

FLECKER

JAMES ELROY

THE KING OF ALSANDER

James Flecker

The King of Alsander

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PREFACE

Here is a tale all romance – a tale such as only a Poet can write for you, O appreciative and generous Public – a tale of madmen, kings, scholars, grocers, consuls, and Jews: a tale with two heroines, both of an extreme and indescribable beauty: a tale of the South and of sunshine, wherein will be found disguises, mysteries, conspiracies, fights, at least one good whipping, and plenty of blood and love and absurdity: a very old sort of tale: a tale as joyously improbable as life itself.

But if I know you aright, appreciative and generous Public, you look for more than this in these tragic days of social unrest, and you will be most dissatisfied with my efforts to please you. For you a king is a shadow, a madman a person to be shut up, a scholar a fool, a grocer a tradesman, a consul an inferior grade of diplomatic officer, and a Jew a Jew. You will demand to know what panacea is preached in this novel as a sovran remedy for the dismal state of affairs in England. With what hope do I delude the groaning poor: with what sarcasm insult the insulting rich? What is the meaning of my apparent joyousness? What has grim iron-banging England to do with sunshine, dancing, adventure and, above all, with Poets?

In support of my reputation let me hasten to observe that in my efforts to please a generous and appreciative Public I have not failed to insert several passages of a high moral tone. Grave matters of ethics are frequently discussed in the course of my story, and the earnest inquirer may learn much from this book concerning the aim, purpose and origin of his existence. To Government and its problems I have given particular attention, and the observant reader may draw from these subtle pages a complete theory of the Fallacy of the Picturesque. Only I implore the public to forgive the Poet his proverbial licence, to remember that truth is still truth, though clad in harlequin raiment, and thought still thought, though hinted and not explained.

Farewell, then, my King of Alsander. Ride out into the world and conquer. Behind you – a merry and a mocking phantom – my youth rides out for ever!

Beyrouth, Syria, 1913.

CHAPTER I

BLAINDON

Would that I had a little cot
Beside a little hill,
In some romantic English spot
Where summer's not so very hot
And winter not too chill.

J. Williams

The writer of these simple lines, now unhappily dead, was a man of the soil, whose sweet native note had never been troubled by the sinister depravities, the heartless affectations of urban existence; and I believe myself that his pathetic and modest ideal could have been actually realized had he inhabited, as perhaps he did, the peaceful village of Blaindon. This secluded hamlet lies some ten miles from the sea, in an undulating, but not terrible, country – a land of woodland and meadow, of buttercup and daisy, of tiny streams and verdant dells. At evening the scene is more tranquil than ever, and the old church spire, standing sentinel above the cold ploughlands, presents a curiously sad appearance, tinged as it is with the melancholy of years. However at the time when this story opens it was not evening, but afternoon, and a very hot one. The horse in his freedom, like the pig in his confinement, lolled upon the ground, and the thatches rustled with the melodies of sleep.

Yes, let us look beneath those thatches and consider the village yokel for a moment, as with mouth agape and heavy eyelids he takes his meed of repose:

Nec partem solido demere de die
Spernit; nunc viridi membra sub arbuto
Stratus; nunc ad aquae lene caput sacrae.

But if, here in England, he has no arbut tree, or sacred fountain, whereby to stretch his large, unwieldy limbs, there awaits him, nevertheless, the fireside in winter, the straw of the stable loft for hotter days. Ensconced beneath such lowly roofs as those of little Blaindon, many a hundred sons of toil have been born, been married and been finally dead, after a life spent in working nobly for an ignoble pittance, far away from the wearisome strife of new ideas and endeavours, and all the rumbling of the world's chariot wheels.

I have carefully examined the records in the parish church, thinking that they might interest all those who still have faith in the sterling qualities and bulldog tenacity of our British yeoman class. I discovered the interesting fact that only a fifth of the population die before the age of sixty-five; and that the same families seem to have lived here in a state of ceaseless intermarriage for century after century. The *Weolkeðings* of Saxon days, the *Weilcans* of the Normans, who are they but the honest Wilkinses round the corner? No great calamities have occurred at Blaindon except an occasional plague; no stirring battles have there been fought. The place seems to have been forgotten or overlooked during the Civil Wars. (However, an inhabitant of the town fought at Balaclava, but not in the Heavy Brigade.) Of the prevailing insanity, I need say nothing; this is the inheritance of all rustic communities. That the people of Blaindon are happy and appreciate their charming home they have proved in the clearest possible way. They have never left it.

Would that he who looks over the church-yard wall down at the tidy rows of one-room cottages, whose gardens blaze with nasturtia and red daisies, could say that no jarring note, no trace of a restless

individuality, marred the enchanting scene. But, alas! every traveller is bound to remark a peculiarly ugly two-storied erection, whose rectangular bricks render it at once an eyesore and a solecism. This building used to be called by the inhabitants Price's bongmash: but the name on its sign was Bon Marché (French for Good Market). Mr Price's business was at the time this story opens the most flourishing concern in Blaindon. It was carried on chiefly by the indomitable energy of the younger Price; his father now slept most of the day, not so much on account of his advancing years as because he was very tired and a heavy eater. He could trust his son completely. Young Norman Price was one of the most envied personages in Blaindon. He was only nineteen; a handsome and strong young man, and the face he showed a customer wore no servile frock-coated smirk, but a laugh of real pleasure at being able to supply the needs of the community. Nearly everything was on sale in his shop – all groceries, also cloth, garden seeds, papers, books (the least flourishing part of the trade), and tobacco. Yet his store did not look at all like other village stores where everything is bought in dirty pennyworths. It was well arranged, and the goods were displayed to good account, more after the tradition, I fear, of American vulgarity than of British honesty. Worse still, Price had actually taken upon himself to corrupt the adorable simplicity of the villagers and to turn their thoughts to the enervating fashions of great cities. If a young villager came in who liked to be thought rather a nut and who fancied him self in a new waistcoat, the young grocer would give him a little elegant and expensive tobacco to try, explain that he smoked it himself, and that one smoked less of it than of the commoner sorts, so it came no dearer after all. He utterly refused to sell cigarettes at ten for a penny, or assorted sweets at three half-pence the quarter. It soon became a mark of distinction to be a customer at the Bon Marche, and the firm got a reputation for selling "sound articles and no trash."

I have not mentioned, however, the object that would probably most astonish a gentleman of culture on entering the shop. On the wall hung a large and fine reproduction of Holbein's portrait of Georg Gisze. The young merchant, robed in delicate silk and velvet, and surrounded by keys, quadrants, scissors, maps, and ledgers, was obviously meant to be the tutelary deity of the house; indeed, as a set-off to the flowers that stand upon the painted table, Norman had placed a large bowl of carnations on his counter.

The picture had been a present from his friend, John Gaffekin. If young Price appears in this story so strangely different from his father and from the other villagers of Blaindon, and indeed from all grocers whatsoever, we need not accept the explanation of some, that his father was "a deeper man than you'd think" or the assertion of others that he "got it from his mother," a lady of whom he had never seen so much as a photograph. The lad's singularity was much more likely due to this curious and close intimacy with a gentleman: and I hope that those who read this history will not close the book without a sigh of remonstrance against all those who insist on giving the lower classes thoughts above their station. John Gaffekin lived with his widowed mother in the Elizabethan Blaindon Hall, a typical old country house standing just outside the village on a plot of park. The old lady was infirm, and in order that he might attend to his mother, and also avoid drawing on a by no means unlimited income, John had never gone to school. He had taken some lessons from the Vicar, who had been "a fine classic in his day," and as he naturally loved books and was of a quiet disposition he became so proficient that the Reverend George Apple warmly urged him to try for a scholarship at Oxford. For a long time he had refused even to attempt this feat. He declared that he could not leave his mother. He feared he could not win the scholarship. But the old lady joined her importunities to those of the Vicar. "They had not enough money to go on for ever," she maintained, "and if John had a degree he would always be able to turn his hand to something at a pinch, and earn his daily bread." Very much at a pinch, had the dear old lady but known it!

"I can easily get some one to look after me," said the old lady, "and it is very wrong of me not to have sent you away before. You are getting buried in this stupid place, and too dreamy altogether, with no one here but that grocer friend of yours to talk to."

"I wish Norman could come with me to Oxford," said John. "It's wrong of me to leave him."

"My dear son, I can't have you consorting with that sort of person all your life."

"I do hate that subject," protested John.

"My dear boy, you'll find the wisdom of my words when you've seen a little more of the world," said Mrs Gaffekin.

"Besides," interposed the Vicar, tactfully, "College terms only account for half the year. We shall see plenty of you down here."

So John got his scholarship and went to Oxford, and Norman found himself rather lonely. One day, three years ago, John had begun to talk to him when he came into Blaindon to buy tobacco, and since then they had been continuously together, walking, fishing and shooting all over the place, and conversing on high and learned topics. That is why Norman was an educated man after a certain curious fashion. He was, however, no mere counterpart of his friend. Left to himself, Norman had fire and intelligence enough to make his mark. But the sudden wide prospect opened up by all that golden world all those enchanted gardens that lie hid between pasteboard covers – had dazzled his eyes and made him a most exceptional person. He had plunged into everything, learnt Latin and French, attempted Greek. There were very few books that he read carefully; hardly one would he read twice. "There are so many more to read," he used to say. No one could be less of a scholar, and the fine points of characterization, the delicate shades of metre and language, lay beyond his sphere. But he loved all the books that are not generally read; he could feel that such books were peculiarly his own property or his own discovery, and a habit of always reading books that no one else has read is not a bad guide to literature. All the works that glow with dark frenzy, or with diabolical Rembrandt fires, whose authors died nameless deaths or were burnt for magic, all the fantastic tales about new countries on the other side of mountains, or happy islands in limitless seas, all stories of the moon or stars were his especial delight and continual joy. For he loved the *Monk* of Monk Lewis, and this is a rare book to find, and *Vathek*, and *William Jordan, Junior*, greatest of unread modern books; and he sang to himself the *Gods of Pegana* and dreamed over its ethereal pictures, and he loved the new Irish tales. And he adored that mysterious wonder-story of the *Golden Ass*, and its glittering precious style; and he read Richepin's tales of the Roman decadence. And he never wearied of James Thompson (not of the "Seasons"), or of Baudelaire, or of the great travel poems of the world from the *Odyssey* to *Waring*.

And here, again, I must point the moral. The egregious bad taste of this young man was almost certainly the outcome of his low antecedents. Stale romanticism is embedded in the poorer classes. He liked his literature garish and vivid, and with his insistent passion for all the decadent stuff that used to be in favour ten or twelve years ago, he could never appreciate that really noble modern literature, much of it dramatic, which tackles so fearlessly and with such psychological insight the problems of our industrial age. In fact, he used to say that it might be damned good, but it was damned boring. Such is the obtuseness of the Philistine. He was, moreover, no critic, as you may well opine; he had not the fine taste of his friend, but he fell the more readily under the spell and domination of strange books; he was a dreamer, and entertained ideas of his own, which he would not have dared impart. Yet this dreamer was a man of business, and employed all the resources of a crude but powerful imagination in the disposal of his wares. How, then, could he help feeling a little weary of Blaindon, especially when John was away at Oxford? And on this afternoon, on which I have promised that my story should begin, he was sitting rather disconsolate in his shop, drowning care in the delights of Conrad's *Youth*.

He had hardly been interrupted the whole day, except for lunch. The sexton had been in for some twine, and the Vicar's daughter for some pink wool "to match the merino mother bought yesterday." She was a pretty girl, and Price almost aspired to marry her. Had he only known it, the poverty-stricken Mr Apple would have been only too glad, and I do not think the young lady was at all averse to Norman, whose beauty of person and brilliance of mind made one forget his unfortunate connexion with trade.

At about half-past three he shut the book with a bang, heaved a disconsolate sigh to think that the glorious tales were over, and stretched himself. Then he slid off the counter and looked down the high road to see if anything stirred thereon. Straight, broad, white, glaring, over the sleeping downs lay the deserted road that led to Blaindon from the unseen Ocean, fit for the trampling of armies and the shouting of men, a road for caravans and caravans of merchandise to traverse with bells a-jangle while wagoners told the tales of wagoners high perched on their creaking wains; yet a road for modern life, ready for tramways to glide along its hedges, and motor-cars to spin down its smooth and cambered way; yet perhaps chiefly an ancient road, down which some herald would speed, his gold coat laced with dust, his knees tight gripping his steaming horse, with a message of war, disaster, or relief. And down this mighty road came no wagon, nor army, nor motor, nor herald: no one save in the far distance a solitary walker, small and lonely in the vast sunshine. Price lazily watched the approaching figure. It seemed to be that of an old man, but if so this old man was walking faster than any other old man in the world. At all events, Price was already sure that he was no inhabitant of Blaindon, and he therefore came out and stood at his door to look at him.

It was indeed a tall, straight and singular old man who came up some twenty minutes later and halted opposite the Bon Marche, resting on his stick. His long hair and beard were of an almost dramatic whiteness, like those of a Father Christmas in sugar. What was seen of his face seemed smooth, and he had surprisingly young, blue eyes. Afterwards, one noticed his long archaic lips and the beauty of his hands. His clothes, subordinate as all clothes should be to the face, were yet curious and distinctive. He wore a mauve silk scarf, a sort of Norfolk jacket, a cricketing shirt, grey flannel trousers, and brown boots with pointed toes. No collar, and no hat. His stick was a stout partridge cane with a silver nameplate. The old man stood opposite Price and looked at him with fixed attention for at least half a minute.

"Have you got any Navy Cut, sir?" said the old man.

"Mild or medium?" said Norman, beating a retreat into the shop to let the stranger enter and to look for the tobacco.

"Strong, of course," bellowed the old man. "Thank you."

"What a voice he has!" thought the grocer. The new customer sat down on a chair and threaded out the tobacco into an enormous briar, looking curiously about him. Suddenly he started.

"You don't mean to say that you keep Menodoron Mixture here!" said he. "I haven't been able to get any in this damned county at all."

He tapped the Navy Cut out of his pipe, swept it into his pouch, and seized hold of the Menodoron tin. As he did so his eye lit upon the Holbein. He gave a second start, more violent than the first, a quick, violent spasm of his entire body, which made his snowy beard flap like the handle of a water pump.

"Hullo! Where did you get that from?"

"Georg Gisze? He's a present from a friend of mine."

"And all those books and dictionaries, are they for sale? Have you a Grammar School in this notable town?"

"No, sir. I read them when business is slack."

"Then what are you doing here?" said the old man, earnestly. "I can see you are not a gentleman: you look too much like a god. Tell me, what are you doing, with a library like that, here in a grocer's shop, in this horrible little village?"

"Now, come, sir," said Norman, "it's a picturesque old place, situated in charming country."

"Sir," replied the stranger, "I am a travelled man; I am perhaps a trifle over-proud of my great journeys. I have seen all the Great Effects. I have clambered among fearful crags to see the Euphrates, that old river, burst through the Gate of Taurus. I have seen the Alps from the Finsteraarhorn below me, Niagara from the footpath above me, night in the city, day in the desert, dawn on the sea. I have seen the Little Effects: Normandy, Tasmania, the English Lakes. But never on train, steamer, bicycle,

tram, motor, balloon, camel, horse, mule, or foot, have I found such an unutterably dull place as Blaindon. Forgive this rhetoric, purveyor of sweetmeats, but be assured of its truth."

"In all places, sir, there is a sky, a sun, and stars."

"Where," pursued the stranger, "did you learn to talk with that pure accent, vendor of spices; or to frame such pleasant words? What are you doing in this fantastic shop?"

"Earning my living, sir. Nor is there any mystery about my case. I have a friend, now at Oxford, who gave me books to read and taught me Latin."

"Are you contented? Perfectly happy in your sunlight and starlight? Supremely satisfied with Catullus on the counter?"

"As a rule, yes. But my friend is away at present; there is no one to talk to, and these wonderful stories" (he pointed to the book lying face downward on the counter) "stir the soul to travel."

"Well, why not travel, O Lord of Things in Tins? Blaindon's no good for a man like you, great enough to make castles out of his biscuit tins, and fortifications out of washing soap." And he pointed to Norman's window, which was dressed that day with certain architectural effects.

"I have been content with my dreams for a long time," said Norman, with a little vulgar pride in his poetic and pathetic phraseology "I am fond of dreams – they are my best friends."

"If you imagine I am going to be impressed by that sort of Watts-Dunton talk you are wrong; I'm going," said the old man, as he pose up from his chair.

"Sir!" cried Norman; "you haven't paid for the tobacco."

The old man sat down with a thump.

"I am a poet," he said, with deprecatory grandeur. "And you aren't a cultured snob after all, but something of a man. Have you travelled at all, now? Tell me."

"Oh, yes, I go round the county a bit. On market days I usually go over to Iffcombe in the Marsh; it's quite lively there."

"By the Queen of the Moon and the Sea whom I worship and by the memory of your mother whom I swear you have never known, how dare you stand opposite me, a young man with the face of a god, and blither about Iffcombe in the Marsh! Travel, man, over the water, down south among the palms! You've got money?"

"Not I!"

"A little, surely!"

"Only about a hundred pounds of my own, so far."

"Only a hundred pounds! Then go away with it before your friend borrows it off you to pay his Oxford bills. No, don't get wrathful; I'm an Oxford man myself and understand that curious world. A hundred pounds! Why, I've never had a hundred pounds all at one time for many a year. How you can keep a hundred pounds in your pocket or in the bank, I do not know, when five pounds will take you to the Alps, seven to Italy, twelve to the Gulf of Corinth, thirty to Damascus,¹ and fifty to Yokohama. You should clear out of this rat-hole, young man, and that immediately. Why not tonight? as thundering Salvationists cry, desiring to save the soul. That engagement, this duty, the other promise, *este, ese, aquel*, as the Spaniards have it, leave it all and save your life, this is the Poet's appeal, the Muse's command. You'll find a kingdom somewhere, or a war, or an adventure. I am a prophet, and the worshipper of a Holy Lady. Now, good-bye."

He laid his hands on the boy's shoulders, and looked at him dramatically. Then he turned round, seized the tin of Menodoron and strode away.

"Two and sixpence," said Norman, calling him back.

¹ I should subjoin a word to prevent any enthusiastic reader from taking the words of the old poet too seriously and wasting thirty pounds in going to Damascus. It is a very filthy town with electric trams and no drains. The fares mentioned by the poet are of course third-class.

"Two and elevenpence, counting the Navy Cut," said the poet, handing over the exact sum. "You will certainly succeed, Mr Norman Price. So I will give you a good tip," he added in a stage whisper. "Go straight to Alsander."

"Where's that?" said Norman, but the eccentric customer, without another word, strode out of the shop, leaving him bewildered. There was nothing to do in the shop; he tried to re-arrange some shelves, but felt it was not worth the trouble. He opened the *Golden Ass* and found he could not progress without looking up many exotic words, and the dictionary was too heavy. Finally he sat down on his counter, gazing at the sunswept fields and lengthening shadows of the hedges. The vast mournful light of the late afternoon penetrated his spirit, and he felt, not for the first time, that unutterable sadness, that vague and restless longing for the Unknown land Impossible that it is the privilege of young men to feel. For many a youth this curious sense of unity with the earth is but a first awakening of amorous desire, and to such a one Venus comes quickly, with all her gentle pain. But there are a few who understand their souls, or who have souls to understand, whose daydreams are fashioned of other delights and different imaginings.

So Norman began dreaming, at first as schoolboys dream of adventure, plot, swordsmanship, hidden treasures, dense jungles, heroic bravery, desperate efficiency and lost princesses. Then a poet's dream of hot suns, and open plains, and vast masses of swaying colour. Then he bethought himself of a multitude of pleasant practical schemes. John and he had often talked of a bicycling tour in Normandy. That would be inexpensive, but now it seemed so tame an affair. What of this delicately – named Alsander the Poet talked of? It sounded remote enough. To go somewhere where no one else had ever been would be better than reading books no one else had ever read. And one should go at an hour's notice, without making any plans. What a curiously-inspired man this old poet or artist was! Quite mad, no doubt, with his Holy Lady. And what did he mean by mentioning Norman's mother? Norman had no gods; he feared Death and loved Life. Well, since Life is short, and since one is sure of nothing, shall one not be bold? To-night!

The old man's words thrilled him. If, as the poet had suggested, a trumpet-voiced vulgarian in black can save a drinker from dirt and disease in a quarter of an hour, cannot a radiant poet save a dreamer from stagnation in ten minutes? Norman began to think hard, and his pulses were stirring for action, when the bell rang behind the shop. It was time for meat-tea.

Norman, with no feeling of any bathos, entered the parlour with the full intention of eating a hearty meal. He sat down opposite old William Price and began to cut himself enormous slices of bread. Meanwhile he looked at his father, and studied the old man's appearance carefully and cynically for the first time in his life. We often take some of our near relations for granted (like the nursery cuckoo clock or the cabbage-roses on the porch), and we never become acutely conscious of their existence or individuality unless they die, disappear, or make themselves offensive. Norman dispassionately scrutinized his father's stumpy red beard, curious veiled eyes, and fireless, thin face, remembered his equanimity and his shrewdness, and wondered with boyish shallowness and conceit – for he knew less about his father than about the man in the moon – what on earth he had in common with such a man outside human nature and the grocery business. The only recent change that Norman could observe in his parent was that he had certainly become fatter and more foolish since he had left his son to do all the grocery work. The lad was sure that the one salvation for his father would be to take the business on again, and his idea of effecting a dramatic departure – for a time, at least – grew almost a resolve.

Usually Norman never told his father anything that could possibly puzzle or worry the excellent old gentleman, and had maintained the rule that the elder generation is the last place where the new should expect sympathy. However, for want of something to talk about, Norman observed that a most peculiar person, describing himself as a poet, had been in the shop and had tried to persuade him to travel.

"To travel, eh?" said William Price. "What in?"

"Oh, he meant abroad."

"I've n'er bin abroa'," said the honest oil fellow, stifling his words in large mouthfuls of ham. "But I bin 'sfuras Wales."

"I'm longing to go," said Norman, "and I will go, too."

"Ah, yes," said the old man, paying no serious attention, as he leaned back in his wooden armchair. "I've often wanted to see it myself. Used to live down by the sea in Kent, and I was always wunnering what was the other side, and thinking I saw France, but it was only the clouds. I'm glad I never went there though; they say it's a very irreligious country."

Norman finished his meal in silence and folded up his napkin.

"Good night, father," he said, as he got up from his chair, leaving the old man still hard at work. "I expect you'll want to get to sleep now, it's been a tiring day."

"Indeed it has," said William Price. "Indeed it has."

"I'm going out for a stroll," said Norman, at the door.

"Oh, *we* understand," gurgled Mr William Price after him, with a wink. "Young rip!" he added complacently as he continued his meal.

But when, his meal finished, he began to doze in the armchair by the fire, even his confident son might have been startled to see him open his wide dark eyes, unfilmed, and smile as though he saw Paradise dawn upon the ceiling.

Norman walked up and down the village street, as though he hoped that the moon, Whose silver bow hung listlessly above, would send some barbed messenger of watery fire to confirm him in a resolution. Whether indeed the celestial lady did touch him somehow, or whether his vanity and naughty desire to startle the villagers was not more powerful, cannot say; but in a few minutes a strange decided mood swept over him, and when a quarter of an hour later he swung into the Blaindon Arms it was as a man resolved to say good-bye.

For neither business nor inclination had ever permitted Norman to lose touch with these heroes of the soil, the Blaindon working class. They were honest, strenuous, interesting fellows, a little too full perhaps of local colour, Though they were a little jealous of him, they were a kindly folk and bowed naturally to his superior wealth. Superior intellect they did not allow him to possess. For them he was a bright boy who'd got "notions."

He greeted little Nancy at the bar as a habitué should, and asked for the time-table.

"Surely ye aren't goin' anywhere this tame o' nate," murmured John Oggs.

"Yes, I am," said Norman. "I'm just off abroad. And I've come to say good-bye."

"What!" said old Canthrop, a person who combined the functions of village patriarch and village imbecile, and was, in accordance with the universal custom of savage communities, almost worshipped in consequence. "What!" he repeated, making the mono-syllable rhyme with hat. "Aiy didn't know: no one tould me!"

"Well, you're the first to know as usual, Mr Canthrop. The old man doesn't know yet."

"What!" said old Canthrop, almost shrieking, "not tould yer feyther? Not tould yer feyther that yer goin' away?"

He rocked convulsively in his chair.

"Isn't that rather sudden of you, Mr Price?" said pleasant Nancy, simpering. She was a great friend of Norman's, and her voice was a little tremulous as she asked her question.

Thomas Bodkin, the sexton, who passed for a man of the world, and was drinking airily at the bar, leaned over and whispered very audibly, "It's a scrape, Nancy ... these young dogs ... must let 'em sow their oats ... eh, what?.. We know."

Mr Bodkin's jerky mouthfuls passed in the inn for nimble elocution, his metaphors for the delicious slang of an old and experienced rake.

"Gawd!" ejaculated John Oggs, who was sitting behind him, "ye have it there, man, ye have it there!"

"What nonsense!" said Norman. "You don't imagine I should run away from trouble, do you? Or that I should be likely to get into trouble? Or that if I did I should be such a fool as to tell you anything about it?"

"Why did you, then?" said Thomas Bodkin. A roar of laughter greeted this vivacious sally.

Price looked round with rather priggish disgust. It was more than he could stand, this asinine mockery. "I came to say good-bye," he said.

"Till to-morrow, eh?" said the sexton. "You will not see me to-morrow," said Norman.

"See now, Mr Price," pursued the sexton, "there are *no* more trains. None between five this evening and 10.30 to-morrow, except on markets when the 8.15 goes to Iffcombe. You're mad."

Another peal of laughter, during which Norman disappeared, a baffled Byron, punished by the native humour of honourable working men for trying to produce a cheap effect.

But his resolution had received its final confirmation. He could not face the ridicule of the morrow. He hurried back at once to the shop, and there on the counter wrote a concise note to his father. He thought it unnecessary to condole or excuse. He knew how delightful it would be for the old man to have anything happen to him at all, how he would enjoy being the centre of sympathetic interest in the village, and how thoroughly good it would be for his moral character to get back to business. He then took the Post Office Savings Bank book from the safe. There were ninety pounds odd in it, entered in his name, the profits that had accrued during his two years' management of the shop. Perhaps it was not strictly his; his father had established the business, and provided the initial stock. But then his father had laid by enough to keep him even in food for the next ten years, and Norman had done the work. It is the young who want money; Norman had never been able to see the object of saving money with immense toil over against the day when one should become infirm, insane, or dead. He uttered a vigorous oath against the Post Office system, which means a day's delay in withdrawal, sent the book up to headquarters at once, asking that it should be sent him by return to the Central Post Office, Southampton, posted it in the box opposite, and then considered what he ought to pack. He took a change of raiment, and then looked lovingly at the ponderous tomes on his shelves. Only the smallest could go with him.

"After all," said Norman, "I have read all these once. New lands, new books, and I am not going away for what John would call a reading party."

Finally he took no book with him save a little Elzevir *Apuleius*, and packed it with all his other effects on his bicycle carrier and in the saddle-bag. Just as he was mounting one more thought troubled him. Would he not be terribly lonely? If only John could come too! "No," he said, arguing to himself, "my life must not consist of John. If I'm lonely I shall have to discover for myself new companions in new countries."

It was a splendid night. He set off down the High Street, on the main road to Southampton in a state of perilous exultation. Smoothly and quickly the tired wheels bore him on out to infinity. The door of the Blaindon Arms stood open, and as he rolled noiselessly by he could hear Canthrop summing up his view of the situation for the fiftieth time,

"Bloody silly, I call it," said the old man, "bloody silly!"

CHAPTER II

ALSANDER

Know'st thou the land where bloom the lemon trees,
And darkly gleam the golden oranges?
A gentle wind blows down from that blue sky...

With a spear of golden light and gradual splendour Dawn rose on her triumphal car. In winter men rise up to welcome her advent: wives cast off sleep and light fires in her honour; the good citizens draw the curtains to gaze out upon her beauty, stretching their lazy limbs. In winter Dawn arises to the sound of chattering and bustle, the herald of man's work in town and field. But in summer only the grey mists and the light-winged birds listen to her as she rings the bells of day.

Norman had seen new lands and cities, and had been wandering on foot for many weeks to south and east admiring all things, but never so satisfied with what he saw as to rest for a single day. At the first glimmer of light he leapt to his window, and whether Dawn rose broken upon the peaks or solemn on the plain, whether she wandered mysteriously down old winding streets, or set the city square clattering and clanging, it was early, ever early, that our heroic traveller left his mean abode to seek the unexpressed, unknown, ever-receding city of his heart's desire.

One night as he was trudging along he met a tramp, whose face he could hardly make out beneath the stars, who, learning that he was bound to Alsander, talked to him in English passionately of the beauties of that country, recommended him to learn its language, and then disappeared into the gloom. This confirmed the boy in his definite aim, and day after day he approached this certain goal, fired by the eloquence of the mysterious stranger. This night, being among the high mountains, he had found no inn; however, undaunted, he lay down on the roadside for an hour or two, then rose and strode on, pack on shoulder, through the shadows. Who could be tired of walking with the mountain wind ahead, the dim white road beneath, and the joy of watching for the dawn! "Ah!" he thought, "how I pity the six-legged at their desks! What for them is the sunrise curtain to the drama of a day? How indeed should they greet it, save with a cry of pain and a curse upon the light? But I will wander on."

Now had come that shining moment of Eternity when Aurora unravels the folds of her saffron robe across the sky and bares her wounded breast to the blue of morning. The boy swung round a corner of the highway, and suddenly beheld the valley far below. He saw quiet forests of tall golden trees and meadows so rich with gentian and wild pansy that even at that far height he could see them shine. To his left, at the edge of the plain, lay spear-sharp mountains, a little darker than the skies, whose distant hollows and tortuous cones ever hinted at the mystery of the next valley and the joy of things unseen. He saw the thin torrent which tumbled down in cascades behind the wall become a quiet and solemn river below leading to a curved strip of sea, of an intense unearthly colour, southern, fantastic, beyond all belief, and the sound of rushing waters seemed the only sound in the world. But most surprising of all, on a rocky mound between the mountains and the bay rose the white city of Alsander, with her legendary towers and red roofs all dreaming in the sunlight. In such deep slumber lay that perfect city, the boy held the very sight of it to be a dream. For there surely dwelt the good King and the bad King, the younger son and the three princesses, the dwarf, the giant and the gnome. Surely in those blue mountains lurked and lolled the devastating dragon who came down for his yearly toll of maiden flesh; surely in that blue sea swam all the shoal of nereids and dolphinous fishy beings whose song is dangerous to men. Thus appeared the city of Alsander to Norman as he gazed at it over the wall in silence. "Blessings on the head of that wonderful old tramp," said Norman, "who told

me Alsander was the loveliest place in Europe and directed my steps on this glorious path; wherever he may be may joy attend him, so boldly did he bear the weight of years." Then down he went on his way again, humming to himself, and the birds were frightened of his deep voice and the little green lizards fled up the walls as he strode on down the hill.

"Knowst thou the land where bloom the lemon trees?"

Many men can only enjoy beauty when they face it alone. These dark and solitary aesthetes love to ramble on the most horrible downs and heaths at intempestive morning hours, drinking in the miserable and fearsome aspect of the world. One such has said to me that he would walk half a day to avoid meeting a friend. I fear, too, that these characters consider their misanthropic tastes a self-evident mark of their superiority over the mass of men, who, herding together with vivacious chatter, much love-making, and explosion of corks, crowd to the prettiest places they know to enjoy Bank Holiday. Your lonely man claims a special communion with God or with the Spirit of Nature, or with the Rosicrucian mysteries of his own soul, so that his ramble becomes a sacrament, purifying by pity, terror and love. Norman was a little above this sort of rubbish: he felt dimly the cruelty of beauty and the menace of solitude. This sent him moving and set him longing – longing very definitely for human companionship. Thus he fell short of the self-sufficient man recommended by Aristotle, for which the reader may devoutly praise the Lord.

But the stilted style of this century can ill express the fluctuations of our hero's feelings. "Who is there" (I should have written in 1820), "or what man of feeling and imagination can be found, who, upon contemplating the ineffable grandeur and unspeakable majesty of Nature, does not ardently aspire to hold at the same moment communion with some divinely tender female heart, to read in those liquid eyes his own reflections purged of their dross and transmuted into gold, to press those sensitive fingers and thereby lose himself in rapture among the gorgeous scenes that astonish and confound his gaze, to seal those fluttering lips with the memory of an unforgettable moment?"

To resume the use of the English language, Norman felt lonely, and for that very reason paid particular attention to the only figures discernible in the landscape. He came down and the figures came up, three companions they seemed to be. But presently Norman made out that the central figure was a girl, and her two shining companions were only the two pails she carried, slung from a yoke that passed behind her neck. "Life for me," said Norman to himself, as he and the girl drew near to each other at the combined rate of six miles an hour, "is crude marble, and I have come here to carve it into flowers, and the flowers of youth are the fairest of them all." Pleased with this ingenuous comparison, he looked up with a smile, and discovered that the neck which bore the yoke was a shapely one, and that there in front of him, not fifty yards away, stood a young girl, with her pails clanking at her side. She was dressed in a white frock and her head was covered with a white kerchief edged with gold.

The reader now dreads the inevitable love scene, and I, too, feel that an apology is needed. For so many novelists, ballad-makers, jongleurs, troubadours, minstrels, poets, and bards have sung the praises of perfect, adorable and captivating ladies that I am inclined to lament with one of them that

I have sung all love's great songs
And have no new songs to sing,
But I'll sing the old songs again.

And so I will. We will have those old songs again, for I will not give my heroine "plain but interesting features" or "a noble rather than beautiful countenance with intellect shining in her eyes," or even in a candid moment declare her to possess "a haunting plainness all her own." But apart from all this there is the truth to consider, and this young girl was assuredly one of the most perfect women God ever made by accident or Satan by design.

For she stood there in front of him in the radiant, dancing, dewy morning, happy and unperturbed, in her gracious half-human beauty, not majestic, not passionate, not mysterious, but unreal from her very loveliness, a nymph, not of the woods or rivers, but of the sea – yet not of the tempestuous main – no tall sad siren of a treacherous rock, but a sweet, young pleasant nymph from a bay where the sun is always shining, a sea-sand nymph not unacquainted with flowers.

For when I would deal with her face and body, all those feeble, pretty comparisons whereby the pen of the writer strives to emulate the brush of the painter, must be of the sea or of flowers. Her dark hair, fringed against the gold lace of her scarf – but those same painters (whom all we word-workers envy bitterly but dare not say so) have shown how many confluent colours – hyacinth and blue and red and deep red gold, gleam in the shadowy hollows of the hair we fools call dark. ... Dark! As the sea-water in a sunlit bay lies dark between two little island rocks yet ripples in the wind, and the sea flowers turn it red along the marge and the depths glow violet in the midst, and the sunshine is all near but hidden – am I not now describing the dark hair of a lovely woman?

"But her eyes, poor poet, her eyes – are they not also pools of the salt sea?"

Not the eyes of this lass, my gentle friend. Her eyes were of finer and subtler essence than the heavy water of the sea. They were blue – which is ever most wonderful with dark lashes, dark brows and sea-dark hair – but not the dark blue of a rock pool nor yet quite the light broken blue of the blinking waves in the calm and brilliant bay. Her eyes were of a light dry fire – the blue not of sea nor of sky, but rather of the glowing air that swims about the idle fisher's boat hour after hour on summer days. So that you could not tell if they were deep eyes or light wayward eyes, – those little gay discs of laughing sunlit air.

And her countenance, that was a sweet rose and jasmine garden – but always, I would have you remember, a garden that blossoms by the sea, with vistas of the bay down every alley of the roses, and gleams of blue water glinting behind the trellis of the jasmine, and the sea air slightly touching the colour of all the flowers. Have you not seen the flowers in that Italian picture that are flung round Venus as she rises from the sea! Even so a little paler than the brave inland flowers were the jasmine and roses in the garden of the countenance of this lovely girl.

And her body? Can I tell you its secret? Ah, never: but as you leave the garden – pluck one tendril from the vine.

Her light, gracious, flowing beauty trans-ported the boy to the days he had read of, the days when the world was young. The chains of commerce and the shackles of class, – as it were, the last tatters of his black British clothes – fell from him. Looking at her, he smiled.

She evidently took that smile as a greeting intended for her, for she seemed to wait for him to come down and to be in no hurry with her pails.

"Good morning," she cried to him as he approached, in the honeyed and somewhat languorous speech of Alsander.

"Good morning," said Norman. "May I help you with the water?" Alsandrian is an easy, simple, and sonorous language, and Norman had been learning it and talking it to himself ever since the tramp he met in the night had directed his thoughts and footsteps toward the country of Alsander, yet he was very shy at practising for the first time this newly-acquired tongue.

"Ah, I thought you were a foreigner," said the girl, speaking with the strained simplicity and slight mispronunciation that we all of us employ for the benefit of strangers and infants. "What is your country and your home?"

"England."

"England? Why you are the first Englishman I have ever seen! How beautiful you are!"

Norman smiled, unable, and indeed unwilling, to deprecate his personal appearance.

"It is you who are beautiful," he said, slowly, labouring with the strange tongue, "Are they all like you in Alsander?"

"Do you think it possible?"

She drew herself up with such grace that Norman's arms twitched and ached. But he was rather in awe of her.

"How bright your eyes are!" he said.

"Are they? What colour do you think they are?" she asked, turning them full on him.

"They are blue. I have never seen such blue eyes in my life before."

"You are quite sure that they are not green?"

Norman was not at all sure that they were not: they seemed to him to change colour like little bright clouds, and shone at that moment like a lustrous emerald. But he simply said that they were not green, as he could only make very simple phrases in the language of Alsander.

"Are you going to stay long in this country?" inquired the girl.

"I think I shall have to."

He carved a dust pattern with his stick quite nervously, daring no more to look at her eyes. He asked her name.

"Peronella," she said. "And yours?"

"My name is Norman."

"Nor-mano, how nice!" said the girl, who seemed to think that this bashful northerner needed encouragement. "Normano. I shall always call you Normano."

"Always?" said Norman, looking up quickly.

The shameless maiden hung her head with a rosy blush as though she had been caught in an indiscretion, – as though the word had slipped from her unawares. But even at six in the morning, a sane though splendid hour, Norman, that reserved young Englishman, considered such encouragement sufficient. He went deliberately and took the pails off the girl's shoulders, as though he were going to help her, and the moment they had clattered on the road, he embraced this adorable girl from behind and kissed her ravenously. The kiss fell some two inches below her left ear.

She stood very stiff, flushed and angry; but Norman simply maintained his pressure till her whole body unstiffened. Norman had adopted to good purpose the principle that returns the penny-in-the-grip machine and secures for Britain her extensive Empire.

By this time they had become thoroughly nervous of each other. They sat down side by side on the wall near the spring. Norman ruffled his hair in embarrassment. Peronella murmured something about Fate. Norman inwardly disagreed; he did not think he ought to blame (or thank) Fate for the present contingency.

"Where are you going to stay?" asked the girl at last.

"As near you as possible."

"But don't you really know?"

"I know nothing. I am just a stranger, and I have come here for a ... for a ... damn," said Norman in English to himself, "what's the word for a holiday? – for a rest."

"You don't look as if you wanted a rest, and you won't get it if you stay near me."

"Not rest," said Norman, "not rest exactly, but ... amusement. O Peronella, you know how hard it is to talk a foreign tongue. I have learnt Alsandrian in a book, but I have never talked a word of it before."

"You talk it very nicely indeed; it is charming to hear you. It is not at all pleasant for us to hear men from Ulmreich talking Alsandrian. They make a horrible harsh noise, although they talk very carefully. But I think the lazy way you pronounce your o's and e's is charming..."

"I think," said Norman, looking at his watch with a smile, "that it is just twenty minutes since I first saw you and already..."

"Well?"

"I love you very much." He meant only to say "I like you very much," but in southern lands the linguistic distinction does not exist.

The girl seized him by the wrists.

"Don't say things like that, you devil," she cried, "especially if you do not mean it. Yes, say it even if you do not mean it; I love to hear you saying it. But be very careful. We are not like heathen women."

"I mean it!" said Norman, perforce.

"Normano, did you treat all other girls like this in England, and do you think I allow other men..."

"It will be quite different," faltered Norman.

"Say it again!"

"Peronella, I really love you."

Norman could not conceal a little yawn in his voice even at the moment of making this startling declaration; his eyes were heavy with light and he had walked for many hours. The girl perceived at once.

"Why, you are quite tired!" she said, "and talking fearful nonsense. You must come and find a room at once. Have you been walking long?"

"Four or five hours," said Norman.

"You curious person, to go walking in the night. Where have you come from?"

"From Braxea. I had my supper in the inn last night, and I've been walking ever since."

"What a pace you must have put on! Why, it's ever such a way away. Braxea? Why, it's right over the mountains on the frontier. Those long legs!" she added, pointing to them with a laugh. "No wonder they go far. I have never seen such long legs, except on a grass-hopper. And now you will walk into Alsander. But you have not yet answered my question. Where are you going to stay in our city?"

"I don't know a bit, beautiful girl, as I told you. Perhaps you can find me a place, not far away from you."

"Ah, perhaps I might," said she, "and perhaps I might not. I do not think you would be an agreeable neighbour."

"Ah, why not? Should I trouble and annoy you?"

"You have no idea how to behave, none at all," murmured Peronella.

"Oh, I will learn," cried the boy, "if you will teach me."

"And you will promise never, never again to squeeze my breath out in that awful manner?"

"Faithfully I will promise everything you ask."

"Why, then," said Peronella, rising up, with her eyes sparkling, "you had better come and live with my mother and me. We have a little *pension* and we want a lodger."

"What?" said Norman, not trusting himself to have understood.

"Come – and – live – with – my – mother – and – me, that is, if you like."

"O Peronella, I am afraid." And indeed the boy was really getting seriously frightened of this persistent maiden.

"But will you come? Or will you not have enough rest or amusement? Perhaps you would rather stay at the Palace Hotel. Most foreigners do. Ours is a very poor house. But the Palace Hotel is not really a palace. Will you come? It would be much less expensive for you, and we have no mosquitoes, and mother cooks divinely."

"How dare you ask me, you mad girl? You must think we live in snow houses and get our hearts frozen up in the north. Let us go at once!"

He made as if to accompany her, highly pleased at his proficiency in Alsandrian.

"No, no," said the girl. "That will never do. People are beginning to get up now and would say all sorts of things. You do not know what tongues they have, the old women of the town. I should be shamed and ruined. But I have a beautiful plan. You must walk about thirty yards behind me and follow me home."

Norman shook his head at her, not understanding. It is so much easier to be metaphorical than to be practical in a foreign tongue.

If you do not understand what I mean, consider a moment. You possess, let us say, a little knowledge of Italian, without tears. You are in a restaurant at Rome, and two Counts are discussing at the next table. To your delight you comprehend them perfectly. The Count with the white imperial has just observed, "*La vera educazione, il segreto del progresso umano, e ideale.*" You admire the limpidity of his thought, the purity of his enunciation, and your own knowledge of a tongue so recently acquired. Then comes the infernal waiter with his coarse, plebeian accent. Where are you now? *Minestra, cipolle, rombo, sermone*— is the old Count going to preach one? Holding back the scalding tears of shame, you feed the brute with English.

Norman's obtuseness dismayed the girl.

"Oh, dear!" said she. "You don't understand a word. You are dreadfully stupid. What shall I do? Ah, I know!"

Laughing merrily, she picked up two pebbles, one longer than the other.

"You," she said, "and me."

Then she thrust Norman's stick into the grass to represent home, she explained. Then, kneeling down and pulling Norman beside her, she made the pebbles walk after her at even distances towards the stick. She made the short pebble trip along lightly with a mincing gait, while the tall one paced behind in gigantic strides, reverent and slow. At the stick she put another great pebble, squat and dumpy, to do duty for Mamma. The lady pebble tapped at the door and was admitted; the tall pebble thumped a few minutes afterwards; it talked inquiringly to the dumpy pebble, bowed to the graceful pebble, and finally (so Norman contrived to the girl's vast delight) kissed that graceful pebble rapturously behind the squat one's back.

"Now," said she, "do you understand, you stupid?"

Norman understood the little pantomime. She started off. He had to call her back for her forgotten pails. Norman filled them and placed them lovingly on her back. She went a full hundred yards ahead, and then waved her hand, nearly spilling her pails as she did so. He followed, rather frightened, very thrilled, and overwhelmingly tired.

Not otherwise did the Ithacan follow Nausicaa into the city of the Phoeacians whose ships went wisely in the waves.

CHAPTER III

EN PENSION IN ALSANDER

You, sweet, have the power
To make me passionate as an April day;
Now smile, then weep; now pale, then crimson red;
You are the powerful moon of my blood's sea.

The Witch of Edmonton

Norman followed, through the crumbling gateway, past an old fountain half buried in roses, up narrow tortuous ways at the back of a huge cathedral. Then he came to a street of steps. The town was beginning to awake. Little boys and girls had begun to play on the thresholds with portentous solemnity; half-naked men were washing their brown bodies at the pumps; and from the newly opened shutters many a glittering eye marvelled at the fair-haired stranger, as though he were some adventurous prince from the fantastic North, where it snows one half the year and rains the other, and red devils dance and moan in the perpetual fog.

Norman saw Peronella disappear inside a house in the distance; he came up to it and entered. The staircase was a long one, and there were innumerable doors. However, he proceeded up the very dirty steps as long as the splashings from the pail guided him onwards. "She cannot have much water left in that pail," thought Norman. At last the splashing ceased by a door whereon hung the notice:

"VIDVINO PRASKO

CAMBRI PRO LUI,"

signifying, as even Norman apprehended, that the lady of the house, a widow, would let rooms. Behind the door he heard Peronella chattering with exaggerated vigour. He rang, and the girl opened, scanned him up and down with mild astonishment (a piece of delicate acting, for which there was no reason whatever, as her mother, the widow Prasko, was busy clanking pans in the kitchen), and asked him what he wanted.

"I want to live here in a room," was the muddled reply.

"Wait a minute then, sir; I will speak to mother about it."

She shut the door in his face with a crashing slam, and ran into the kitchen.

"Mother," she said, in an impartial voice, as soon as there was a lull in the clanking of the kettles, "here is a foreign gentleman wanting a room."

"An Ulmreicher?"

"I don't know where he comes from; but I am sure he is not from Ulmreich."

"Because, you know," said the old lady, "however poor we may be, I could not stand having one of those people in the house: I simply hate them. They want all the floors cleaned with petroleum every day, and if there's a flea in the bed they curse one as if one were a beggar. It's no good, Peronella. I don't want any foreigners here, male or female. I never met a foreigner who was not much more interested in the way his room was dusted than in the style his food was cooked. Tell him to go away."

"You had really better look at him first, mother. He looks such a very nice foreigner, and not a bit like an Ulmreicher. And though he is very dusty, I noticed he had a gold watch chain."

"Well, well, girl, wait a bit and I'll come and see him. But I won't have one of those dirty Ulmreich pigs coming here and fussing about the fleas."

Norman, waiting outside the door, heard, even understood, the widow's remarks, for she nearly always spoke at the top of her voice, and invariably acted on the assumption, usually justifiable, that no foreigner could speak more than three words of Alsandrian. Yet he observed that the old lady's screech was not altogether unpleasant; it was, at all events, a peculiarly powerful noise. When the widow at length appeared at the door, a gigantesque apparition, he felt her to be striking enough to have a superior voice, or even to be the mother of Peronella. True, her face was wrinkled like an old lemon, or like a raised map of some uncharted country on the invisible side of the moon; and the vast cylinder of blue apron that she wore was not calculated to palliate either the rugosity of her face or the extreme fatness of her body. Yet for all her monstrous appearance she walked well, and had regular features, which suggested that neither her intelligence nor her will had disappeared, and had once been wedded to beauty.

"Do you come from Ulmreich?" she said to Norman in the language of that country, scanning him up and down.

Norman, though he knew enough Ulmreichan to master the import of her question, pretended not to understand, and stood dumb.

"Where do you come from?" the widow pursued in Alsandrian.

"From England."

"Ah, from England. I never knew anyone from England, but when I was in Ulmreich I met an American whose name I have forgotten, but he was a nice man, in a good line of business, till he died. And how long have you been in Alsander?"

"I have only just arrived."

"You have only just arrived. And you talk the language?"

"I learnt it on my way."

"And how did you find out my house, if you have only just arrived? We do not advertise: we are not a regular pension. Only it happens we sometimes let a room."

"I was wandering round looking for a room, and some one directed me here."

"Now who could that be?"

"Oh, I don't know. A little man round the corner."

"I wonder who it was. Was it a little cobbler with red hair? That would be Simone. Did you notice if he had red hair?"

"I don't know," said Norman, inwardly consigning the old girl to perdition. "He wore a felt hat."

"Ah, Simone has no hat," said the Widow Prasko. "And have you any luggage?"

"It is coming on by train."

"Did you not come by train yourself?"

"No," said Norman, crossly. "I have walked all night, from Braxea, and I am very tired. Please give me a room or refuse a room and send me away, at once."

"Ah, forgive me," said the widow, quite courteously, "but I have a daughter in the house, and I must ask questions. And, of course, you must be either very mad or very poor or you would not have walked from Braxea, and if you had walked you would have gone to the hotel."

"Do I look like the sort of man who would misbehave with your daughter?" said Norman, stiffly.

"Oh, I don't mind how you behave with per. But you might want to marry her, and I should not like her to marry a poor man."

"I am fairly rich," said Norman, "but I have not seen your daughter long enough to decide about marriage."

"You are rich and you want to find a room here?"

"Yes, please."

"And food?"

"Yes, food, too."

"You will find it rather simple living. You would live much better at the hotel."

"I would rather be here," said Norman. "I like to have people to talk to; I do not like hotels."

"Well, you might as well come in and see the room."

She showed him a small bedroom, almost entirely filled by an enormous curtained bed. It was a pretty room, papered in pale blue, ornamented with cuttings from French illustrated papers, a statuette of a nakedish lady apparently eight feet high, called Mignon, an oleograph representing a romantic northern castle surrounded by impossible waterfalls, and a clock which had been for many years too tired to work. Peronella it was who drew up the sunblinds and let in the pure air, for which the room thirsted. There was a view over the red roofs right out to sea.

Norman expressed himself delighted. He settled the terms, and paid in advance for a month. He arranged to have meals with the family; he did not want to be lonely, and wanted to learn Alsandrian. All this obviously pleased the old lady, and Norman, too tired even to walk about in the city, shut himself up and slept, to the disgust of Peronella, till the late afternoon.

His bag awaited him at the station a mile away, down on the plain on the land side of the rock. He walked there to get it, still too sleepy to look round him and enjoy the newness of things, and carried it painfully back. He tried that evening to clothe himself as fashionably as he could. He succeeded, at all events, in a country where the proper use of the starched linen collar and its concomitant tie is practically unknown, in impressing the Vidvino Prasko, who in her turn took great care to let him know that she was of old family and good education, and had been Maid of Honour to the last Queen of the country. And so she rambled on, giving Norman, who was eager to hear about the country, an account even of its history and commerce, and left him greatly surprised at the extent of her knowledge. She had been brought up in the Palace itself, in the good old times, as she said, sighing, and knew more than most. For herself, she had a little pension from the Government. "It is worth no one's while to steal it," she observed, "and, besides, I have my daughter, whom I bring up most care-fully – don't I, Peronella?"

Peronella, who had discarded her white frock and now appeared in what had better only be described as her "Sunday Best," blushed modestly and hung her head beautifully. Norman, however, was not pleased, but rather disappointed to find she was not the peasant girl he had thought her, but a half-educated young lady with ideas. Troubled, he looked at her again. She was still there, still beautiful, still charming; but, alas! how the spell of the morning was broken! The nymph who stood before him, the very spirit of Nature, some few hours ago had had lessons in geography and fancy needlework, could even play the piano. She had almost the same accomplishments as those he and all Blaindon had admired in the pretty daughter of Mr Apple.

And yet she was there opposite him, still beautiful, still charming...

Soon after dinner the old lady declared herself sleepy and departed, admonishing Peronella not to stay up too late.

"That's just like mother," said the girl.

"What?"

"She's taken a fancy to you all at once and goes off, leaving me alone with you as if you were a pet lamb instead of a..."

"Lascivious lion," suggested Norman. "By the way, Peronella..."

"Yes."

"Peronella, have you any more lovers?"

"How fond you are of repeating my name! Of course I have. Do I look as if I hadn't? He is called Cesano. He will be coming soon. He will certainly try to kill you. Do you mind?"

"What?"

"Being killed."

"Of course, I should hate it."

"You silly fellow. I mean, you aren't afraid?"

"I am deadly afraid of being killed, so soon after meeting you."

"Would you kill somebody for me if I asked you to?"

"Yes, unless I was likely to be hanged for it."

"I don't believe you're at all brave, or very fond of me, after all."

"I am rather frightened of you, Peronella, at all events."

Some time after, a ring at the bell interrupted some similar inane, mock-passionate conversation.

"You were talking about my lovers, dear Normano," said the girl. "If you want to see one, you have only to wait here while I open the door. Now, if that's Cesano, as I suppose it is, there will be fireworks. Be careful, Normano; he's a rival. Alsandrian lovers are not like English. They have hot blood in their veins. Listen, how he rings. He is angry already. Oh, Normano, go into your bedroom. It would be dangerous for you to stay here –"

"Nonsense; I have come to stay. Do you think I am frightened? I am longing to see this very passionate man and to learn how I ought to make love."

She undid the door and Cesano entered. He was a dark individual, a few years older than Norman, with a bulging forehead, and a black moustache. He looked very much like an English maidservant's idea of a typical Spaniard, being, furthermore, dressed in one of those horrible colour-combinations in velvet and silk that we English, perhaps the best-dressed people in the world, find so charmingly picturesque and so essentially artistic.

"Good evening, Cesano; let me introduce you to our new lodger, an Englishman."

The two men bowed to each other without saying a word. Cesano wasted no time.

"Are you coming out?" he said.

"I should like to, Cesano, but I can't possibly leave a stranger quite alone for his first night in Alsander, can I?"

"Oh, he looks as if he could look after himself, that great pink-faced lout of an Englishman. Besides, what does he matter? And he must be tired if he has only just arrived."

"I am not at all tired," said Norman. "I have been asleep all day."

Cesano gasped. It had never crossed his mind that a foreigner could understand a word of the language of Alsander.

"Then you understand me, sir? Then you don't mind?"

"I do rather. Especially since you have said I didn't matter. Particularly so since you called me a pink-faced lout of an Englishman."

"Forgive me, sir," said Cesano, with intensive courtesy. "I could not have imagined that you understood my words. It is so rarely that we Alsandrians have the pleasure of hearing foreigners speak our tongue. And as you have understood me, you have understood that I was only in jest. And if there was a little offence, you must pardon me. I am a lover. We lovers are so hasty. It is natural to be jealous of all men when one is a lover. Of course, for me to have been jealous of you, even for an instant, was purely ridiculous."

"I pardon you certainly, Signor Cesano," said Norman. "I pardon you with all my heart, but..."

Norman felt uncomfortable. He heartily wished that Peronella would go for her passion-walk with Cesano, and leave him to his too long neglected pipe. But, despite all his Englishman's vague terror of the foreigner, he had all a brave man's objections to hauling down his colours, especially in the face of so ridiculous an opponent as the Italian opera personage who stood there gesticulating at him, and whose politeness was thrice as offensive as his rudeness. So he dwelt a second on the word "but" and glanced at Peronella, who came to his aid only too gladly, and with consummate impudence took up the tale.

"Normano desires to say" – murmured the young lady in a very sweet voice – "that you have plenty of cause for jealousy."

"Cause for jealousy! What do you mean by cause for jealousy? Of him?"

"Ah! he still finds the language a little difficult to speak, you know. Even you who are native do not seem to have mastered it completely, Cesano. Yes, of course, of him!"

"But what do you mean – what do you mean? What do you dare to mean?" cried Cesano, crescendo.

"This!" Here Peronella looked up at Norman with a glance of admiration and put her arm round his waist. Proud of her new lover, she thought also that it would be more prudent to display her colours at once. Cesano staggered to the wall, doubtless moved by real emotion, but with such theatrical gestures that he appeared a mere buffoon.

"What has happened? Can I believe my eyes? Am I moon-mad? Have all the devils possessed me? Are you Peronella? Am I Cesano? Is he your lover?"

He buried his face in his hands. Peronella would not answer the poor fellow.

"What has happened? Has that pink foreigner bewitched your heart? Are you tormenting me or are you tired of me?" he cried.

"Not tired of you," said the girl, growing a little white but not relaxing her grip of Norman, "but very fond of him."

"Fond of that person? Who or what is he? I have not the honour..."

"He is an English lord who came here this afternoon to live here."

"An English lord in this mud-house?"

"It is good enough for him where I am."

Meanwhile Norman was feeling awkward enough. The girl, it seemed, had taken possession of him almost without asking him, though doubtless it was his own fault, for kissing lonely nymphs all in the morning of the world. There she was publicly avowing him, and making him feel very mean and foolish before her honest, if extravagant, lover, who now went on with a sort of portentous dignity:

"I am sorry. Forgive me, Peronella. I am confused. I cannot understand what has happened. You cannot give me up after all these months for some one you do not know at all. It is absurd. It could not be. It is fantastic. It is unreal."

"I did not know I had ever taken you," replied Peronella. "What have we ever done but go out for walks like friends?"

"But I was going to give up everything for you. Do not blast my youth."

"It has been blasted before, Cesano."

"Not like this time. I cannot sleep. Come, take away your arm, last of creatures. I cannot bear it. I will go mad. I will beat you. As for you, sir" (to Norman, in a deep bass), "I will deal with you after with cold steel!"

"Come, now," said Peronella, smoothly. "I am very sorry indeed. One cannot help the hand of Fate."

"Hand of Fate," said Cesano, in justifiable wrath. "It has driven many women to hell, that hand of Fate. Do you kiss a new man every week? Have you a price? Was I not honourable? Did we not talk of marriage? Did I not pick you coral from the sea – violets from the meadows?"

"Don't be poetic, Cesano, or I shall cry."

"Cry! Can you shed tears? I have shed many for you at night beneath your window. But you have no heart!"

"Why trouble then about so stony a young girl?"

The affected languor of her tone irritated Norman almost as much as it was intended to irritate Cesano, but he could not well desert her now, and stood his ground. Cesano sobbed, put one hand on his breast and the other on a tableknife with which he made the most threatening gestures at Norman. The latter, who understood the hand-play more than the rhetoric, could not help laughing at the grotesque but unfortunate Alsandrian.

"Ah! you laugh now!" said Cesano, ferociously. "Some day I will make you smile at the back of your head."

And turning on his heel, to Norman's surprise, he went softly and quietly out of the room.

"I am so sorry for Cesano," said Norman. "I did not mean to be rude to him; he is a good man. I am sorry you were so cruel to him. He has not deserved it of you."

"Love is cruel! And, O, Normano, Love is divine!"

"Love is a very good subject of conversation," said Norman, ungallantly. He was tired, and therefore had sagacious misgivings as to what he had let himself in for. "Good night," he added, and turned on his heel.

"Is that all?" said Peronella, opening out her arms.

But the wary Englishman had fled.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCING A GOOD BEGGAR AND A BAD KING

Beautiful and broken fountains, keep you still your Sultan's dream?
The Golden Journey to' Samarkand.

Despite any irritation he might feel in finding his pretty flirtation degenerate into a sentimental romance which might end ill, for a week Norman led the golden life, and, after all, the golden life can only be led in sunny lands, by him who has a mistress on his arm and music in his soul, and it never lasts more than one week in the same place. The golden life in Alsander means swimming, sunstruck memories of old walls and young faces; it means prospects down tortuous streets of blue mountains towering to the sky or of blue skies falling into bluer seas. It means the discovery of an elegant fountain down this way, of a Roman inscription hidden in moss down that. It means the first view of the Cathedral square. For the façade of the Cathedral of Alsander, first seen of a sudden some early morning, when the square is still, seems an impossible thing – a mirage: it is so vast, so lovely, and so old.

But for Norman in Alsander, as for many another, the chill Sunday of disappointment followed the week-days of delight. Naturally the first disappointment was Peronella. We have already hinted at Norman's disappointment. It did not vanish, that disappointment: it grew. Can beauty be boring? Ah! ye gods, it can, if one has to talk to it, and it is stupid. But was Peronella not romantic? Oh, yes, she was indeed, but romantic with a "k." She was romantick like the fair misses of a hundred years ago. But is not the romantick the same as the romantic in principle? Oh, yes, indeed, the sentiment is the same; but to be romantic requires intellect, and to be romantick requires none. But was not Peronella educated? Indeed she was, most abominably educated, quite enough to ruin all the fresh roses of her nature. She had not, could not, alas! read Ella Wheeler Wilcox, her poems, but, oh! how she would have loved them had she known them! Marie Corelli she did read; you may buy her works in Alsandrian. But was she incapable of appreciating true literature? Oh, no, she adored Shakespeare and Byron, which she read in translations. You see, her mother had ideas and considered herself a lady. Nevertheless Peronella began to bore Norman: the spell was broken!

And once that spell broken, other enchantments lost their hold. The mirage lifted from the city of Alsander. The illusion began to disappear one day when it rained, and the next day, when Norman walked out alone after a sulky quarrel, it had utterly vanished. The rain had ceased, but the sun had revived the smells of Alsander (which were ubiquitous, insinuating, sometimes crushing) without drying the streets. Norman slipped at every step he took in the glutinous mud. The utter disrepair of the cobbled streets made walking bad enough at any time, heartrending after rain. As for driving, it was a wonder there was a carriage in the place. Across one of the narrowest but most frequented roads gaped a fabulously large hole which had perhaps been opened for some vague drainage or burial operations. The displaced cobbles formed a little circular hill all round this preposterous cavity, which looked in consequence more like the crater of Etna than an honest hole in the road, and carriages had positively to be lifted over the hill into the valley and then over the hill again. A couple of men could have put it straight in half an hour – but this was Alsander.

The question will arise, "But what of the pavements?" In Alsander, as a rule, there are no pavements, the roads being flanked on each side by little running sewers. Where pavements do exist they are used for idle shopmen to obstruct with their chairs or pushing shopmen to bar with their merchandise. They also have a way of coming to an end in the gutter after a few yards, just as you are getting your stride in, and then tempting the foolish to wade across the road by casually sprouting up on the opposite side.

Norman had all an Englishman's hatred of discomfort and waste; he felt that Blaindon could put Alsander to shame in the matter of public works; he feared the smells would give him typhoid, and he began to hate Alsander, and he heard the call of Roon, the God of Going, as it is written in the *Gods of Pegana*.

Besides all this he was frightened and puzzled. He had fallen into a trap. He was looked upon as a prospective son-in-law by the Widow Prasko – and that was ever so largely his own fault. Englishmen were accounted fabulously rich, and this one was evidently handsome as well. Peronella was already airing her proprietorship to the envy and admiration of the other maids of Alsander. Then Cesano was a nuisance with his little tricks, for he was as sincere as he was ridiculous – the complement of Peronella with no redeeming beauty. He was only at the scowling stage at present, but would certainly advance, in accordance with the sound early Renaissance tradition of the country, to powder in the coffee, snake in the boot, or knife in the back. But for all this, Norman was chivalrous and conscientious enough, and no coward, either; and though he felt it would be best for all concerned for him to leave his baggage and run away by the next train, his sense of honour was in conflict with anything that smacked of dishonesty or funk. Besides, he had not so much money left; he had to decide whether he would try and make a living here or elsewhere, and decide soon. It was part of his travel scheme (which was not so fantastic, after all) to work his passage, so to speak, in some way or other from place to place. But as yet he had not earned a farthing or so much as looked for work. This also depressed him.

Thus it was that the great glass dome of his happiness was shattered, and the last hour of the golden life fell like a golden leaf from the tree of existence. And as for that moment when he heard all the bells of morning ringing in his ears and smiled at a girl with her pails of water, that was not a week but five thousand years ago, when all the skies were blue.

Darkly brooding and much disillusioned, therefore, our hero came to the Royal Castle of Alsander. He had not seen it close at hand before. It stands far from the centre of the town, on the steepest part of the rock, an unconquerable edifice of faceted stone, its Palladian gateway flanked by two stupendous fat uncompromising towers, with hundreds of yards of unbroken, unwindowed wall slanting outwards to the base, continuing beyond the towers to right and left. Two sleepy sentries, in a fine old uniform, holding in their hands some weapon, vaguely mediaeval, guarded the entrance.

The strength, one might almost say the ugliness, of the castle pleased Norman's mood. He was just beginning to enjoy the scene, leaning by a fine old statue which stood in the midst of the square on a low pedestal and represented, standing twice life-size, helmeted and hand to sword, the hero King of Alsander, Kradenda the First, the builder of the castle. He was gazing round intently, when an old crouching beggar interrupted him and asked him in a sort of hoarse whisper if he wanted to see the castle. Norman, with a disgusted and pitying glance at the filthy rags of the mendicant, offered him silver to be left in peace.

"I do not want silver," said the old man. "Look you here" – and he tossed into the air a heavy purse that hung by his girdle – "I want to show you the castle."

"Is it open to all visitors?" inquired Norman.

"No, but if I take you we shall pass," replied the vagrant, with assurance. Norman was surprised into accepting; more surprised still when the heavy-eyed sentries gave a sort of furtive salute to his disreputable guide; and most surprised on viewing the interior of the castle. "At all events there was one more thing to see in Alsander before I left," said he to himself.

For inside the frowning battlemented walls, instead of harsh keeps and dungeons, were the beautiful ruins of a beautiful garden. There was a riot of greenery, to which roses, orange blossom, jasmine and hybiscus gave the prominent colours and scents. The grass was sprinkled with cyclamen, asphodel, red anemones and with wild remnants of old cultivation. There were toy stone Greek temples, little cottages like English cottages, painted lath and plaster summer-houses like Turkish summer-houses, showing the bare bones of their construction at every windy corner.

"Who made all this?" inquired Norman.

The old beggar turned away from the garden and pointed to the vast encircling quadrilateral of the wall, as grand from within as from without.

"This wall," he said, standing up straight and waving his hand around with curious enthusiasm, and speaking in a vibrating but refined voice which ill befitted his rags and mouldering beard, "is the work of Kradenda the Great, founder of the power and glory of Alsander, against whose statue you were leaning in the square. Now I know many stories of the great Kradenda, and will tell you one, my lord. In those days the Saracen galleys had driven the people of this land up into the hills, and the plain was all a waste. Now Kradenda was a shepherd lad, and one day he went out at the head of his fellows and burnt the fleet of the infidels..."

"Oh, I have heard the story," said Norman. "Milord is impatient," said the beggar. "But I am glad that after so short a stay in Alsander he should know at least one story of Kradenda the Great. There are, of course, many other stories. My lord, have you heard how King Kradenda recultivated the plain?"

"No, I have not heard that story. Tell me.

"Well, I will tell you. It was like this. Malaria had gripped those good rich lands, and not a soul would reclaim them for fear of disease. The Great King ordered his people to recultivate the plain. But so many died of fever that they murmured against the order. Thereupon he called to them and told them that they were soldiers and would they run from an enemy? 'Never,' they said, 'if he led them,' 'Do you not see, then,' said the King, 'that fever is our enemy now that I have driven off the infidel: you must fight it and die for your country if needs be.' 'We will! obey,' said the old chief who had led the deputation, 'but only if you lead us.' Whereupon? the King laughed and bade them follow him, and there and then he pitched his tent in the filthiest part of the marsh and began to dig a channel for the waters with his own hands. In that way the marsh was soon drained and dry, and such a man was the first Kradenda."

"That is a good story," said Norman, "and well and concisely told. But tell me now about the garden and the summer-houses and the fountain."

"What of them?" said the guide. "The summer-houses are crumbling, the garden is a wilderness and the fountains play no more."

"Weird talk from a beggar," thought Norman. "But who built them?" he inquired aloud. "They are quite beautiful."

"They were built by King Basilandron: he was quite beautiful, too."

"I have never heard of him, though my landlady, who is a wise woman, has told me much of the history of your charming country."

"Ah, we do not talk much of him in Alsander. Here is his name, cut in the wood."

He showed Norman an inscription on the side of a little summer-house with wooden tracery and a faded blue paint, which ran: ΒΑΣΙΛΑΝΔΡΩΝ.

"But why is it in Greek letters?" inquired Norman.

"He would have everything in Greek. He it was who called the river Ianthe. It was known as Vorka before."

"You know the history of Alsander well," said Norman, more and more astonished at the language and erudition of his guide.

"I love Alsander," said the old man. "I know all the stones of this castle and all the stories of Alsander's past."

"Then tell me the story of King Basilandron," said Norman, "for I have never heard it. And after that I shall ask you to tell me the story of your life: for rags do not make you a beggar."

"Neither does my erudition prove me to be a prince in disguise," said the old fellow with a smile. "But I would rather even tell you the story of my life, tragic as it is, than tell you the story of King Basilandron, which is the tragedy of a nation, and one that those who love Alsander do not care to tell."

"Tell me first the story of Basilandron and then the story of your life."

"It is little we poor citizens of Alsander can refuse to the inquiring tourist," said the old man with acerbity. "And may the devil torment you for a member of a great nation that can look after itself. We, you know, are supposed to be incapable of self-government, especially since we went bankrupt a year or two ago, and actually dared to ruin some French bondholders. Since that day the Great Powers have been terrifying us with an international commission. If ever there is a free fight in a café here, or a dog-fight in the square, some foreigner writes to a European newspaper about the anarchy in Alsander. American missionaries, who believe in Noah's Ark and the historical existence of Methusalem, revile the degraded superstitions of our peasants who still hold to their immemorial festivals in honour of the water that bursts from the rock or the grape that grows dark on the vine. And now we are threatened with inspectors, all of varying nationalities, to avoid all appearance of intrigue or possibility of jealousy. You see our strategic importance is the only importance left to us – otherwise we should long ago have disappeared. So we are to have a Spanish Financial Inspector and a Swiss Sanitary Board. Our gendarmerie will be organized by a virtuous Dane. Our agriculture will be modernized by an energetic Dutchman. Our public conveniences will doubtless be improved by one of your own compatriots."

"My compatriot," said Norman, "will not be unoccupied. But I insist upon your telling me the tale of King Basilandron."

"I will tell you, milord, since you are so importunate, but forgive me if I have been impolite. These things touch me so near."

"Well, then, King Basilandron ruled in days when certain ideas from Italy, having reached Alsander, had turned the heads even of sober people and made great havoc of the Court. It was in those days that all this wood and plaster work which you so much admire was erected; it was in this garden that night after night King Basilandron held revel, to the great pleasure of those engaged therein. The Court was all crammed with fiddlers, painters, poets, dancers, barbers and buffoons. But they were quack fiddlers, feeble painters, vile poets and clumsy dancers, who would not have dared to move a leg in Italy. But the barbers and buffoons were such as the world has never seen, so dexterous and stylish. Need I tell you how the country was taxed to maintain this alien population, or how the people groaned and murmured, or how the aesthetic monarch kept them quiet and amused by diverting pageants? All sorts of pageants there were – of beggars, thieves, madmen, lovers, heretics (real heretics, subsequently burnt), queens of antiquity, widows, tigers and Turks. But a pageant was the end of the whole business, as I will tell you now."

"One day the King resolved to re-establish the worship called of Orpheus, to the great joy of his friends. He clothed himself as Bacchus, though per Bacco he looked more like Silenus (if the painters of his day did not make him more ugly than he was, which in those days was not the custom of Court painters). His escort was a troop of noble ladies clothed in forest branches and none too leafy: and one summer evening under the full moon off they went singing to the mountains. After they had danced their fill and sinned God knows what sins, the moon set and back they swooped on the city in a sort of make-believe battle line; and there at the gates was the army of Alsander mumming in Greek tunics waiting to receive their amorous attack. But at that very hour a different host was approaching Alsander – forgotten barbarians from Ulmreich – and the two hosts met. And that is all – and that has been all for the glory and power of Alsander," concluded the old man, bitterly.

"But Alsander is independent still."

"An independence handed her as a gift by Ulmreich and Gantha, her two great neighbours, is not much worth having. The day one of them is strong enough to seize us from the other, we shall go. Or if that international commission really sits, it is as good as death to our little nation. We shall never more be able to raise our heads – and chiefly through the fault of King Basilandron."

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