeur for a local garage had taken a party of his own friends for a joy ride, and that the expedition had come to summary grief. My effort to trace the history of that particular car for a week or two past resulted in nothing. I was informed that it had been hired many times and to many unrecorded persons, usually for the afternoon or day.

Several nights later I was sitting at a roulette table in Monte Carlo's *Cercle des Etrangers*. I had fallen in with a coterie of chance acquaintances, who for some reason held faith in my luck and insisted upon my crowding into a vacant place at the wheel. My function was to submit to the issue of fortune not only my own stack of *louis d'or*, but also the considerable purse that they had raised among them.

My table was near the center of the main *salle*, and at my elbows crowded the little party of men and women whose interests hung upon my success or failure. It was the same old scene; the same old life that one sees year after year in this

chief cathedral of the gods of chance. Men and women from both hemispheres stood or sat in the tense absorption of eyes riveted on dancing ball and whirling disc. At my right was a regally gowned woman whose delicate features were now as hard as agate and whose eyes were avid. At my left was a saturnine Spaniard who smiled indifferently, but who did not know his cigar had died to a stale coldness. I was experiencing the sense of disillusionment which invariably comes to me afresh when I enter the Casino of Monaco. I always ascend the stairs of the palace which the principality-supporting syndicate has provided for its patrons with a mild elation of expectancy. I always take my place at the tables with the realization of disappointment. The sparkle of jewels is there; sometimes the beauty is there, but the spirit that rules is not a spirit of gaiety; and the glitter of eyes makes me forget the diamonds. The cold lust of greed flashes in the hard brightness of set faces.

Between the droning announcements of the croupier insidious thoughts force themselves. I think of the management's efficient ambulance services; of the exhaustive arrangements by which unknown patrons may be promptly identified; and the sinister discoveries of the beach. These things were in my mind now as the stack of gold pieces at my front alternately piled and dwindled under a fitful sequence of petty losses and gains.

I may have been at the table an hour when I began to have the insistent feeling of someone in particular standing at my back. Of course, there were many people behind me. Besides my own

party was the crowd of idle onlookers as well as others who were impatiently waiting to seize upon vacant places about the board.

And yet, just then I could not turn my head. My system involved leaving the winnings upon the table for three successive spins of the wheel. I had played a group of numbers in the black, cautiously avoiding the alluring perils of the greater odds, and twice my little pile of *louis d'or* had drawn in its prize money. On the third spin we stood to lose the entire amount of our augmented stake or see our pile swell commandingly. While I waited for the croupier to close the betting and touch the button, I twisted my head backward, to determine whose presence in the throng had so subtly announced itself to my consciousness. But the barrier of faces that pressed close against my chair cut off all who stood further back. The wheel raced; the ball danced madly about its rim; the crowd stood bating its breath; and the scattered piles of gold lay in doubt on the green baize diagram.

It was over. The croupier sang out the winning number, column and combinations. The rake was extended to push over to me a fairly imposing pile of French gold. I was conscious of coming in for more than my individual share of interest. Luck had been with me, and at Monte Carlo, the lucky man is the man of moment. But the sense of some personality above the many personalities was now borne in upon me with irritating force. I was impatient to rise and push back my chair and look about me, but as I attempted to do so, the men and women whose capital I had increased raised a chorus of remonstrance. I reluctantly

resumed the place which I had been about to abdicate and once more laid out my stake. This time I pushed the entire pile out onto the green cloth in a pyramid on the black. I knew if I lost it they would willingly surrender my services. Even at that cost I wanted freedom.

For, in the moment that I had been standing there, I had caught a glimpse of a retreating figure, which disappeared through the door, almost at the instant that my eyes identified it. It was the figure of a woman in evening-dress, or rather, I should say, of *the* woman in evening-dress. There was the same graceful majesty of bearing, the same slim grace – and the same averted face. But because I wished to leave the table fortune pursued me. Spin after spin doubled, tripled, quadrupled my swelling pile of money. Finally I told them that I would remain for three more tests of chance – but no more. I could hardly abandon these enthused men and women without warning, but as soon as I had fulfilled the obligation, I rose, and I fear there was more of precipitate haste than of courtesy in my manner of shouldering my way through the press of onlookers, to the door and the wonderful embroidery of flower beds before the casino. Eyes followed me, for my luck had held and I was a momentary sensation. It was still early, as hours go in a place where the major activity belongs to night life, and for two hours I haunted the cafés and boulevards without result. The next day proved equally fruitless, but that night, as I was idling with my after-dinner cigar, along the Boulevard de Condemine, I saw strolling at some distance

ahead of me, a young man and a girl. It was she, and I had only to hasten my steps to overtake and see her. I could guess that the man with her was a Frenchman. The cut of his clothes and the jaunty swagger of his bearing were distinctively Gallic. My imagination could read the title "fortune hunter" as though it were embroidered on his coat-tails.

I was resentful, and hurried on, but as usual I was destined to disappointment. An untimely and inconsequential acquaintance loomed up in my path, and when I attempted to brush hastily by him, he slapped me on the back and hailed me with that most irritating of all conceivable forms of address, "Well, how is the boy to-night?"

He did not find the "boy" particularly affable that night, but with an accursed and persistent geniality he succeeded in delaying me for the space of a few precious moments. At a distance, I saw her disappear into a lighted doorway against which her face and figure showed only in silhouette. Again I had lost her. I could hardly pursue her into the entrances of private houses, but I noted the location and went back to my apartments in the Hotel Hermitage with the comforting thought that we were in the same town and that by rising early the next morning, and searching tirelessly till midnight, I should ultimately be able to see her.

Before sleep came to me a telegram was brought to my door. Aunt Sarah had succeeded in becoming involved in some ludicrous difficulty with the Italian customs officials. She

implored that I come at once to her rescue. How she had achieved it, was a matter of inscrutable mystery. I had always found the politeness of Italian customs officers as gracious as a benediction, but Aunt Sarah was a resourceful person. I rejoined her detestable cortège long enough to extricate her from her newest difficulty, and to discuss with her her plans for the immediate future. I found that she and her young ladies were yearning for the sepia tinted walls of Rome where, under every broken column and crumbling arch their hungry souls might drink deep draughts of improving tradition and culture. I knew that they would waste no time musing by moonlight in the shadows of the Colosseum, but that with Latin dictionaries they would decipher in the broad light of day the inscriptions on the arcs of Titus and Constantine. None the less, I encouraged their idea and enlarged upon the suitability of this time. I looked up the train schedules and wired for hotel reservations. Every moment that they hesitated I was excitedly quoting, though not aloud, lines that came back from the days of a less-mature literary taste:

"Why dost thou stay and turn away,  
Here lies the path to Rome."

I thought it the part of wisdom to refrain from mentioning until the actual moment of their departure that my own way lay in an opposite direction. But when I had seen them settled in their first-class compartments and the accommodating guard

had reassured me by locking them in, I turned with a sigh of contentment and fled back to Monte Carlo. I had been absent only a few days, but I returned to a dusty and desolate town. Perhaps the numbers of gamblers and pleasure-seekers had not actually diminished. Perhaps they had even increased, but a day's search satisfied me that the unknown lady had gone, and for me the town was empty.

What idiosyncrasy drove me to the Holy Land, I cannot say, unless it was that after my exhausting term of cathedral inspection I felt a desire to have a look at that temple which, except for the Taj Mahal, has always appealed to me as the world's most beautiful place of worship – the Mosque of Omar.

Riding one day on a donkey around the walls of Jerusalem, I had a glimpse of Her standing on the ramparts above me by the gate of the Needle's Eye. But as I looked up, the sun was full in my eyes and I could distinguish only the lashing of her skirts in the wind, and a halo-like aura of gold about her head, which was uncovered. At that distance her face was a featureless oval. Until night came with its howling of a thousand dogs I visited the places to which guides most frequently conduct their charges. But in the Temple of The Sepulchre, on the Mount of Olives, at the Jews' Wailing Place and among the vaulted bazaars, there was only failure for my quest. For two days I hunted, and while I hunted she must have gone down to Jaffa or departed for the overland trip to Syria.

## CHAPTER III

# I EMBARK ON A FOOL'S ERRAND

I was sitting on the terrace at Shepherd's Hotel on the evening of my arrival there. I was finding life flat, as one must who can discover no fascination in Cairo's appeal to the eyes, nostrils and ears. Before me was the olla-podrida of touring fashion and fellaheen squalor; the smell of camels and attar of roses; the polyglot chatter of European pleasure-seekers and the tom-toms of Arab pilgrims.

Then once more I saw her. But still I did not see her face. I suppose there were other persons with her. I did not notice. I did notice the salient thing. She was boarding a motor 'bus, presumably for the Alexandria train, and was followed by the usual Cairene retinue of tarbooshed porters and luggage-bearers.

My glimpse of her was again only in exit. My baggage had just been unpacked, and I also could not catch the Alexandria train. I had been foolish enough to announce my coming by postcard from Jerusalem to an acquaintance at the Turf Club and had found awaiting me at Shepherd's on my arrival a note informing me that George Clann, a friend of past days, had invited a few army officers and native men for dinner that evening to meet me. The note added that no excuse would be accepted. I had called up the club and signified my acceptance. That was before I had seen

the departing goddess, but I was due in the Sharia el Magrabi an hour hence and so was once again completely anchored.

Had I seen her in entrance instead of in exit only, I should perhaps have remained in Egypt and fanned into rebirth a languid interest in sarcophagi and cartouches and camel-riding and scrambling up the comfortless slants of pyramids.

As it was I began to subscribe to the Oriental idea of an inevitable destiny. I admitted to myself that it was written that for me this lady was to remain as unseen as though she belonged to the latticed and veiled seclusion of some pasha's harem. I told myself that had my first glimpse been a full one I should have gone on my way with prompt forgetfulness and that a curiosity so strange and fantastic must influence me no further.

I sought out an empty place on the terrace where unintentionally enough I overheard an earnest conversation between a fair-haired and enthusiastic young Englishman and a grizzled fellow in middle life. They were talking business in one of the writing-rooms which give out through open windows upon the terrace, and the enthusiasm of the younger gave a carrying quality to his voice.

He was, it appeared from his solicitude, seeking a billet which it lay in the power of his elder vis-à-vis to bestow. From the discussion which neither of them treated as confidential I learned that there is somewhere in the Pacific Ocean a perfectly useless island from which certain ethnological data and exhibits might be obtained. It further appeared that the British Museum was

deficient in these particular curios and that the glass cases were yearning to be filled. The youth had been employed in Soudanese excavations and research. Now that work had ended and with it the pay, the necessity for other work and pay had not ended.

"The billet down there," suggested the elder man, "will be no end beastly, I dare say. A tramp steamer sails from Port Said in three days for Singapore, Sandakan and the South Seas. The pay will be one hundred and fifty pounds for the job. The fare will probably be maggoty biscuits – still, if you feel game to have a dash at it – " The speaker finished with a shrug which seemed to add, "It's never difficult to find a fool."

But the young man laughed with a whole-hearted enthusiasm, that entirely missed the under note of contempt in the manner of his benefactor. "Well, rather," he declared. "And I say, you know, its jolly good of you, sir."

Later I made the acquaintance of the young Briton in the American bar where over Scotch and soda we discussed the project, to the end that I nominated and elected myself an assistant forager for the British Museum, serving at my own expense. There was something likeable about my new and naïve acquaintance, who was so eager to shoulder his futile way across a third of the globe's circumference in search of crudely inscribed rocks and axe-heads and decaying skulls. My own experience in life had been even more futile. I had learned to speak five languages and had completely failed of gaining a foothold in five useful professions: Art, Law, Literature, Music

and Contentment. Possibly the appeasement of my Salatheal hunger, the curing of the curse, did not after all lie along the routes of Cunarders and Pullmans. Maybe I was still nibbling at travel as the school-girl nibbles at chocolates. Perhaps his method of taking the long and empty trail was the heroic medicine my itching feet required. At all events, I sententiously quoted to myself, "I think It will kill me or cure, and I think I will go there and see."

When I informed young Mansfield, for that proved to be his name, that I meant to be his traveling companion, his almost childlike face took on an incredulous expression. He was a great two-hundred-pound chap whose physique should logically have been the asset of a pirate or a pugilist, but the visage which surmounted it had a rosy pinkness and his blue eyes wore the guileless charity of essential innocence. With his physical power went a long-suffering good nature, and as he talked of the widely scattered places he had seen and the things which should have made him wise in his generation it seemed to me that his soul must have worn a macintosh, from which the showers of experience had been shed off without leaving a mark. I have seen mastiffs with eyes full of wistfulness because Nature has denied their affectionate temperaments the gentle lives of lap dogs. Mansfield struck me the same way. Why a man, by his spare and simple standards as rich as Cr[oe]sus, should care to ship with him on a voyage promising maggoty biscuits, was quite beyond his mental process. He confessed, in all frankness, that

he did it merely for the money – the pitiful hundred and fifty. There was a girl back in England, probably as devoid of surprises and complications of character as a lane-side primrose. I pictured her to myself as a creature of pink and shallow prettiness. The day to which his ambition strained as the ultimate goal was the day when he could become a curator in the British Museum and transplant her to decent London lodgings. He longed to placard and arrange scarabs in a plate-glass case and to classify Chimbote pottery and on bank holidays to push a go-cart in the park.

I was glad, however, when I went over the rust-red side of the *Wastrel* that Mansfield went with me. We had known that we were shipping on a mean vessel, and one shouldered out of more orderly chartings, because of her unworthiness. Liners did not ply the tepid waters for which we were bound: waters ridden by no commerce save the peddling of copra and pearl shell and beche-de-mer. Yet even the warning had not prepared me for what I found, as I first stepped upon her unclean decks and had my initial view of her more unclean crew. Perhaps there are other corroded hulks shambling here and there among the less frequented ports of the seven seas as uninviting in appearance and as villainously manned as was the *Wastrel*, but on this point I stand unconvinced. A glance told us that her sea-worthiness was questionable and that her over-burdening cargo pressed her Plimsoll mark close to the water line. We were to learn by degrees that her timbers were rotten, her plates rust-eaten and her engines junk. Her officers were outcasts from respectable

seafaring, none too cordial in their relations with admiralty courts. They had fallen back on the hazardous command of such a vessel as this not from choice, but necessity, precisely as other types of unemployed and hopeless men fall back on vagrancy and crime. Her crew was picked from the dregs of scattered ports. They were Lascars, Kanakas, Chinese and non-descripts from here and there; haled forth and signed from dives where human garbage trickles down to the sea. At first they interested me as new and roughened types of men, yet as I say, I was more than grateful for the shoulder touch of at least one being of my own sort. From our arrival, none of them except the captain and officers took the slightest pains to conceal that they regarded us as unwelcome interlopers and even the courtesy of the after-guard was short-lived enough. In that desert of taciturnity Mansfield babbled like a brook and overflowed with young sentimentality.

The first leg of our journey ended at Borneo, leaving us as unacquainted with officers and seamen, save in the surface details of personal appearance, as we had been at Port Said. Now we were dropping Sandakan harbor over the stern. Already the sprawling, hillside town, framed in its mangrove swamps, was lost around the buttress of the harbor's sentinel rock. Ramparts of sandstone were burning with a ruddy glow in the sunset.

A sense of isolation settled on us. As we had nosed our way outward Mansfield had been leaning silently on the after rail. His eyes had dwelt lingeringly on the green gardens and white walks

of the British Consulate which sits upon its hill. Now we had seen the last of that and of the bay's flotilla of matting-sailed junks. Off the port bow were only beetling sandstone and the countless gulls, flashing white as they tilted the snowy linings of their wings into the sun. He talked for a time, in low tones of the girl in Sussex as men will talk when they are homesick, and then he rather shamefacedly produced from somewhere and opened at random a much battered blank-book, written in a woman's hand.

"I dare say," he hesitantly told me, "I have no moral right to read this. It's quite personal, yet it's unsigned. Invasion of privacy can't apply to anonymous persons, you know." He paused for a minute and indolently watched the screaming hordes of Sandakan birds as if awaiting my agreement, but I said nothing.

"You see," he continued, "I've been living lately in a cheap *pension* at Cairo and, before that, in beastly Soudan inns, so when I drew a bit in advance I resolved to treat myself to a day or two at Shepherds. You remember how full the house was? They had to give me a small room on the roof. It was really a sort of servant's room in less crowded times, I fancy. A beggar of an Arab used to pray on his rug in front of my door... In rummaging about I found this." He held up the blank-book. "I looked for an address, meaning to post it to its owner but there was no address and only given names – there's not a surname between these covers. Some servant must have found it in a vacated room and later left it in the one to which I had fallen heir. Seems to have been some girl's desultory but intimate diary. Just an entry now and then,

with evidently long gaps between. You see the first writing is immature, almost childish – and the last is dated at Cairo."

I nodded my head, but said nothing. He appeared deeply interested but his simple punctilio required the reinforcement of my approval, before he could quite clear the skirts of his conscience in the matter of having sampled its contents.

"You see," he half-apologized, "my first glance was disinterested, I was merely seeking to identify ownership. But from just a few lines, read in that fashion, I saw that it was – " his voice became serious, almost awed – "well that it was rather wonderful. Some girl has been putting her heart into words here – " he tapped the blank-book – "and she's written a genuine human document." Again he paused, drumming on the rail with the fingers of one hand.

"From a half-dozen bits of Chimbote pottery," he reflected, "I can read a great deal of the habits and life of the Incas. I can restore an extinct mammal from some fragments of skeleton, but I find it jolly difficult to understand anything about a woman. If a fellow means to marry he ought to try to understand. That's why I'd like to have a dip into this. Do you think I might?"

"Do you think," I countered, smiling, "that you would have the right to read somebody's unsigned love-letters?" A certain magazine editor had once witheringly opined that I would never succeed in literature until I acquired some insight into the feminine riddle. But he had not pointed me to diaries. He had bluntly advised me to fall in love with a few variant types.

Until a man had found blond or dark hairs on his coat shoulder, said the editor, he could not hope to write about heartbeats. If he had found various kinds, and that often, he could write better.

Young Mansfield was giving my question a graver and more literal consideration than it merited.

"I rather think," he said seriously, "that one might read such letters. Unless the offense is against some definite person there is no offense at all."

"Perhaps you are right," I admitted, with a listless avoidance of argument, and in a moment more he had opened the book at random and was reading aloud.

## CHAPTER IV

# SOME PASSAGES FROM A DIARY

Mansfield was right. The pages of this diary struck the essentially human note of frank self-avowal. They were as fragrant as May orchards, their sweetness of personality made one think of brave young dreams among dewy blossoms. But I confessed to him the feeling that we were trespassers into these secrets, and after that he either laid the book by altogether or read it only when alone.

The *Wastrel* was cruising at her cripple's pace southeast by east, through those hot waters which lie directly above the equator. After some days we sloped across the line, but still clung to the hideous swelter of the next meridian. Our course lay among groups of lush islands which simmered in steam and fever, and the merciless, overhead sun beat upon us, as if focused through a burning glass until the pitch oozed from the deck cracks, and the sweat from our pores, and the self-control from our curdled tempers. Faces that had been sullen at Sandakan grew malevolent and menacing at 150 degrees, east, where, if I remember rightly, we crossed the equator.

The scowls of the men dwelt hatefully upon Captain Coulter as he paced the bridge. From scraps of information picked up here and there in fo'castle disparagement, I pieced together a lurid

abstract of his history. I knew how wild and unsavory were the reputations of many of the men of the eastern beaches. I had listened to tales of *lanai* and *bund*, but even in such company our skipper stood out as uniquely wicked.

The sheer and hypnotic force of his masterful will lay over and silenced the ship. From the first, he dominated. But if he had dominated at the latitude of 120 he domineered at 150, and to this domineering he brought all those extremes of tyranny which lie at the hand of a ship's captain on the high seas. At times the sheer, undiluted brutality of this control compelled my unwilling admiration. Every pair of eyes that met his from the fo'castle, were eyes of smoldering hatred and fear, and though he assumed scornful unconsciousness of this attitude, he knew that his security was no greater than that of the lion-tamer, whose beasts have begun to go bad. He must appear to invite attack, and upon its first intimation of outbreak, he must punish, and punish memorably.

Captain Coulter was little above the average in physical pattern and he walked with a slight defect of gait, throwing one foot out with an emphatic stamp. His face was always clean-shaven, and it might have served a sculptor for a type of the uncompromising Puritan, so hidden were its brutalities and so strong its note of implacable resoluteness.

Over a high and rather protrusive forehead, long hair of iron gray was always swept back. Bushy and aggressive brows shaded eyes singularly piercing and of the same depth and coldness

as polar ice. His nose was large and straight, and his lips set tight and unyielding like the jaws of a steel trap. The chin was square and close-shaven. Our captain was a silent man, yet in his own fashion bitterly passionate. Heffernan, the first mate, was a tawdry courtier, who studiously considered his chief in every matter, and maintained his position of concord by ludicrous care to risk no disagreement. In the stuffy cabin where three times a day we sweltered over bad food Mansfield and I studied the attitudes of the officers.

Coulter grimly amused himself over his eating by making absurd statements for the sheer pleasure of seeing his next in command, fall abjectly into agreement. The second mate, however, was impenetrably silent. He was without fear, but a life which had evidently brought him down a steep declivity from a lost respectability, had taught him consideration for odds. If he did not contradict the dogmatic utterances of his chief in table conversation, he at least refused to agree.

Mansfield and I were convinced that if this prematurely gray fellow with the dissipated face, cut in a patrician mould, could ever be brought to the point of personal narrative, he would have a stirring story to tell. We also knew that he would never tell it.

Once before the feud between after-watch and fo'castle drove the officers into an alliance of self-defense. A grave clash between the captain and the second mate seemed inevitable. It was a night of intolerable heat, and a sky spangled with stars hung over us low and smothering. Lawrence, the second mate,

was off watch, and joined us, carrying a violin. Then under the weird depression and melancholy lassitude which burdened us all, he began to improvise. Mansfield and I listened, spell-bound. Under his touch the catgut gave off such strains as could come only from the sheer genius of a gifted musician who had suffered miserably. It was almost as if he were giving without words the story which his lips would never tell, and into the improvised music crept infinite pathos and somber tragedy. No one could have listened unmoved, but the manner in which Captain Coulter was affected was startling.

He came over with an advent like that of a maniac. The lame foot was pounding the deck with the stressful stamp that was always his indication of rage. He halted before us with fists clenched and his eyes glittering. Upon Lawrence he vented an outpouring of blasphemous and unquotable wrath.

"Throw that damned fiddle overboard," was the command with which he capped his fierce tirade. "Don't let me hear its hell-tortured screeching on my ship again."

For a moment Lawrence stood silent and cold in a petrification of anger. Then he laid the instrument carefully on a hatch and stepped forward. Obviously it was in his mind at that moment to kill the captain, but after a pause he thought better of it. The odds against him were too heavy.

"I'll stow the violin in my box, sir," he said with a voice so quiet it was almost gentle, "but so help me God, if ever we meet after this voyage is ended, I mean to kill you." Coulter laughed

disdainfully and strode away, but for ten minutes Lawrence sat silent, his breath coming in deep gasps while he wrestled with the murder madness. We learned later that the captain was one of those persons whom music frenzies, and from that time on we did not even permit ourselves the consolation of whistling a favorite air.

Of all the restless men in the fo'castle, Coulter most keenly watched one John Hoak, a gigantic seaman from Liverpool, in whom he instinctively recognized a potential ringleader of mutiny. One evening Hoak vindicated this appraisalment by defiantly and loudly playing a music-hall tune on an accordion. A strain of it reached the bridge and Coulter, who was on watch, ordered the offender forward. After a violent and profane denunciation, under which the giant writhed in silent fury, Coulter lashed out to the sailor's mouth with his clenched fist and sent him sprawling to the deck. But lest this conduct should appear too irresolute, he added the punishment of twenty-four hours in irons. A fellow seaman plucked up the heroism to demand that the incident be entered on the log for admiralty investigation and Coulter's only reply was to send the insurgent into the inferno of the stoke hold for an extra shift at the shovels. In the stokehold the thermometer registered 130 degrees Fahrenheit, and the white and brown torsos that strained under the trembling dials were black with the sooty sweat of their effort and red with the pitiless glare from the grates.

From these beginnings the cloud on the horizon of our

affairs steadily gathered and blackened until an ominous pall of impending mutiny overhung us. Only an occasional coral reef or atoll now broke the monotony of a dead and oily sea. No shred of cloud relieved the emptiness of a devitalized sky. Mansfield and I went about in canvas shoes and pajamas. The ship was more disheveled than we, and its discipline more slovenly than its dress. The churlish silence of the fo'castle was met by the braggart autocracy of the officers. Conditions grew tenser and thicker with each day, yet no specific rupture came to fire the waiting explosion. Slowly it brewed and gathered menace, while the air hung pulseless and heavy under its shadow. Mansfield and I knew it needed only a lightning flash to loose all the artillery of the thunders and set them about their hell's fury. By tacit consent we did not often talk of it, but we remained close together and placed our revolvers, belts and sheath-knives where they could be readily caught up. Under the silent horror of foreboding our nerves became raw and our tempers, like those of the others, short and raspy. On one sultry afternoon when the trade wind was dead, I came upon Mansfield sprawling in the shadow of a life-boat, diligently reading entries from the unknown girl's diary, touching the incidents of her sheltered and untroubled life. He glanced up shamefacedly, then began in exculpation:

"See here, you know you're quite wrong about the guiltiness of reading this. I'm sure she wouldn't mind. She's not that sort. Here we are menaced by the inferno of a mutiny. We are no better than mice waiting the pleasure of a cat, which means to

crush them... The atmosphere will drive us mad. This book is like a breeze off the heather... I tell you it helps."

In abnormal times men entertain abnormal ideas and warped notions. I sat cross-legged on the deck beside him and stuffed tobacco into my pipe. I said nothing.

"It's all getting on my nerves. I'm losing my grip!" he admitted. "Last night I dreamed of a nasty row and all day a bit of rhyme has been running through my brain." He paused a moment, then quoted:

""Twas a cutlass swipe or an ounce of lead  
Or a yawning hole in a battered head,  
And the scuppers glut with a rotting red.

""And there they lay while the soggy skies  
Dreened all day long in upstaring eyes,  
At murk sunset and at foul sunrise.""

He broke off and laughed at himself unsteadily.

"Get your mind off it," I commanded shortly. "Fetch out the blank-book. Let's read about her *début* party."

But the passage at which the book fell open dealt with a time prior to *débuts*. At the head of the page was pasted a newspaper clipping hinting at personalities but giving no names.

"One of the most beautiful and popular members of the younger set in the summer colony" had been capsized while sailing in the harbor. The youth who accompanied her had

been seized with cramps and she had kept not only herself but her helpless escort above water until the tardy arrival of help. Beneath, in her own hand, was scrawled:

"Did they expect me to drown him? I had to stand by, of course. What else could a fellow do? But I spoiled a dress I look nice in. I'm sorry for that."

Appended to this was a postscript so badly written that it was hard to decipher. I could guess that her cheeks had colored as she wrote it.

"Maybe after all, I am a grandstander. I did get awfully tired – and I pretended that *he* was looking on, and was swimming out to help me."

"By Jove" snorted Mansfield, "she's a ripping good sort. I wonder who she pretended was looking on."

"Turn back," I suggested. "It may tell."

But it was only after some searching that we found him duly catalogued, and even then she gave him no name. Yet in trailing him through the pages, we came to know her quite well, and to render sincere allegiance. She was not at all conventional. She was one of those rare discoveries upon which the prospector in life comes only when he strikes an El Dorado. She dared to think her own thoughts and did not grow into the stereotyped mold of imitation. We felt from the clean, instinctive courage of her tone and view-point that if ill chance had marooned her with us on this imperiled ship, she would bear herself more gallantly than we could hope to do, and that she would tread these filthy decks

with no spots on the whiteness of her skirts.

In her early writings she had shown for something of a tomboy and there were hints of elderly exhortation to tread more primly the paths which were deemed maidenly. Yet from these tattered scraps of life and outlook, we could piece together some concept of her soul fabric. This girl was woven of pure silk, but not of flimsy silk; there were strength and softness – resoluteness and tenderness – a warp and woof for the loom of noble things – and charm. Often I felt as though I were invading a temple in which I had no place as communicant, and into whose fanes and outer areas I should wish to come reverently, with the shoes of my grosser soul in my hands. One night she had been sitting in the moonlight on the beach, and the sea had talked to her. What she wrote that night was pure poetry. I shall not try to reproduce it from my faulty memory. My heavy masculine hand would mar its gossamer beauty. One might as well undertake to restore the iridescent subtleties of a broken bubble. On this occasion she was thinking of the mysterious man she had so quaintly idealized. Had the lucky beggar, whoever he was, read those lines he must have felt that, in the lists of life, there rested on him the sacred obligation to bear a spotless shield and a true lance. She transcribed as one to whom the magic and delicate nuances of life are revealed. Besides these passages there were others sparkling with the merriment of spontaneous humor. Our writer was no Lady Dolorosa. She was as many-sided and many-hued as the diamond whose facets break light into color. She frankly

admitted to these pages, intended only for herself, that she was beautiful, though she wished that her eyes were blue instead of gray-brown, and that her type were different. Evidently she had cut her teeth on compliment and fed from childhood on that type of admiration which beauty exacts. She seemed to be a little hungry for tributes of a different and deeper sort. In her society days, as in the more youthful period, we found frequent references to the unnamed man who still held his undeserved and paramount place as an idealized personality; a human touchstone by which she tested the intrinsicness of other men – always to the detriment of those on trial.

# CHAPTER V

## PREMONITIONS

### BECOME REALITIES

At last, running back to the start, we tracked him down and with his discovery came disappointment. I had realized that she had been dressing a mere lay-figure in garments of idealized manhood and endowing an unknown with a panoply of the chivalric to which he could probably lay no rightful claim. Still it was disconcerting to realize that he had, in the flesh, contributed absolutely nothing to the picture. She had simply devised from the whole cloth of imagination a collaborative sum of Galahad the Pure and Richard the Lion-Hearted. She had seen him only once in later years – from the sidelines of a Yale-Harvard football game. He was playing with the crimson and she was at the impressionable age. There was the whole and meager foundation for his apotheosis. She did not state the year, but she gave the score, and by that I identified the occasion.

"I devoutly pray," I confided to young Mansfield, "that she never meets him. She has fed herself on dreams. I hope she doesn't wake up."

Mansfield promptly took up the unknown hero's defense. He invariably held a brief for the idealist.

"Why do you assume that he's a bounder?" he demanded

almost resentfully. "He may be all she thinks."

"I don't assume anything," I retorted, "but I happened to play on that team myself and I am compelled to admit, though with chagrin, that we had among us no knights from Arthur's Round Table. Warriors of ferocity we had; young gentlemen who played the game to the lasting glory of John Harvard; but this letter-perfect type of chivalry, valor and gentleness well, I'm afraid he failed to make the team."

You remember the story of Bruce and the spider? In his ermine, surrounded by his stalwart barons, Robert would probably have learned no lesson from the weaving of filmy webs. Alone and in peril, it taught him how to conquer. To us, alone and in peril, this diary assumed an epochal importance entirely out of kelter with its face value.

Of course, there were many topics which we might have discussed to divert our minds from morbidly watching the cloud of impending mutiny spread and grow inky. But the cloud was present and human, and the diary was present and human, and we were present and human. Whether or not we were creatures of atrophied brains and distorted vision is an academic question. The fact remains. For us there was genuine relief in turning from the miasma of brooding doom which overhung the *Wastrel* to the spiced fragrance of this self-revealed personality. It was a clean breeze into our asphyxiation. It was a momentary excursion out of a noisome dungeon into an old-fashioned garden, where roses nod and illusions bloom.

One steaming night when darkness had stopped our reading, the two of us were lying flat on our backs – and silent – in the enveloping shadows of the forward deck near the capstan. A group of men who were off watch had gathered near us, seeking the gratefulness of the uninterrupted breeze. With no suspicion of our proximity, they fell into a low-pitched but violent conference.

Hoak held the floor as spokesman, and his deep whispering voice was raw with bitterness.

"We hain't no bloomin' galley-slyves," he growled. "Blyme me, I say, let's make a hend o' the 'ole bloody mess once and for hall."

"How?" came the natural question from one of the more conservative.

"Ow?" retorted the ringleader, "W'at's the odds 'ow? Any way will do. Rush the cabin. There's a stand of rifles at the for'ard bulkhead. Kill hoff the bloody lot of hofficers. Navigate the bloomin' ole 'ooker back ourselves and report whatever damn thing we like."

"How about these passengers? They'd snitch," suggested the same questioner.

"Aw no," sarcastically assured Hoak, "they won't snitch. They won't 'ave no more charnce to snitch than Coulter 'isself – damn 'im."

For a moment I felt a steaming throb in my throat. Then came a new sensation, something like relief that at last the clear outline

was looming through the fog of maddening uncertainty. It did not seem to matter so much what the certainty was, so long as it brought an end to the suspense. There was some discussion in hushed voices. Caution had its advocates who opposed so desperate a course.

"Think it hover till to-morrow," said Hoak at last. "But hif you don't stand by me Hi'm going to cut loose a boat and tyke to the water. To 'ell with the *Wastrel* an' her rotter of a captain."

There was a sudden hush followed by a sort of low chorused groan. Around the superstructure of the forward cabin appeared Captain Coulter, his first officer and the chief engineer. For an instant they stood silently, flashing electric torches into the terrified faces of the conspirators who, like schoolboys caught denouncing their teacher, shuffled their feet and remained speechless.

Hoak, alone, took a step forward. His face was working spasmodically in the bull's-eye glare which exaggerated the high lights on his snarling teeth and the black shadows of his scowl. He wavered for an instant between his personal dread of Coulter, and the knowledge that, with so much already known, caution was futile. While he hesitated the other men tacitly grouped themselves together at his back and stood sullenly eying the officers. Coulter and his two subordinates slipped their hands into their pockets. It was a tense moment and a noiseless one. When the captain broke silence his voice was cool, almost casual.

"Mr. Kirkenhead," he ordered the chief engineer, "take this

man Hoak to the stokehold, and keep him there until we reach port. Give him double shift and if he makes a false move – kill him."

The giant made a passionate start forward, and found himself looking down the barrel of Coulter's magazine pistol. From the glint of the raised weapon he bounced backward against the rail, where he leaned incoherently snarling like a cornered dog.

"Hi didn't sign as no blymed stoker," he growled at last. "Hi won't go – "

"The stokehold or hell, it's up to you." Coulter's reply came in an absolute monotony of voice strangely at variance with the passionate stress of their labored breathing. Back of the tableau gleamed the phosphorescence of the placid sea. "There's thirty seconds to decide. Mr. Kirkenhead, look at your watch."

For a seeming eternity there was waiting and bated breath. We could hear the muffled throb of the engines, and the churning of the screws.

Then Kirkenhead announced, "Twenty seconds, sir."

A moment more and Hoak turned, dropping his head in utter dejection and shambled aft toward the engine-room companionway.

"Mr. Heffernan," came the captain's staccato orders, "instruct the ship's carpenter to scuttle all the boats, except the port and starboard ones on the bridge. If we are to have any little disagreements on board we will settle them among ourselves. No one will leave in my boats except by my orders. And" – he

wheeled on the men – "whenever you vermin feel inclined for trouble – start it."

So that incident passed and went to swell the cumulative poison of festering hatred. We knew that the eruption had merely been delayed; that it must inevitably come and that now its coming would be soon. Between forward and aft war had been declared. Later that same evening I made bold to remonstrate with Captain Coulter as to the order concerning the boats. The conversation took place on the bridge – and it was brief.

"Mr. Mansfield and myself," I said, "are passengers who have paid full fares and we are entitled to full rights. We demand protection. This hulk is rotten and unseaworthy. When you scuttle her boats you are throwing the parachute out of a leaky balloon."

Coulter looked me over for a moment and replied with absolute composure.

"Mr. Deprayne, rights are good things – when you can enforce them. Consulates and courts of admiralty are a long way off. The intervening water is quite deep. If you don't like the *Wastrel*, leave it. I'm sorry I can't spare you a boat to leave in."

Mansfield and myself went that night in the miserable cabin which we shared oppressed with the conviction that the breaking point was at hand. Mansfield had suddenly sloughed off his boyishness and become unexpectedly self-contained, giving the impression of capability. The prospect of action had changed him. Once more he began to quote his ghastly verses, but now

without shuddering, almost cheerfully.

""Twas a cutlass swipe or an ounce of lead,  
Or a yawning hole in a battered head —  
And the scuppers glut with a rotting red.""

Then he remembered that sometimes men survive strange adventures, and he wrote a letter to the girl in Sussex which he asked me to deliver in the event that I, and not he, should prove such a survivor. I fastened it with a pin into the pocket of my pajama jacket. For hours after we had turned into our berths each of us knew that the other was not sleeping. We heard the crazy droning of the sick engine; the wash of the quiet water; the straining of the timbers.

We had not, on turning in, followed our usual custom of blowing out the vile-smelling oil lamp which gave our stateroom its only illumination. Neither of us had spoken of it, but we left the light burning probably in tacit presentiment that this was to be a night of some portentous development, and one not to be spent in darkness. Mansfield pretended to sleep in the upper berth, but after vainly courting dreams for an hour, I slipped out of mine and crept to the fresher air of the deck.

When I returned to the cabin, still obsessed with restless wakefulness, I found the diary, and throwing myself into my bunk, spent still another hour in its perusal. I had long ago laid by my early scruples and now I found in its pages a quality strangely soothing.

Singularly enough, in all our fragmentary reading between these limp covers, we had never pursued any consecutive course and though certain passages had been re-read until I fancy both of us could have quoted them from memory, there still remained others upon which we had not touched. For me in my present condition of jumping nerves they offered fields of quieting exploration. Now, for a time, I skipped about, reading here and there passages in no way connected. There was a highly humorous description of a certain Frenchman who had insistently shadowed the course of the girl's travels about the Continent, inflicting on her an homage which it seemed to me must have been more offensive than actual rudeness. She did not give his name, but her description of his appearance and eccentricities was so droll and keenly appreciative that even my strained lips curled into a grin of enjoyment in the perusal. He had a coronet to bestow and she likened his attitude and bearing to that of a crested cock robin. "To-night," she wrote, "*monsieur le comte* proposed for my hand – to Mother. I was in the next room and heard it. To hear one's self proposed to by proxy is quite the most amusing thing that can happen. When he asks me I shall inform him that I've already given my heart to another man – a man who hasn't asked me and may never ask me. Yes, he will, too. He *must*. It is in my horoscope. 'The Heavens rolled between us at the end, we shall but vow the faster for the stars.' This little Frenchman needs an heiress and it might as well be me – but it won't be."

This was the first intimation that the unknown author of these pages was possessed of wealth as well as beauty. In a vague way I found myself regretting the discovery, although I could not say why. Through these pages breathed the distinction of a piquant and subtly charming personality – the fact that she had fortune as well, could add nothing. But as I read the paragraphs devoted to her odyssey across the continent and around the borders of the Mediterranean, shadowed always by this persistent suitor with his picayune title, it struck me that her itinerary and the order of her going tallied with my own wanderings. Yet that might have no significance, since the routes of European touring are distressingly devoid of variation.

The finger of destiny had seemed to concern itself in the fashion in which I had always just missed the lady of Naples, Monte Carlo and Cairo by a margin of seconds and of untoward circumstance. If my Fate were playing with me in this manner it appeared consistent with its policy of tantalizing evasiveness that she and the writer might be the same. When I had given up the pursuit and come away to this remote quarter of the globe it might still be decreed that I should not escape her influence.

Having skipped about for a time in such haphazard fashion, the idea seized me of going back to the beginning and reading from the commencement down to the present.

In the first pages of course I encountered a certain immature crudity of composition and yet, in spite of these things, there was much here of the charming fascination of childhood and

the beginnings of character. If the later sections were as fragrant as flowers, the earlier passages were like the annals of rosebuds and blossoms. I believe I have already mentioned that in her childhood she had been something of a tomboy. Her interests had seemed to include many things which might quite naturally have belonged to the enthusiasms of her brothers. Also one read between the lines that her charming sense of humor and self-containment had developed upon overcome tendencies toward passionate temper. A certain passage had to do with her experience at a girls' boarding-school when she was probably not more than ten or eleven. One of the teachers – an unimpeachable lady of great learning and little human perception, it would seem – had aroused her intense disfavor. There were various references to this feud and also, even so early, to the mysterious person vaguely alluded to as He. The principal of the school harbored a bull terrier of rather uncertain temper. This brute, save for total fealty to his mistress and to the writer of the diary, seemed to hold in his nature only distrust for humanity, and among those specially singled out for his antipathy was the aforementioned teacher.

One day the writer and the dog had met the preceptress on the avenue. The girl had set down with great glee, the terror with which her enemy had appealed to her for protection against the onslaughts of the dreaded Cerberus.

"I told her that I would hold him," naively related the entry, in a sprawling, childish hand, "and I did hold him until she was

*almost* at the gate – but when I let him go I gave him a little sound advice and he took it."

There followed a vivid description, done into mirth-provoking humor, of the somewhat strenuous events of the next twenty or thirty seconds. A section of black alpaca skirt remained with the dog as a memento.

"Of course," commented the writer, "I couldn't laugh freely until I got back to the house, but I am laughing now. She looked so absurd! As I came in I saw Him ride by on horseback. I'm afraid he wouldn't approve."

The description of that teacher had reminded me strongly of my good Aunt Sarah. The explanation that the dog had been the child's friend merely because she had refused to be afraid, was so convincingly put that I found myself in guilty accord with her point of view. In a dozen ways, despite this single instance, she showed that her pity and tenderness were very genuine and sensitive, and easily reached by any true appeal.

This going back to the beginning enabled me to meet, on the occasion of his first appearance, the man who had exercised such a strong influence upon her subsequent life. In this I was pleased, for it showed that however imaginary may have been his aura of ideality, none the less it had basis in something more substantial than a glimpse of a football game. There was, too, an element touching and almost pathetic in this earliest self-confessed love. He was when she first saw him, eighteen or nineteen, and she half as old. This disparity in age had put a chasm between them

which it did not occur to her that the years would bridge. He was just at that self-sufficient age, when he regarded himself as very much a man and short-skirted, pigtailed females as very far beneath his mature devotion. Yet, in his patronizing way, he had been decently kind and had jeopardized his standing as a man-of-the-world by impersonal courtesies to a little girl. His influence had accordingly grown strong and permanent, though he had not known of its existence. She had enviously watched him with girls a few years her senior and had admired his frank, sportsmanlike attitude and freedom from callow freshness – and his courage. She said quite frankly in the diary that she did not suppose he had remembered her at all.

And so, as I lay sleepless and oppressed by presentiment of disaster, I read from childhood to young womanhood her chronicle of ideals until, under the soothing of the document, I at last fell into a doze.

## CHAPTER VI

# THE END OF THE "WASTREL"

When sleep came to me it was fitful with a thousand nightmare impossibilities, I saw, in my dreams, the face of the stale sea and sky translated into a broad human visage paralyzed and smiling unendingly in that hideous grin which stamps the tortured teeth of the lockjaw victim. Then the monster of the dream broke out of its fixity and with a shriek of hurricanes aimed a terrific blow at the prow of the *Wastrel*. The ship shivered, trembled and collapsed. With a stifled gasp I woke. Our sickly lantern was guttering in a sooty stream of smoke. Young Mansfield stood in the center of the cabin buckling his pistol belt. From somewhere came a sound of rushing water and a medley of shouts and oaths and pistol shots. A dingy rat scuttled wildly out from between my feet and whisked away through the crack under our bolted door. While I stood there stupidly inactive, hardly as yet untangling fact and dream, Mansfield handed me my belt and revolver.

"Slip on your shoes and fetch along a life-belt," he commanded steadily. "It has come."

We jerked open the door and groped along the alley-way in darkness, and, as we guided our steps with hands fumbling the walls, water washed about our ankles. The lights there had gone

out. With one guiding hand on the wall and one on Mansfield's shoulder, I made my labored way toward the deck ladder.

Without a word and as of right, the young Englishman, who had heretofore lacked initiative, now assumed command of our affairs. We needed no explanation to tell us that the pandemonium which reigned above was not merely the result of mutiny. A hundred patent things testified that this shambling tramp of the seas had received a mortal hurt. The stench of bilge sickened us as the rising water in her hull forced up the heavy and fetid gases. The walls themselves were aslant under a dizzy careening to starboard.

She must have steamed full front on to a submerged reef and destruction. It was palpably no matter of an opening seam. She had been torn and ripped in her vitals. She was dying fast and in inanimate agony. In the rickety engine-room something had burst loose under the strain. Now as she sank and reeled there came a hissing of steam; a gasping, coughing, hammering convulsion of pistons, rods and driving shafts, suddenly turned into a junk heap running amuck.

It is questionable whether there would have been time to lower away boats had the most perfect discipline and heroism prevailed. There was no discipline. There were no available boats, except the two hanging from the bridge davits, and about them, as we stumbled out on the decks, raged a fierce battle of extermination, as men, relapsed to brutes, fought for survival.

I have since that night often and vainly attempted to go

back over that holocaust and arrange its details in some sort of chronology. I saw such ferocity and confusion, turning the deck into a shambles in an inconceivably short space, that even now I cannot say in what sequence these things happened. I have a jumbled picture in which certain unimportant details stand out distinctly while great things are vague. I can still see, in steel-black relief, the silhouetted superstructure, funnels and stanchions; the indigo shadows and ghostly spots of white under a low-swinging half-moon and large softly-glowing stars. The sky was clear and smiling, in the *risor sardonius* of my dream.

I have sometimes felt that all the difference between the courageous and craven lies in the chance of the instant with which the numbers fall on the dice of life. To-day's coward may be to-morrow's hero. For an instant, with an unspeakable babel in my ears and a picture of human battle in my eyes, I knew only the chaotic confusion that comes of panic. Then I caught a glimpse of one detail and all physical fear fell away from me. I found myself conscious only of contempt for the struggling, clawing terror of these men who were as reasonless and ineffective as stampeding cattle. The detail which steadied me like a cold shower was the calmness of young Mansfield as he waited at my side, his face as impersonally puzzled as though he were studying in some museum cabinet a new and strange specimen of anthropological interest.

We both stood in the shadow of the forward superstructure as yet unseen. All the ferocity of final crisis swirled and eddied

about the bridge upon which we looked as men in orchestra chairs might look across the footlights on a stage set for melodrama. Apparently the crew had already discovered to its own despair that Coulter's inhuman orders for scuttling the boats had been carried out, and that of all the emergency craft carried by the *Wastrel*, only those ridiculously insufficient ones hanging by the port and starboard lights of the bridge offered a chance of escape. At all events, the other boats hung neglected and unmanned. That the whole question was one of minutes was an unescapable conclusion. One could almost feel the settling of the crazy, ruptured hull as the moments passed and each time I turned my head to glance back with a fascinated impulse at the smoke-stack I could see that its line tilted further from the vertical.

Heffernan was in charge of the starboard boat, already beginning to run down its lines, and over that on the port side, Coulter himself held command.

It seemed that when the moment of final issue came, a few of the foremast men had preferred entrusting their chances to obeying the captain, whose effectiveness had been proven, to casting their lots with their mates. These were busy at the tackle. On the deck level howled and fought the mutineers. Already corpses were cluttering the space at the foot of the steep ladder that gave – and denied – access to the bridge. Probably the revolver shots we had heard as we groped our way from our cabin had been the chief officer's terse response to the first mad rush for that stairway. Now as he awaited the lowering away, Coulter

stood above, looking down on the sickening confusion with a grim expression which was almost amusement. The fighting went on below where the frantic, terror-stricken fellows swarmed and grappled and swayed and disabled each other in the effort to gain the ladder. But when someone rose out of the maelstrom and struggled upward it was only to be knocked back by the ax, upon which, in the brief intervals between assaults, Coulter leaned contemplating the battle-royal. The revolver he had put back in his pocket. It was not needed, and he was conserving its effectiveness for another moment.

In telling it, the picture seems clear enough, but in the seeing, it was a thing of horrible and tangled details, enacted as swiftly as a moving-picture film run too rapidly on its reel.

There were shouts and quick staccato orders piercing the blending of terrorized voices – an oath snapped out – a shriek – a struggling mass – a desperate run up the ladder – hands straining aloft to pull down the climber and clear the way – a swift blow from above, a thud on the deck below – a sickening vision of slaughter. Over it all pounded the hammering racket from the disorganized engines. Soon came the stench of smoke and out of one of the after hatches mounted a thin tongue of orange flame, snapping and sputtering vengefully for a moment, then leaping up with a suddenly augmented roar. The twin elements of destruction, water and fire, were vying in the work of annihilation.

I turned my head for an instant to look back at the new

menace, and clutched Mansfield's arm. Aloof with folded arms against the rail, making no effort to participate in the riot, stood young Lawrence. The fast-spreading flames lit up his face. His attitude and expression were those of quiet disgust. His lips were set in scorn for the superlative excitement of his fellows. He was the stoic awaiting the end, with a smile of welcome for the acid test which held, for him, no fear. It was as though the rising rim of water brought a promise of grateful rest. He saw ahead nothing except release from all the wild turmoil and misery which had spoken itself without words that evening when Coulter had silenced the improvisation of his violin.

But if the end was a thing of quiet philosophy to Lawrence, it was not so to others. The lurid flare, which turned the impassioned picture in a moment from a silhouette of blacks and cobalts to a crimson hell, seemed to inflame to greater madness men already mad. There was a rush for the rails. We saw figures leaping into the sea. There had been some hitch on the bridge, due no doubt to the miserable condition of everything aboard the disheveled tramp. The boats were not yet launched, but now the men were embarking. Coulter himself was the last to leap for the swinging boat, and a moment before he did so Hoak appeared. He had miraculously made his way alive out of the engine-room's inferno, and his coming was that of a maniac. His huge body, bare to the waist, sweat-streaked and soot-blackened and fire-blistered, was also dark with blood. His voice was raised in demented laughter and every vestige of reason had deserted

eyes that were now agleam only with homicidal mania. From the companionway to the bridge, his course was as swift and sure as a homing pigeon's. He brandished the shovel with which he had been shamefully forced to feed the maws of the furnaces. The struggling men fell back before his onslaught. But Hoak had no care for self-preservation. His sole mission was reprisal.

The fight about the ladder's foot had waned. With a leap that carried him half-way up and an agility that knew no thwarting the madman made the upper level. The tyrannical despot of the vessel, standing poised for his swing to the boat raised the pistol which had already halted other mad rushes during the last sanguinary minutes. At its bark Hoak staggered to his knees, but was up again and charging forward with the impetus of a wounded rhinoceros. He had one deed to do before he died and would not be denied. The flying shovel narrowly missed the captain's head as he jumped for the boat, but the seaman with his lips parted over the snarl of clenched teeth fought his painful way to the davit, gripping a knife which he had brought in his belt. His eyes glowed with the strange light that madness lends and his muscles were tensed in the brief exaggerated strength of a supreme effort. He hurled himself to the out-swung support and seizing the stern line began hacking at its tarred tautness as he bellowed ghastly laughter and blasphemies. Coulter from his place below sent two more bullets into the great hulk of flesh that hung tenaciously and menacingly above him, but, as the second spat out, the rope, none too good at best, parted and the boat, held

only by its bow line, swung down with a mighty snap, spilling its occupants into the sea like apples tossed from an overturned plate. We had a momentary glimpse of the captain clinging to the gunwale, his legs lashing out flail-like. Then his hold loosened and he fell with a splash into the phosphorus water where the sharks were already gathering. And at the same moment, his mission performed, Hoak slowly slid around the curving davit and dropped limply after him.

Young Mansfield's voice came vaguely to my ear. "They've overlooked the life-raft," he said. "Let's have a try at that. There's not much time now."

The starboard scuppers were letting in sea water and the flames were creeping close, as we turned together, holding to the shadows of the superstructure, and ran forward.

We were tearing our fingers raw over stiffened knots when a rush of feet interrupted us. The next instant I saw my companion lashing out with the butt of his pistol, and surrounded by a quartette of assailants. In the moonlight he loomed gigantic and heroic of proportion. I, too, was surrounded and conscious only of a wild new elation and battle-lust, as I fought.

Suddenly there came a terrific shock, preceded by a wildly screaming hiss in the bowels of the *Wastrel's* hull. The torn shell quivered in an insensate death-rattle, and under a detonation at once hollow and loud a mass of timbers shot upward amidships. The boilers had let go and we hung wavering for the final plunge, yet it did not come at once. Then I suppose I was struck by falling

débris. With a dizzy sense of stars dancing as lawlessly as rocket sparks and dying as quickly into blackness, I lost all hold on consciousness.

# **CHAPTER VII**

## **IN STRANGE CIRCUMSTANCES**

Pongee pajamas and a revolver belt constitute a light equipment even for the tropics, but that was the least pressing of my concerns.

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