

Hope Anthony

# Phroso: A Romance



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**Hope A.**

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# Anthony Hope

## Phroso: A Romance

### CHAPTER I

### A LONG THING ENDING IN POULOS

‘**Quot** homines tot sententiæ;’ so many men, so many fancies. My fancy was for an island. Perhaps boyhood’s glamour hung yet round sea-girt rocks, and ‘faery lands forlorn,’ still beckoned me; perhaps I felt that London was too full, the Highlands rather fuller, the Swiss mountains most insufferably crowded of them all. Money can buy company, and it can buy retirement. The latter service I asked now of the moderate wealth with which my poor cousin Tom’s death had endowed me. Everybody was good enough to suppose that I rejoiced at Tom’s death, whereas I was particularly sorry for it, and was not consoled even by the prospect of the island. My friends understood this wish for an island as little as they appreciated my feelings about poor Tom. Beatrice was most emphatic in declaring that ‘a horrid little island’ had no charms for her, and that she would never set foot in it. This declaration was rather annoying, because I had imagined myself, spending my honeymoon with Beatrice on the island; but life is not all honeymoon, and I decided to have the island none the less. Besides I was not to be married for a year. Mrs Kennett Hipgrave had insisted on this delay in order that we might be sure that we knew our own hearts. And as I may say without unfairness that Mrs Hipgrave was to a considerable degree responsible for the engagement – she asserted the fact herself with much pride – I thought that she had a right to some voice in the date of the marriage. Moreover the postponement just gave me the time to go over and settle affairs in the island.

For I had bought it. It cost me seven thousand five hundred and fifty pounds, rather a fancy price but I could not haggle with the old lord – half to be paid to the lord’s bankers in London, and the second half to him in Neopalia, when he delivered possession to me. The Turkish Government had sanctioned the sale, and I had agreed to pay a hundred pounds yearly as tribute. This sum I was entitled, in my turn, to levy on the inhabitants.

‘In fact, my dear lord,’ said old Mason to me when I called on him in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, ‘the whole affair is settled. I congratulate you on having got just what was your whim. You are over a hundred miles from the nearest land – Rhodes, you see.’ (He laid a map before me.) ‘You are off the steamship tracks; the Austrian Lloyds to Alexandria leave you far to the northeast. You are equally remote from any submarine cable; here on the southwest, from Alexandria to Candia, is the nearest. You will have to fetch your letters.’

‘I shouldn’t think of doing such a thing,’ said I indignantly.

‘Then you’ll only get them once in three months. Neopalia is extremely rugged and picturesque. It is nine miles long and five broad. It grows cotton, wine, oil and a little corn. The people are quite unsophisticated, but very good-hearted.’

‘And,’ said I, ‘there are only three hundred and seventy of them, all told. I really think I shall do very well there.’

‘I’ve no doubt you will. By the way, treat the old gentleman kindly. He’s terribly cut up at having to sell. “My dear island,” he writes, “is second to my dead son’s honour, and to nothing else.” His son, you know, Lord Wheatley, was a bad lot, a very bad lot indeed.’

‘He left a heap of unpaid debts, didn’t he?’

‘Yes, gambling debts. He spent his time knocking about Paris and London with his cousin Constantine – by no means an improving companion, if report speaks truly. And your money is to pay the debts, you know.’

‘Poor old chap,’ said I. I sympathised with him in the loss of his island.

‘Here’s the house, you see,’ said Mason, turning to the map and dismissing the sorrows of the old lord of Neopalía. ‘About the middle of the island, nearly a thousand feet above the sea. I’m afraid it’s a tumble-down old place, and will swallow a lot of money without looking much better for the dose. To put it into repair for the reception of the future Lady Wheatley would cost –’

‘The future Lady Wheatley says she won’t go there on any account,’ I interrupted.

‘But, my very dear lord,’ cried he, aghast, ‘if she won’t –’

‘She won’t, and there’s an end of it, Mr Mason. Well, good day. I’m to have possession in a month?’

‘In a month to the very day – on the 7th of May.’

‘All right; I shall be there to take it.’

Escaping from the legal quarter, I made my way to my sister’s house in Cavendish Square. She had a party, and I was bound to go by brotherly duty. As luck would have it, however, I was rewarded for my virtue (and if that’s not luck in this huddle-muddle world I don’t know what is); the Turkish Ambassador dropped in, and presently James came and took me up to him. My brother-in-law, James Cardew, is always anxious that I should know the right people. The Pasha received me with great kindness.

‘You are the purchaser of Neopalía, aren’t you?’ he asked, after a little conversation. ‘The matter came before me officially.’

‘I’m much obliged,’ said I, ‘for your ready consent to the transfer.’

‘Oh, it’s nothing to us. In fact our tribute, such as it is, will be safer. Well, I’m sure I hope you’ll settle in comfortably.’

‘Oh, I shall be all right. I know the Greeks very well, you see – been there a lot, and, of course, I talk the tongue, because I spent two years hunting antiquities in the Morea and some of the islands.’

The Pasha stroked his beard, as he observed in a calm tone:

‘The last time a Stefanopoulos tried to sell Neopalía, the people killed him, and turned the purchaser – he was a Frenchman, a Baron d’Ezonville – adrift in an open boat, with nothing on but his shirt’.

‘Good heavens! Was that recently?’

‘No; two hundred years ago. But it’s a conservative part of the world, you know.’ And his Excellency smiled.

‘They were described to me as good-hearted folk,’ said I; ‘unsophisticated, of course, but good-hearted.’

‘They think that the island is theirs, you see,’ he explained, ‘and that the lord has no business to sell it. They may be good-hearted, Lord Wheatley, but they are tenacious of their rights.’

‘But they can’t have any rights,’ I expostulated.

‘None at all,’ he assented. ‘But a man is never so tenacious of his rights as when he hasn’t any. However, *autres temps autres mœurs*; I don’t suppose you’ll have any trouble of that kind. Certainly I hope not, my dear lord.’

‘Surely your Government will see to that?’ I suggested.

His Excellency looked at me; then, although by nature a grave man, he gave a low humorous chuckle and regarded me with visible amusement.

‘Oh, of course, you can rely on that, Lord Wheatley,’ said he.

‘That is a diplomatic assurance, your Excellency?’ I ventured to suggest, with a smile.

‘It is unofficial,’ said he, ‘but as binding as if it were official. Our Governor in that district of the empire is a very active man – yes, a decidedly active man.’

The only result of this conversation was that when I was buying my sporting guns in St James’s Street the next day I purchased a couple of pairs of revolvers at the same time. It is well to be on the safe side, and, although I attached little importance to the by-gone outrage of which the Ambassador

spoke, I did not suppose that the police service would be very efficient. In fact I thought it prudent to be ready for any trouble that the old-world notions of the Neopaliens might occasion. But in my heart I meant to be very popular with them. For I cherished the generous design of paying the whole tribute out of my own pocket, and of disestablishing in Neopalio what seems to be the only institution in no danger of such treatment here – the tax-gatherer. If they understood that intention of mine, they would hardly be so short short-sighted as to set me adrift in my shirt like a second Baron d'Ezonville, or so unjust as to kill poor old Stefanopoulos as they had killed his ancestor. Besides, as I comforted myself by repeating, they were a good-hearted race; unsophisticated, of course, but thoroughly good-hearted.

My cousin, young Denny Swinton, was to dine with me that evening at the Optimum. Denny (a familiar form of Dennis) was the only member of the family who sympathised thoroughly with me about Neopalio. He was wild with interest in the island, and I looked forward to telling him all I had heard about it. I knew he would listen, for he was to go with me and help me to take possession. The boy had almost wept on my neck when I asked him to come; he had just left Woolwich, and was not to join his battalion for six months; he was thus, as he put it, 'at a loose end,' and succeeded in persuading his parents that he ought to learn modern Greek. General Swinton was rather cold about the project; he said that Denny had spent ten years on ancient Greek, and knew nothing about it, and probably would not learn much of the newer sort in three months; but his wife thought it would be a nice trip for Denny. Well, it turned out to be a very nice trip for Denny; but if Mrs Swinton had known – however, if it comes to that, I might just as well exclaim, 'If I had known myself!'

Denny had taken a table next but one to the west end of the room, and was drumming his fingers impatiently on the cloth when I entered. He wanted both his dinner and the latest news about Neopalio; so I sat down and made haste to satisfy him in both respects. Travelling with equal steps through the two matters, we had reached the first *entrée* and the fate of the murdered Stefanopoulos (which Denny, for some reason, declared was 'a lark'), when two people came in and sat down at the table beyond ours and next to the wall, where two chairs had been tilted up in token of pre-engagement. The man – for the pair were man and woman – was tall and powerfully built; his complexion was dark, and he had good regular features; he looked also as if he had a bit of a temper somewhere about him. I was conscious of having seen him before, and suddenly recollected that by a curious chance I had run up against him twice in St James's Street that very day. The lady was handsome; she had an Italian cast of face, and moved with much grace; her manner was rather elaborate, and, when she spoke to the waiter, I detected a pronounced foreign accent. Taken together, they were a remarkable couple and presented a distinguished appearance. I believe I am not a conceited man, but I could not help wondering whether their thoughts paid me a similar compliment. For I certainly detected both of them casting more than one curious glance towards our table; and when the man whispered once to a waiter, I was sure that I formed the subject of his question; perhaps he also remembered our two encounters.

'I wonder if there's any chance of a row!' said Denny in a tone that sounded wistful. 'Going to take anybody with you, Charley?'

'Only Watkins; I must have him; he always knows where everything is; and I've told Hogvardt, my old dragoman, to meet us in Rhodes. He'll talk their own language to the beggars, you know.'

'But he's a German, isn't he?'

'He thinks so,' I answered. 'He's not certain, you know. Anyhow, he chatters Greek like a parrot. He's a pretty good man in a row, too. But there won't be a row, you know.'

'I suppose there won't,' admitted Denny ruefully.

'For my own part,' said I meekly, 'as I'm going for the sake of quiet, I hope there won't.'

In the interest of conversation I had forgotten our neighbours; but now, a lull occurring in Denny's questions and surmises, I heard the lady's voice. She began a sentence – and began it in Greek! That was a little unexpected; but it was more strange that her companion cut her short, saying

very peremptorily, 'Don't talk Greek: talk Italian.' This he said in Italian, and I, though no great hand at that language, understood so much. Now why shouldn't the lady talk Greek, if Greek were the language that came naturally to her tongue? It would be as good a shield against eavesdroppers as most languages; unless indeed I, who was known to be an amateur of Greece and Greek things, were looked upon as a possible listener. Recollecting the glances which I had detected, recollecting again those chance meetings, I ventured on a covert gaze at the lady. Her handsome face expressed a mixture of anger, alarm, and entreaty. The man was speaking to her now in low urgent tones; he raised his hand once, and brought it down on the table as though to emphasise some declaration – perhaps some promise – which he was making. She regarded him with half-angry distrustful eyes. He seemed to repeat his words and she flung at him in a tone that grew suddenly louder, and in words that I could translate:

'Enough! I'll see to that. I shall come too.'

Her heat stirred no answering fire in him. He dropped his emphatic manner, shrugged a tolerant 'As you will,' with eloquent shoulders, smiled at her, and, reaching across the table, patted her hand. She held it up before his eyes, and with the other hand pointed at a ring on her finger.

'Yes, yes, my dearest,' said he, and he was about to say more, when, glancing round, he caught my gaze retreating in hasty confusion to my plate. I dared not look up again, but I felt his scowl on me. I suppose that I deserved punishment for my eavesdropping.

'And when can we get off, Charley?' asked Denny in his clear young voice. My thoughts had wandered from him, and I paused for a moment as a man does when a question takes him unawares. There was silence at the next table also. The fancy seemed absurd, but it occurred to me that there too my answer was being waited for. Well, they could know if they liked; it was no secret.

'In a fortnight,' said I. 'We'll travel easily, and get there on the 7th of next month; – that's the day on which I'm entitled to take over my kingdom. We shall go to Rhodes. Hogvardt will have got me a little yacht, and then – good-bye to all this!' And a great longing for solitude and a natural life came over me as I looked round on the gilded cornices, the gilded mirrors, the gilded flower-vases, and the highly-gilded company of the Optimum.

I was roused from my pleasant dreams by a high vivacious voice, which I knew very well. Looking up, I saw Miss Hipgrave, her mother, and young Bennett Hamlyn standing before me. I disliked young Hamlyn, but he was always very civil to me.

'Why, how early you two have dined!' cried Beatrice. 'You're at the savoury, aren't you? We've only just come.'

'Are you going to dine?' I asked, rising. 'Take this table, we're just off.'

'Well, we may as well, mayn't we?' said my *fiancée*. 'Sorry you're going, though. Oh, yes, we're going to dine with Mr Bennett Hamlyn. That's what you're for, isn't it, Mr Hamlyn? Why, he's not listening!'

He was not, strange to say, listening, although as a rule he listened to Beatrice with infinite attention and the most deferential of smiles. But just now he was engaged in returning a bow which our neighbour at the next table had bestowed on him. The lady there had risen already and was making for the door. The man lingered and looked at Hamlyn, seeming inclined to back up his bow with a few words of greeting. Hamlyn's air was not, however, encouraging, and the stranger contented himself with a nod and a careless 'How are you?' and, with that, followed his companion. Hamlyn turned round, conscious that he had neglected Beatrice's remark and full of penitence for his momentary rudeness.

'I beg your pardon?' said he, with an apologetic smile.

'Oh,' answered she, 'I was only saying that men like you were invented to give dinners; you're a sort of automatic feeding-machine. You ought to stand open all day. Really I often miss you at lunch time.'



‘My dear Beatrice!’ said Mrs Kennett Hipgrave, with that peculiar lift of her brows which meant, ‘How naughty the dear child is – oh, but how clever!’

‘It’s all right,’ said Hamlyn meekly. ‘I’m awfully happy to give you a dinner anyhow, Miss Beatrice.’

Now I had nothing to say on this subject, but I thought I would just make this remark:

‘Miss Hipgrave,’ said I, ‘is very fond of a dinner.’

Beatrice laughed. She understood my little correction.

‘He doesn’t know any better, do you?’ said she pleasantly to Hamlyn. ‘We shall civilise him in time, though; then I believe he’ll be nicer than you, Charley, I really do. You’re –’

‘I shall be uncivilised by then,’ said I.

‘Oh, that wretched island!’ cried Beatrice. ‘You’re really going?’

‘Most undoubtedly. By the way, Hamlyn, who’s your friend?’

Surely this was an innocent enough question, but little Hamlyn went red from the edge of his clipped whisker on the right to the edge of his mathematically equal whisker on the left.

‘Friend!’ said he in an angry tone; ‘he’s not a friend of mine. I only met him on the Riviera.’

‘That,’ I admitted, ‘does not, happily, in itself constitute a friendship.’

‘And he won a hundred louis of me in the train between Cannes and Monte Carlo.’

‘Not bad going that,’ observed Denny in an approving tone.

‘Is he then *un grec*?’ asked Mrs Hipgrave, who loves a scrap of French.

‘In both senses, I believe,’ answered Hamlyn viciously.

‘And what’s his name?’ said I.

‘Really I don’t recollect,’ said Hamlyn rather petulantly.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ observed Beatrice, attacking her oysters which had now made their appearance.

‘My dear Beatrice,’ I remonstrated, ‘you’re the most charming creature in the world, but not the only one. You mean that it doesn’t matter to you.’

‘Oh, don’t be tiresome. It doesn’t matter to you either, you know. Do go away and leave me to dine in peace.’

‘Half a minute!’ said Hamlyn. ‘I thought I’d got it just now, but it’s gone again. Look here, though, I believe it’s one of those long things that end in *poulos*.’

‘Oh, it ends in *poulos*, does it?’ said I in a meditative tone.

‘My dear Charley,’ said Beatrice, ‘I shall end in Bedlam if you’re so very tedious. What in the world I shall do when I’m married, I don’t know.’

‘My dearest!’ said Mrs Hipgrave, and a stage direction might add, *Business with brows as before*.

‘*Poulos*,’ I repeated thoughtfully.

‘Could it be Constantinopoulos?’ asked Hamlyn, with a nervous deference to my Hellenic learning.

‘It might conceivably,’ I hazarded, ‘be Constantine Stefanopoulos.’

‘Then,’ said Hamlyn, ‘I shouldn’t wonder if it was. Anyhow, the less you see of him, Wheatley, the better. Take my word for that.’

‘But,’ I objected – and I must admit that I have a habit of assuming that everybody follows my train of thought – ‘it’s such a small place, that, if he goes, I shall be almost bound to meet him.’

‘What’s such a small place?’ cried Beatrice with emphasised despair.

‘Why, Neopalia, of course,’ said I.

‘Why should anybody, except you, be so insane as to go there?’ she asked.

‘If he’s the man I think, he comes from there,’ I explained, as I rose for the last time; for I had been getting up to go and sitting down again several times.

‘Then he’ll think twice before he goes back,’ pronounced Beatrice decisively; she was irreconcilable about my poor island.

Denny and I walked off together; as we went he observed:

‘I suppose that chap’s got no end of money?’

‘Stefan – ?’ I began.

‘No, no. Hang it, you’re as bad as Miss Hipgrave says. I mean Bennett Hamlyn.’

‘Oh, yes, absolutely no end to it, I believe.’

Denny looked sagacious.

‘He’s very free with his dinners,’ he observed.

‘Don’t let’s worry about it,’ I suggested, taking his arm. I was not worried about it myself. Indeed for the moment my island monopolised my mind, and my attachment to Beatrice was not of such a romantic character as to make me ready to be jealous on slight grounds. Mrs Hipgrave said the engagement was based on ‘general suitability.’ Now it is difficult to be very passionate over that.

‘If you don’t mind, I don’t,’ said Denny reasonably.

‘That’s right. It’s only a little way Beatrice – ’ I stopped abruptly. We were now on the steps outside the restaurant, and I had just perceived a scrap of paper lying on the mosaic pavement. I stooped down and picked it up. It proved to be a fragment torn from the *menu* card. I turned it over.

‘Hullo, what’s this?’ said I, searching for my eye-glass, which was (as usual) somewhere in the small of my back.

Denny gave me the glass, and I read what was written on the back. It was in Greek, and it ran thus:

‘By way of Rhodes – small yacht there – arrive seventh.’

I turned the piece of paper over in my hand. I drew a conclusion or two; one was that my tall neighbour was named Stefanopoulos; another that he had made good use of his ears – better than I had made of mine; for a third, I guessed that he would go to Neopalía; for a fourth, I fancied that Neopalía was the place to which the lady had declared she would accompany him. Then I fell to wondering why all these things should be so, why he wished to remember the route of my journey, the date of my arrival, and the fact that I meant to hire a yacht. Finally, those two chance encounters, taken with the rest, assumed a more interesting complexion.

‘When you’ve done with that bit of paper,’ observed Denny, in a tone expressive of exaggerated patience, ‘we might as well go on, old fellow.’

‘All right. I’ve done with it – for the present,’ said I. But I took the liberty of slipping Mr Constantine Stefanopoulos’s memorandum into my pocket.

The general result of the evening was to increase most distinctly my interest in Neopalía. I went to bed still thinking of my purchase, and I recollect that the last thing which came into my head before I went to sleep was, ‘What did she mean by pointing to the ring?’

Well, I found an answer to that later on.

## CHAPTER II

### A CONSERVATIVE COUNTRY

**Until** the moment of our parting came, I had no idea that Beatrice Hipgrave felt my going at all. She was not in the habit of displaying emotion, and I was much surprised at the reluctance with which she bade me good-bye. So far, however, was she from reproaching me that she took all the blame on herself, saying that if she had been kinder and nicer to me I should never have thought about my island. In this she was quite wrong; but when I told her so, and assured her that I had no fault to find with her behaviour, I was met with an almost passionate assertion of her unworthiness and an entreaty that I should not spend on her a love that she did not deserve. Her abasement and penitence compelled me to show, and indeed to feel, a good deal of tenderness for her. She was pathetic and pretty in her unusual earnestness and unexplained distress. I went the length of offering to put off my expedition until after our wedding; and although she besought me to do nothing of the kind, I believe that we might in the end have arranged matters on this footing had we been left to ourselves. But Mrs Hipgrave saw fit to intrude on our interview at this point, and she at once pooh-poohed the notion, declaring that I should be better out of the way for a few months. Beatrice did not resist her mother's conclusion; but when we were alone again, she became very agitated, begging me always to think well of her, and asking if I were really attached to her. I did not understand this mood, which was very unlike her ordinary manner; but I responded with a hearty and warm avowal of confidence in her; and I met her questions as to my own feelings by pledging my word very solemnly that absence should, so far as I was concerned, make no difference, and that she might rely implicitly on my faithful affection. This assurance seemed to give her very little comfort, although I repeated it more than once; and when I left her, I was in a state of some perplexity, for I could not follow the bent of her thoughts nor appreciate the feelings that moved her. I was however considerably touched, and upbraided myself for not having hitherto done justice to the depth and sincerity of nature which underlay her external frivolity. I expressed this self-condemnation to Denny Swinton, but he met it very coldly, and would not be drawn into any discussion of the subject. Denny was not wont to conceal his opinions and had never pretended to be enthusiastic about my engagement. This attitude of his had not troubled me before, but I was annoyed at it now, and I retaliated by asseverating my affection for Beatrice in terms of even exaggerated emphasis, and hers for me with no less vehemence.

These troubles and perplexities vanished before the zest and interest which our preparations and start excited. Denny and I were like a pair of schoolboys off for a holiday, and spent hours in forecasting what we should do and how we should fare on the island. These speculations were extremely amusing, but in the long run they were proved to be, one and all, wide of the mark. Had I known Neopalía then as well as I came to know it afterwards, I should have recognised the futility of attempting to prophesy what would or would not happen there. As it was, we spun our cobwebs merrily all the way to Rhodes, where we arrived without event and without accident. Here we picked up Hogvardt and embarked on the smart little steam yacht which he had procured for me. A day or two was spent in arranging our stores and buying what more we wanted, for we could not expect to be able to purchase any luxuries in Neopalía. I was rather surprised to find no letter for me from the old lord, but I had no thought of waiting for a formal invitation, and pressed on the hour of departure as much as I could. Here, also, I saw the first of my new subjects, Hogvardt having engaged a couple of men who had come to him saying that they were from Neopalía and were anxious to work their passage back. I was delighted to have them, and fell at once to studying them with immense attention. They were fine, tall, capable-looking fellows, and the two, with ourselves, made a crew more than large enough for our little boat; for both Denny and I could make ourselves useful on board, and Hogvardt could do something of everything on land or water, while Watkins acted as cook

and steward. The Neopalian were, as they stated in answer to my questions, brothers; their names were Spiro and Demetri, and they informed us that their family had served the lords of Neopalia for many generations. Hearing this, I was less inclined to resent the undeniable reserve and even surliness with which they met my advances. I made allowance for their hereditary attachment to the outgoing family, and their natural want of cordiality towards the intruder did not prevent me from plying them with many questions concerning my predecessors on the throne of the island. My perseverance was ill-rewarded, but I succeeded in learning that the only member of the family on the island, besides the old lord was a girl whom they called 'the Lady Euphrosyne,' the daughter of the lord's brother who was dead. Next I asked after my friend of the Optimum Restaurant, Constantine. He was this lady's cousin once or twice removed – I did not make out the exact degree of kinship – but Demetri hastened to inform me that he came very seldom to the island, and had not been there for two years.

'And he is not expected there now?' I asked.

'He was not when we left, my lord,' answered Demetri, and it seemed to me that he threw an inquiring glance at his brother, who added hastily,

'But what should we poor men know of the Lord Constantine's doings?'

'Do you know where he is now?' I asked.

'No, my lord,' they answered together, and with great emphasis.

I cannot deny that something struck me as peculiar in their manner, but when I mentioned my impression to Denny he scoffed at me.

'You've been reading old Byron again,' he said scornfully. 'Do you think they're corsairs?'

Well, a man is not a fool simply because he reads Byron, and I maintained my opinion that the brothers were embarrassed at my questions. Moreover I caught Spiro, the more truculent-looking of the pair, scowling at me more than once when he did not know I had my eye on him.

These little mysteries, however, did nothing but add sauce to my delight as we sprang over the blue waters; and my joy was complete when, on the morning of the day I had appointed, the seventh of May, Denny cried 'Land!' and looking over the starboard bow I saw the cloud on the sea that was Neopalia. Day came bright and glorious, and as we drew nearer to our enchanted isle we distinguished its features and conformation. The coast was rocky save where a small harbour opened to the sea, and the rocks ran up from the coast, rising higher and higher till they culminated in a quite respectable peak in the centre. The telescope showed cultivated ground and vineyards, mingled with woods, on the slopes of the mountain; and about half-way up, sheltered on three sides, backed by thick woods, and commanding a splendid sea-view, stood an old grey battlemented house.

'There's my house,' I cried in natural exultation, pointing with my finger. It was a moment in my life, a moment to mark.

'Hurrah!' cried Denny, throwing up his hat in sympathy.

Demetri was standing near and met this ebullition with a grim smile.

'I hope my lord will find the house comfortable,' said he.

'We shall soon make it comfortable,' said Hogvardt; 'I daresay it's half a ruin now.'

'It's good enough now for a Stefanopoulos,' said the fellow with a surly frown. The inference we were meant to draw was plain even to the point of incivility.

At five o'clock in the evening we entered the harbour of Neopalia, and brought up alongside a rather crazy wooden jetty which ran some fifty feet out from the shore. Our arrival appeared to create great excitement. Men, women, and children came running down the narrow steep street which climbed up the hill from the harbour. We heard shrill cries, and a hundred fingers were pointed at us. We landed; nobody came forward to greet us. I looked round, but saw no one who could be the old lord; but I perceived a stout man who wore an air of importance, and walking up to him I asked him very politely if he would be so good as to direct me to the inn; for I had discovered from Demetri that there was a modest house where we could lodge that night; I was too much in love with my island to think of sleeping on board the yacht. The stout man looked at Denny and me; then he looked

at Demetri and Spiro, who stood near us, smiling their usual grim smiles. At last he answered my question by another, a rather abrupt one:

‘What do you want, sir?’ And he lifted his tasselled cap a few inches and replaced it on his head.

‘I want to know the way to the inn,’ I answered.

‘You have come to visit Neopalia?’ he asked.

A number of people had gathered round us now, and all fixed their eyes on my face.

‘Oh,’ said I carelessly, ‘I’m the purchaser of the island, you know. I have come to take possession.’

Nobody spoke. Perfect silence reigned for half a minute.

‘I hope we shall get on well together,’ I said, with my pleasantest smile.

Still no answer came. The people round still stared. But presently the stout man, altogether ignoring my friendly advances, said curtly,

‘I keep the inn. Come. I will take you to it.’

He turned and led the way up the street. We followed, the people making a lane for us and still regarding us with stony stares. Denny gave expression to my feelings as well as his own;

‘It can hardly be described as an ovation,’ he observed.

‘Surly brutes!’ muttered Hogvardt.

‘It is not the way to receive his lordship,’ agreed Watkins, more in sorrow than in anger. Watkins had very high ideas of the deference due to his lordship.

The fat innkeeper walked ahead; I quickened my pace and overtook him.

‘The people don’t seem very pleased to see me,’ I remarked.

He shook his head, but made no answer. Then he stopped before a substantial house. We followed him in, and he led us upstairs to a large room. It overlooked the street, but, somewhat to my surprise, the windows were heavily barred. The door also was massive and had large bolts inside and outside.

‘You take good care of your houses, my friend,’ said Denny with a laugh.

‘We like to keep what we have, in Neopalia,’ said he.

I asked him if he would provide us with a meal, and, assenting gruffly, he left us alone. The food was some time in coming, and we stood at the window, peering through our prison bars. Our high spirits were dashed by the unfriendly reception; my island should have been more gracious; it was so beautiful.

‘However it’s a better welcome than we should have got two hundred years ago,’ I said with a laugh, trying to make the best of the matter.

Dinner, which the landlord himself brought in, cheered us again, and we lingered over it till dusk began to fall, discussing whether I ought to visit the lord, or whether, seeing that he had not come to receive me, my dignity did not demand that I should await his visit; and it was on this latter course that we finally decided.

‘But he’ll hardly come to-night,’ said Denny, jumping up. ‘I wonder if there are any decent beds here!’

Hogvardt and Watkins had, by my directions, sat down with us; the former was now smoking his pipe at the window, while Watkins was busy overhauling our luggage. We had brought light bags, the rods, guns, and other smaller articles. The rest was in the yacht. Hearing beds mentioned, Watkins shook his head in dismal presage, saying,

‘We had better sleep on board, my lord.’

‘Not I! What, leave the island now we’ve got here? No, Watkins!’

‘Very good, my lord,’ said Watkins impassively.

A sudden call came from Hogvardt, and I joined him at the window.

The scene outside was indeed remarkable. In the narrow paved street, gloomy now in the failing light, there must have been fifty or sixty men standing in a circle, surrounded by an outer fringe of

women and children; and in the centre stood our landlord, his burly figure swaying to and fro as he poured out a low-voiced but vehement harangue. Sometimes he pointed towards us, oftener along the ascending road that led to the interior. I could not hear a word he said, but presently all his auditors raised their hands towards heaven. I saw that some of the hands held guns, some clubs, some knives; and all the men cried with furious energy, '*Nai, Nai*. Yes, yes!' Then the whole body – and the greater part of the grown men on the island must have been present – started off in compact array up the road, the innkeeper at their head. By his side walked another man whom I had not noticed before; he wore an ordinary suit of tweeds, but carried himself with an assumption of much dignity; his face I could not see.

'Well, what's the meaning of that?' I exclaimed, looking down on the street, empty again save for groups of white-clothed women, who talked eagerly to one another, gesticulating and pointing now towards our inn, now towards where the men had gone.

'Perhaps it's their Parliament,' suggested Denny; 'or perhaps they've repented of their rudeness and are going to erect a triumphal arch.'

These conjectures, being obviously ironical, did not assist the matter, although they amused their author.

'Anyhow,' said I, 'I should like to investigate the thing. Suppose we go for a stroll?'

The proposal was accepted at once. We put on our hats, took sticks, and prepared to go. Then I glanced at the luggage.

'Since I was so foolish as to waste my money on revolvers – ?' said I, with an inquiring glance at Hogvardt.

'The evening air will not hurt them,' said he; and we each stowed a revolver in our pockets. We felt, I think, rather ashamed of our timidity, but the Neopilians certainly looked rough customers. Leading the way to the door I turned the handle; the door did not open. I pulled hard at it. Then I looked at my companions.

'Queer,' said Denny, and he began to whistle.

Hogvardt got the little lantern, which he always had handy, and carefully inspected the door.

'Locked,' he announced, 'and bolted top and bottom. A solid door too!' and he struck it with his fist. Then he crossed to the window and looked at the bars; and finally he said to me, 'I don't think we can have our walk, my lord.'

Well, I burst out laughing. The thing was too absurd. Under cover of our animated talk the landlord must have bolted us in. The bars made the window no use. A skilled burglar might have beaten those bolts, and a battering ram would, no doubt, have smashed the door; we had neither burglar nor ram.

'We're caught, my boy,' said Denny, 'nicely caught! But what's the game?'

I had asked myself that question already, but had found no answer. To tell the truth, I was wondering whether Neopalina was going to turn out as conservative a country as the Turkish Ambassador had hinted. It was Watkins who suggested an answer.

'I imagine, my lord,' said he, 'that the natives' (Watkins always called the Neopilians 'natives') 'have gone to speak to the gentleman who sold the island to your lordship.'

'Gad,' said Denny, 'I hope it'll be a pleasant interview!'

Hogvardt's broad good-humoured face had assumed an anxious look. He knew something about the people of these islands; so did I.

'Trouble, is it?' I asked him.

'I'm afraid so,' he answered, and then we turned to the window again, except Denny, who wasted some energy and made a useless din by battering at the door till we beseeched him to let it alone.

There in the room we sat for nearly two hours. Darkness fell; the women had ceased their gossiping, but still stood about the street and in the doorways of their houses. It was nine o'clock before matters showed any progress. Then came shouts from the road above us, the flash of torches,

the tread of men's feet in a quick triumphant march. Next the stalwart figures of the picturesque fellows, with their white kilts gleaming through the darkness, came again into sight, seeming wilder and more imposing in the alternating glare and gloom of the torches and the deepening night. The man in tweeds was no longer visible. Our innkeeper was alone in front. And all, as they marched, sang loudly a rude barbarous sort of chant, repeating it again and again; while the women and children, crowding out to meet the men, caught up the refrain in shrill voices, till the whole air seemed full of it. So martial and inspiring was the rude tune that our feet began to beat in time with it, and I felt the blood quicken in my veins. I have tried to put the words of it into English, in a shape as rough, I fear, as the rough original. Here it is:

'Ours is the land!  
Death to the hand  
That filches the land!  
Dead is that hand,  
Ours is the land!

'Forever we hold it,  
Dead's he that sold it!  
Ours is the land,  
Dead is the hand!'

Again and again they hurled forth the defiant words, until at last they stopped opposite the inn with one final long-drawn shout of savage triumph.

'Well, this is a go,' said Denny, drawing a long breath. 'What are the beggars up to?'

'What have they been up to?' I asked; for I could not doubt that the song we had heard had been chanted over a dead Stefanopoulos two hundred years before. At this age of the world the idea seemed absurd, preposterous, horrible. But there was no law nearer than Rhodes, and there only Turk's law. The sole law here was the law of the Stefanopouloi, and if that law lost its force by the crime of the hand which should wield it, why, strange things might happen even to-day in Neopalía. And we were caught in the inn like rats in a trap.

'I don't see,' remarked old Hogvardt, laying a hand on my shoulder, 'any harm in loading our revolvers, my lord.'

I did not see any harm in it either, and we all followed Hogvardt's advice, and also filled our pockets with cartridges. I was determined – I think we were all determined – not to be bullied by these islanders and their skull-and-crossbones ditty.

A quarter of an hour passed; then there came a knock at the door, while the bolts shot back.

'I shall go out,' said I, springing to my feet.

The door opened, and the face of a lad appeared.

'Vlacho the innkeeper bids you descend,' said he; and then, catching sight perhaps of our revolvers, he turned and ran downstairs again at his best speed. Following him we came to the door of the inn. It was ringed round with men, and directly opposite to us stood Vlacho. When he saw me he commanded silence with a gesture of his hand, and addressed me in the following surprising style.

'The Lady Euphrosyne, of her grace, bids you depart in peace. Go, then, to your boat and depart, thanking God for His mercy.'

'Wait a bit, my man' said I; 'where is the lord of the island?'

'Did you not know that he died a week ago?' asked Vlacho, with apparent surprise.

'Died!' we exclaimed one and all.

'Yes, sir. The Lady Euphrosyne, Lady of Neopalía, bids you go.'

'What did he die of?'

‘Of a fever,’ said Vlacho gravely; and several of the men round him nodded their heads and murmured in no less grave assent, ‘Yes, of a fever.’

‘I am very sorry for it,’ said I. ‘But as he sold the island to me before he died, I don’t see what the lady, with all respect to her, has got to do with it. Nor do I know what this rabble is doing about the door. Bid them disperse.’

This attempt at *hauteur* was most decidedly thrown away. Vlacho seemed not to hear what I said. He pointed with his finger towards the harbour.

‘There lies your boat. Demetri and Spiro cannot go with you, but you will be able to manage her yourselves. Listen now! Till six in the morning you are free to go. If you are found in Neopalia one minute after, you will never go. Think and be wise.’ And he and all the rest, as though one spring moved the whole body, wheeled round and marched off up the hill again, breaking out into the old chant when they had gone about a hundred yards. We were left alone in the doorway of the inn, looking, I must admit, rather blank.

Upstairs again we went, and I sat down by the window and gazed out on the night. It was very dark, and seemed darker now that the gleaming torches were gone. Not a soul was to be seen. The islanders, having put matters on a satisfactory footing, were off to bed. I sat thinking. Presently Denny came to me, and put his hand on my shoulder.

‘Going to cave in, Charley?’ he asked.

‘My dear Denny,’ said I, ‘I wish you were at home with your mother.’

He smiled and repeated, ‘Going to cave in, old chap?’

‘No, by Jove, I’m not!’ cried I, leaping up. ‘They’ve had my money, and I’m going to have my island.’

‘Take the yacht, my lord,’ counselled Hogvardt, ‘and come back with enough force from Rhodes.’

Well, here was sense; my impulse was nonsense. We four could not conquer the island. I swallowed my pride.

‘So be it,’ said I. ‘But look here, it’s only just twelve. We might have a look round before we go. I want to see the place, you know.’ For I was very sorely vexed at being turned out of my island.

Hogvardt grumbled a little at my proposal, but here I overruled him. We took our revolvers again, left the inn, and struck straight up the road. We met nobody. For nearly a mile we mounted, the way becoming steeper with every step. Then there was a sharp turn off the main road.

‘That will lead to the house,’ said Hogvardt, who had studied the map of Neopalia very carefully.

‘Then we’ll have a look at the house. Show us a light, Hogvardt. It’s precious dark.’

Hogvardt opened his lantern and cast its light on the way. But suddenly he extinguished it again, and drew us close into the rocks that edged the road. We saw coming towards us, in the darkness, two figures. They rode small horses. Their faces could not be seen; but as they passed our silent motionless forms, one said in a clear, sweet, girlish voice:

‘Surely they will go?’

‘Ay, they’ll go or pay the penalty,’ said the other voice. At the sound of it I started. For it was the voice of my neighbour in the restaurant, Constantine Stefanopoulos.

‘I shall be near at hand, sleeping in the town,’ said the girl’s voice, ‘and the people will listen to me.’

‘The people will kill them if they don’t go,’ we heard Constantine answer, in tones that witnessed no great horror at the idea. Then the couple disappeared in the darkness.

‘On to the house!’ I cried in sudden excitement. For I was angry now, angry at the utter humbling scorn with which they treated me.

Another ten minutes’ groping brought us in front of the old grey house which we had seen from the sea. We walked boldly up to it. The door stood open. We went in and found ourselves in a large hall. The wooden floor was carpeted here and there with mats and skins. A long table ran down the



middle; the walls were decorated with mediæval armour and weapons. The windows were but narrow slits, the walls massive and deep. The door was a ponderous iron-bound affair; it shamed even the stout doors of our inn. I called loudly, 'Is anyone here?' Nobody answered. The servants must have been drawn off to the town by the excitement of the procession and the singing; or, perhaps, there were no servants. I could not tell. I sat down in a large armchair by the table. I enjoyed the sense of proprietorship; I was in my own house. Denny sat on the table by me, dangling his legs. For a long while none of us spoke. Then I exclaimed suddenly:

'By Heaven, why shouldn't we see it through?' I rose, put my hands against the massive door, and closed and bolted it, saying, 'Let them open that at six o'clock in the morning.'

'Hurrah!' cried Denny, leaping down from his table, on fire with excitement in a moment.

I faced Hogvardt. He shook his head, but he smiled. Watkins stood by with his usual imperturbability. He wanted to know what his lordship decided – that was all; and when I said nothing more, he asked,

'Then your lordship will sleep here to-night?'

'I'll stay here to-night, anyhow, Watkins,' said I. 'I'm not going to be driven out of my own island by anybody.'

As I spoke, I brought my fist down on the table with a crash. And then to our amazement we heard, from somewhere in the dark recesses of the hall where the faint light of Hogvardt's lantern did not reach, a low but distinct groan, as of someone in pain. Watkins shuddered, Hogvardt looked rather uncomfortable; Denny and I listened eagerly. Again the groan came. I seized the lantern from Hogvardt's hand, and rushed in the direction of the sound. There, in the corner of the hall, on a couch covered with a rug, lay an old man in an uneasy attitude, groaning now and then and turning restlessly. By his side sat an old serving-woman in weary heavy slumber. In a moment I guessed the truth – part of the truth.

'He's not dead of that fever yet,' said I.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FEVER OF NEOPALIA

**I looked** for a moment on the old man's pale, clean-cut, aristocratic face; then I shook his attendant by the arm vigorously. She awoke with a start.

'What does this mean?' I demanded. 'Who is he?'

'Heaven help us! Who are you?' she cried, leaping up in alarm. Indeed we four, with our eager fierce faces, must have looked disquieting enough.

'I am Lord Wheatley; these are my friends,' I answered in brisk sharp tones.

'What, it is you, then – ?' A wondering gaze ended her question.

'Yes, yes, it is I. I have bought the island. We came out for a walk and –'

'But he will kill you if he finds you here.'

'He? Who?'

'Ah, pardon, my lord! They will kill you, they – the people – the men of the island.'

I gazed at her sternly. She shrank back in confusion. And I spoke at a venture, yet in a well-grounded hazard:

'You mean that Constantine Stefanopoulos will kill me?'

'Ah, hush,' she cried. 'He may be here, he may be anywhere.'

'He may thank his stars he's not here,' said I grimly, for my blood was up. 'Attend, woman. Who is this?'

'It is the lord of the island, my lord,' she answered. 'Alas, he is wounded, I fear, to death. And yet I fell asleep. But I was so weary.'

'Wounded? By whom?'

Her face suddenly became vacant and expressionless.

'I do not know, my lord. It happened in the crowd. It was a mistake. My dear lord had yielded what they asked. Yet some one – no, by heaven, my lord, I do not know who – stabbed him. And he cannot live.'

'Tell me the whole thing,' I commanded.

'They came up here, my lord, all of them, Vlacho and all, and with them my Lord Constantine. The Lady Euphrosyne was away; she is often away, down on the rocks by the sea, watching the waves. They came and said that a man had landed who claimed our island as his – a man of your name, my lord. And when my dear lord said he had sold the island to save the honour of his house and race, they were furious; and Vlacho raised the death chant that One-eyed Alexander the Bard wrote on the death of Stefan Stefanopoulos long ago. Then they came near with knives, demanding that my dear lord should send away the stranger; for the men of Neopalía were not to be bought and sold like bullocks or like pigs. At first my lord would not yield, and they swore they would kill the stranger and my lord also. Then they pressed closer; Vlacho was hard on him with drawn knife, and the Lord Constantine stood by him, praying him to yield; and Constantine drew his own knife, saying to Vlacho that he must fight him also before he killed the old lord. But at that Vlacho smiled. And then – and then – ah, my dear lord!'

For a moment her voice broke, and sobs supplanted words. But she drew herself up, and after a glance at the old man whom her vehement speech had not availed to waken, she went on.

'And then those behind cried out that there was enough talk. Would he yield or would he die? And they rushed forward, pressing the nearest against him. And he, an old man, frail and feeble (yet once he was as brave a man as any), cried in his weak tones, "Enough, friends, I yield, I –" and they fell back. But my lord stood for an instant, then he set his hand to his side, and swayed and tottered and fell; the blood was running from his side. The Lord Constantine fell on his knees beside him,

crying, "Who stabbed him?" Vlacho smiled grimly, and the others looked at one another. But I, who had run out from the doorway whence I had seen it all, knelt by my lord and staunch the blood. Then Vlacho said, fixing his eyes straight and keen on the Lord Constantine, "It was not I, my lord." "Nor I by heaven," cried the Lord Constantine, and he rose to his feet, demanding, "Who struck the blow?" But none answered; and he went on, "Nay, if it were in error, if it were because he would not yield, speak. There shall be pardon." But Vlacho, hearing this, turned himself round and faced them all, saying, "Did he not sell us like oxen and like pigs?" and he broke into the death chant, and they all raised the chant, none caring any more who had struck the blow. And the Lord Constantine – 'The impetuous flow of the old woman's story was frozen to sudden silence.

'Well, and the Lord Constantine?' said I, in low stern tones that quivered with excitement; and I felt Denny's hand, which was on my arm, jump up and down. 'And Constantine, woman?'

'Nay, he did nothing,' said she. 'He talked with Vlacho awhile, and then they went away, and he bade me tend my lord, and went himself to seek the Lady Euphrosyne. Presently he came back with her; her eyes were red, and she wept afresh when she saw my poor lord; for she loved him. She sat by him till Constantine came and told her that you would not go, and that you and your friends would be killed if you did not go. Then, weeping to leave my lord, she went, praying heaven she might find him alive when she returned. "I must go," she said to me, "for though it is a shameful thing that the island should have been sold, yet these men must be persuaded to go away and not meet death. Kiss him for me if he awakes." Thus she went and left me with my lord, and I fear he will die.' She ended in a burst of sobbing.

For a moment there was silence. Then I said again:

'Who struck the blow, woman? Who struck the blow?'

She shrank from me as though I had struck her.

'I do not know; I do not know,' she moaned.

But the question she dared not answer was to find an answer.

The stricken man opened his eyes, his lips moved, and he groaned, 'Constantine! You, Constantine!' The old woman's eyes met mine for a moment and fell to the ground again.

'Why, why, Constantine?' moaned the wounded man. 'I had yielded, I had yielded, Constantine. I would have sent them –'

His words ceased, his eyes closed, his lips met again, but met only to part. A moment later his jaw dropped. The old lord of Neopalía was dead.

Then I, carried away by anger and by hatred of the man who, for a reason I did not yet understand, had struck so foul a blow against his kinsman and an old man, did a thing so rash that it seems to me now, when I consider it in the cold light of memory, a mad deed. Yet then I could do nothing else; and Denny's face, ay, and the eyes of the others too told me that they were with me.

'Compose this old man's body,' I said, 'and we will watch it. But do you go and tell this Constantine Stefanopoulos that I know his crime, that I know who struck that blow, that what I know all men shall know, and that I will not rest day or night until he has paid the penalty of this murder. Tell him I swore this on the honour of an English gentleman.'

'And say I swore it too!' cried Denny; and Hogvardt and Watkins, not making bold to speak, ranged up close to me; I knew that they also meant what I meant.

The old woman looked at me with searching eyes.

'You are a bold man, my lord,' said she.

'I see nothing to be afraid of up to now,' said I. 'Such courage as is needed to tell a scoundrel what I think of him I believe I can claim.'

'But he will never let you go now. You would go to Rhodes, and tell his – tell what you say of him.'

'Yes, and further than Rhodes, if need be. He shall die for it as sure as I live.'

A thousand men might have tried in vain to persuade me; the treachery of Constantine had fired my heart and driven out all opposing motives.

‘Do as I bid you,’ said I sternly, ‘and waste no time on it. We will watch here by the old man till you return.’

‘My lord,’ she replied, ‘you run on your own death. And you are young; and the youth by you is yet younger.’

‘We are not dead yet,’ said Denny; I had never seen him look as he did then; for the gaiety was out of his face, and his lips had grown set and hard.

She raised her hands towards heaven, whether in prayer or in lamentation I do not know. We turned away and left her to her sad work; going back to our places, we waited there till dawn began to break and from the narrow windows we saw the grey crests of the waves dancing and frolicking in the early dawn. As I watched them, the old woman was by my elbow.

‘It is done, my lord,’ said she. ‘Are you still of the same mind?’

‘Still of the same,’ said I.

‘It is death, death for you all,’ she said, and without more she went to the great door. Hogvardt opened it for her, and she walked away down the road, between the high rocks that bounded the path on either side. Then we went and carried the old man to a room that opened off the hall, and, returning, stood in the doorway, cooling our brows in the fresh early air. While we stood there, Hogvardt said suddenly,

‘It is five o’clock.’

‘Then we have only an hour to live,’ said I, smiling, ‘if we don’t make for the yacht.’

‘You’re not going back to the yacht, my lord?’

‘I’m puzzled,’ I admitted. ‘If we go this ruffian will escape. And if we don’t go –’

‘Why, we,’ Hogvardt ended for me, ‘may not escape.’

I saw that Hogvardt’s sense of responsibility was heavy; he always regarded himself as the shepherd, his employers as the sheep. I believe this attitude of his confirmed my obstinacy, for I said, without further hesitation:

‘Oh, we’ll chance that. When they know what a villain the fellow is, they’ll turn against him. Besides, we said we’d wait here.’

Denny seized on my last words with alacrity. When you are determined to do a rash thing, there is a great comfort in feeling that you are already committed to it by some previous act or promise.

‘So we did,’ he cried. ‘Then that settles it, Hogvardt’

‘His lordship certainly expressed that intention,’ observed Watkins, appearing at this moment with a big loaf of bread and a great pitcher of milk. I eyed these viands.

‘I bought the house and its contents,’ said I; ‘come along.’

Watkins’ further researches produced a large lump of native cheese; when he had set this down he remarked:

‘In a pen behind the house, close to the kitchen windows, there are two goats; and your lordship sees there, on the right of the front door, two cows tethered.’

I began to laugh, Watkins was so wise and solemn.

‘We can stand a siege, you mean?’ I asked. ‘Well, I hope it won’t come to that.’

Hogvardt rose and began to move round the hall, examining the weapons that decorated the walls. From time to time he grunted disapprovingly; the guns were useless, rusted, out of date; and there was no ammunition for them. But when he had almost completed his circuit, he gave an exclamation of satisfaction and came to me holding an excellent modern rifle and a large cartridge-case.

‘See!’ he grunted in huge delight. “‘C. S.” on the stock. I expect you can guess whose it is, my lord.’

‘This is very thoughtful of Constantine,’ observed Denny, who was employing himself in cutting imaginary lemons in two with a fine damascened scimitar that he had taken from the wall.

‘As for the cows,’ said I, ‘perhaps they will carry them off.’

‘I think not,’ said Hogvardt, taking an aim with the rifle through the window.

I looked at my watch. It was five minutes past six.

‘Well, we can’t go now,’ said I. ‘It’s settled. What a comfort!’ I wonder whether I had ever in my heart meant to go!

The next hour passed very quietly. We sat smoking pipes or cigars and talking in subdued tones. The recollection of the dead man in the adjoining room sobered the excitement to which our position might otherwise have given occasion. Indeed I suppose that I at least, who through my whim had led the rest into this quandary, should have been utterly overwhelmed by the burden on me. But I was not. Perhaps Hogvardt’s assumption of responsibility relieved me; perhaps I was too full of anger against Constantine to think of the risks we ourselves ran; and I was more than half-persuaded that the revelation of what he had done would rob him of his power to hurt us. Moreover, if I might judge from the words I heard on the road, we had on our side an ally of uncertain, but probably considerable, power in the sweet-voiced girl whom the old woman called the Lady Euphrosyne; she would not support her uncle’s murderer, even though he were her cousin.

Presently Watkins carried me off to view his pen of goats, and having passed through the lofty flagged kitchen, I found myself in a sort of compound formed by the rocks. The ground had been levelled for a few yards, and the rocks rose straight to the height of ten or twelve feet; from the top of this artificial bank they ran again in wooded slopes towards the peak of the mountain. I followed their course with my eye, and three hundred or more feet above us, just beneath the summit, I perceived a little wooden *châlet* or bungalow. Blue smoke issued from the chimneys; and, even while we looked, a figure came out of the door and stood still in front of it, apparently gazing down towards the house.

‘It’s a woman,’ I pronounced.

‘Yes, my lord. A peasant’s wife, I suppose.’

‘I daresay,’ said I. But I soon doubted Watkins’ opinion; in the first place, because the woman’s dress did not look like that of a peasant woman; and secondly, because she went into the house, appeared again, and levelled at us what was, if I mistook not, a large pair of binocular glasses. Now such things were not likely to be in the possession of the peasants of Neopalia. Then she suddenly retreated, and through the silence of those still slopes we heard the door of the cottage closed with violence.

‘She doesn’t seem to like the looks of us,’ said I.

‘Possibly,’ suggested Watkins with deference, ‘she did not expect to see your lordship here.’

‘I should think that’s very likely, Watkins,’ said I.

I was recalled from the survey of my new domains – my satisfaction in the thought that they were mine survived all the disturbing features of the situation – by a call from Denny. In response to it I hurried back to the hall and found him at the window, with Constantine’s rifle rested on the sill.

‘I could pick him off pat,’ said Denny laughingly, and he pointed to a figure which was approaching the house. It was a man riding a stout pony; when he came within about two hundred yards of the house, he stopped, took a leisurely look, and then waved a white handkerchief.

‘The laws of war must be observed,’ said I, smiling. ‘This is a flag of truce.’ I opened the door, stepped out, and waved my handkerchief in return. The man, reassured, began to mop his brow with the flag of truce, and put his pony to a trot. I now perceived him to be the innkeeper Vlacho, and a moment later he reined up beside me, giving an angry jerk at his pony’s bridle.

‘I have searched the island for you,’ he cried. ‘I am weary and hot! How came you here?’

I explained to him briefly how I had chanced to take possession of my house, and added significantly:

‘But has no message come to you from me?’

He smiled with equal meaning, as he answered:

‘No; an old woman came to speak to a gentleman who is in the village – ’

‘Yes, to Constantine Stefanopoulos,’ said I with a nod.

‘Well then, if you will, to the Lord Constantine,’ he admitted with a careless shrug, ‘but her message was for his ear only; he took her aside and they talked alone.’

‘You know what she said, though?’

‘That is between my Lord Constantine and me.’

‘And the young lady knows it, I hope – the Lady Euphrosyne?’

Vlacho smiled broadly.

‘We could not distress her with such a silly tale,’ he answered; and he leant down towards me. ‘Nobody has heard the message but the Lord Constantine and one man he told it to. And nobody will. If that old woman spoke, she – well, she knows and will not speak.’

‘And you back up this murderer?’ I cried.

‘Murderer?’ he repeated questioningly. ‘Indeed, sir, it was an accident done in hot blood. It was the old man’s fault, because he tried to sell the island.’

‘He did sell the island,’ I corrected; ‘and a good many other people will hear of what happened to him.’

He looked at me again, smiling.

‘If you shouted it in the hearing of every man in Neopalía, what would they do?’ he asked scornfully.

‘Well, I should hope,’ I returned, ‘that they’d hang Constantine to the tallest tree you’ve got here.’

‘They would do this,’ he said with a nod; and he began to sing softly the chant I had heard the night before.

I was disgusted at his savagery, but I said coolly:

‘And the Lady?’

‘The Lady believes what she is told, and will do as her cousin bids her. Is she not his affianced wife?’

‘The deuce she is!’ I cried in amazement, fixing a keen scrutiny on Vlacho’s face. The face told me nothing.

‘Certainly,’ he said gently. ‘And they will rule the island together.’

‘Will they, though?’ said I. I was becoming rather annoyed. ‘There are one or two obstacles in the way of that. First, it’s my island.’

He shrugged his shoulders again. ‘That,’ he seemed to say, ‘is not worth answering.’ But I had a second shot in the locker for him, and I let him have it for what it was worth. I knew it might be worth nothing, but I tried it.

‘And secondly,’ I went on, ‘how many wives does Constantine propose to have?’

A hit! A hit! A palpable hit! I could have sung in glee. The fellow was dumbfounded. He turned red, bit his lip, scowled fiercely.

‘What do you mean?’ he blurted out, with an attempt at blustering defiance.

‘Never mind what I mean. Something, perhaps, that the Lady Euphrosyne might care to know. And now, my man, what do you want of me?’

He recovered his composure, and stated his errand with his old cool assurance; but the cloud of vexation still hung heavy on his brow.

‘On behalf of the Lady of the island – ’ he began.

‘Or shall we say her cousin?’ I interrupted.

‘Which you will,’ he answered, as though it were not worth while to wear the mask any longer. ‘On behalf, then, of my Lord Constantine, I am to offer you safe passage to your boat, and a return of the money you have paid – ’

‘How’s he going to pay that?’

‘He will pay it in a year, and give you security meanwhile.’

‘And the condition is that I give up the island?’ I asked; I began to think that perhaps I owed it to my companions to acquiesce in this proposal however distasteful it might be to me.

‘Yes,’ said Vlacho, ‘and there is one other small condition, which will not trouble you.’

‘What’s that? You’re rich in conditions.’

‘You’re lucky to be offered any. It is that you mind your own business.’

‘I came here for the purpose,’ I observed.

‘And that you undertake, for yourself and your companions, on your word of honour, to speak to nobody of what has passed on the island or of the affairs of the Lord Constantine.’

‘And if I won’t give this promise?’

‘The yacht is in our hands; Demetri and Spiro are our men; there will be no ship here for two months.’ The fellow paused, smiling at me. I took the liberty of ending his period for him.

‘And there is,’ I said, returning his smile, ‘as we know by now, a particularly sudden and fatal form of fever in the island.’

‘Certainly you may chance to find that out,’ said he.

‘But is there no antidote?’ I asked, and I showed him the butt of my revolver in the pocket of my coat.

‘It may keep it off for a day or two – not longer. You have the bottle there, but most of the drug is with your luggage at the inn.’

His parable was true enough; we had only two or three dozen cartridges apiece.

‘But there’s plenty of food for Constantine’s rifle,’ said I, pointing to the muzzle of it, which protruded from the window.

He suddenly became impatient.

‘Your answer, sir?’ he demanded peremptorily.

‘Here it is,’ said I. ‘I’ll keep the island and I’ll see Constantine hanged.’

‘So be it, so be it,’ he cried. ‘You are warned; so be it!’ Without another word he turned his pony and trotted rapidly off down the road. And I went back to the house feeling, I must confess, not in the best of spirits. But when my friends heard all that had passed, they applauded me, and we made up our minds to ‘see it through,’ as Denny said.

The day passed quietly. At noon we carried the old lord out of his house, having wrapped him in a sheet; we dug for him as good a grave as we could in a little patch of ground that lay outside the windows of his own chapel, a small erection at the west end of the house. There he must lie for the present. This sad work done, we came back and – so swift are life’s changes – killed a goat for dinner, and watched Watkins dress it. Thus the afternoon wore away, and when evening came we ate our goat-flesh and Hogvardt milked our cows; then we sat down to consider the position of the garrison.

But the evening was hot and we adjourned out of doors, grouping ourselves on the broad marble pavement in front of the door. Hogvardt had just begun to expound a very elaborate scheme of escape, depending, so far as I could make out, on our reaching the other side of the island and finding there a boat which we had no reason to suppose would be there, when Denny raised his hand, saying ‘Hark!’

From the direction of the village and the harbour came the sound of a horn, blowing long and shrill and echoed back in strange protracted shrieks and groans from the hillside behind us. And following on the blast we heard, low in the distance and indistinct, yet rising and falling and rising again in savage defiance and exultation, the death-chant that One-Eyed Alexander the Bard had made on the death of Stefan Stefanopoulos two hundred years ago. For a few minutes we sat listening; I do not think that any of us felt very comfortable. Then I rose to my feet, saying:

‘Hogvardt, old fellow, I fancy that scheme of yours must wait a little. Unless I’m very much mistaken, we’re going to have a lively evening.’

Well, then we shook hands all round, and went in and bolted the door, and sat down to wait. We heard the death-chant through the walls now; it was coming nearer.

## CHAPTER IV

### A RAID AND A RAIDER

It was between eight and nine o'clock when the first of the enemy appeared on the road in the persons of two smart fellows in gleaming kilts and braided jackets. It was no more than just dusk, and I saw that they were strangers to me. One was tall and broad, the other shorter and of very slight build. They came on towards us confidently enough. I was looking over Denny's shoulder; he held Constantine's rifle, and I knew that he was impatient to try it. But, inasmuch as might was certainly not on our side, I was determined that right should abide with us, and was resolute not to begin hostilities. Constantine had at least one powerful motive for desiring our destruction; I would not furnish him with any plausible excuse for indulging his wish: so we stood, Denny and I at one window, Hogvardt and Watkins at the other, and quietly watched the approaching figures. No more appeared; the main body did not show itself, and the sound of the fierce chant had suddenly died away. But the next moment a third man came in sight, running rapidly after the first two. He caught the shorter by the arm, and seemed to argue or expostulate with him. For a while the three stood thus talking; then I saw the last comer make a gesture of protest as though he yielded his point unwillingly, and they all came on together.

'Push the barrel of that rifle a little farther out,' said I to Denny. 'It may be useful to them to know it's there.'

Denny obeyed; the result was a sudden pause in our friends' advance; but they were near enough now for me to distinguish the last comer, and I discerned in him, although he had discarded his tweed suit and adopted the national dress, Constantine Stefanopoulos himself.

'Here's an exercise of self-control!' I groaned, laying a detaining hand on Denny's shoulder.

As I spoke, Constantine put a whistle to his lips and blew loudly. The blast was followed by the appearance of five more fellows; in three of them I recognised old acquaintances – Vlacho, Demetri and Spiro. These three all carried guns. The whole eight came forward again, till they were within a hundred yards of us. There they halted, and, with a sudden swift movement, three barrels were levelled straight at the window where Denny and I were stationed. Well, we ducked; there is no use in denying it; for we thought that the bombardment had really begun. Yet no shot followed, and after an instant, holding Denny down, I peered out cautiously myself. The three stood motionless, their aim full on us. The other five were advancing warily, well under the shelter of the rock, two on the left side of the road and three on the right. The slim boyish fellow was with Constantine on the left; a moment later the other three dashed across the road and joined them. In a moment what military men call 'the objective,' the aim of these manoeuvres, flashed across me. It was simple almost to ludicrousness; yet it was very serious, for it showed a reasoned plan of campaign with which we were very ill-prepared to cope. While the three held us in check, the five were going to carry off our cows. Without our cows we should soon be hard put to it for food. For the cows had formed in our plans a most important *pièce de résistance*.

'This won't do,' said I. 'They're after the cows.' I took the rifle from Denny's hand, cautioning him not to show his face at the window. Then I stood in the shelter of the wall, so that I could not be hit by the three, and levelled the rifle, not at my human enemies, but at the unoffending cows.

'A dead cow,' I remarked, 'is a great deal harder to move than a live one.'

The five had now come quite near the pen of rude hurdles in which the cows were. As I spoke, Constantine appeared to give some order; and while he and the boy stood looking on, Constantine leaning on his gun, the boy's hand resting with jaunty elegance on the handle of the knife in his girdle, the others leapt over the hurdles. Crack! went the rifle, and a cow fell. I reloaded hastily. Crack! and



the second cow fell. It was very fair shooting in such a bad light, for I hit both mortally; my skill was rewarded by a shout of anger from the robbers. (For robbers they were; I had bought the live stock.)

‘Carry them off now!’ I cried, carelessly showing myself at the window. But I did not stay there long, for three shots rang out, and the bullets pattered on the masonry above me. Luckily the covering party had aimed a trifle too high.

‘No more milk, my lord,’ observed Watkins in a regretful tone. He had seen the catastrophe from the other window.

The besiegers were checked. They leapt out of the pen with alacrity. I suppose they realised that they were exposed to my fire while at that particular angle I was protected from the attack of their friends. They withdrew to the middle of the road, selecting a spot at which I could not take aim without showing myself at the window. I dared not look out to see what they were doing. But presently Hogvardt risked a glance, and called out that they were in retreat and had rejoined the three, and that the whole body stood together in consultation and were no longer covering my window. So I looked out, and saw the boy standing in an easy graceful attitude, while Constantine and Vlacho talked a little way apart. It was growing considerably darker now, and the figures became dim and indistinct.

‘I think the fun’s over for to-night,’ said I, glad to have it over so cheaply.

Indeed what I said seemed to be true, for the next moment the group turned and began to retreat along the road, moving briskly out of our sight. We were left in the thick gloom of a moonless evening and the peaceful silence of still air.

‘They’ll come back and fetch the cows,’ said Hogvardt. ‘Couldn’t we drag one in, my lord, and put it where the goat is, behind the house?’

I approved of this suggestion; Watkins having found a rope, I armed Denny with the rifle took from the wall a large keen hunting-knife, opened the door and stole out, accompanied by Hogvardt and Watkins, who carried their revolvers. We reached the pen without interruption, tied our rope firmly round the horns of one of the dead beasts and set to work to drag it along. It was no child’s play, and our progress was very slow, but the carcass moved, and I gave a shout of encouragement as we got it down on to the smoother ground of the road and hauled it along with a will. Alas, that shout was a great indiscretion! I had been too hasty in assuming that our enemy was quite gone. We heard suddenly the rush of feet; shots whistled over our heads. We had but just time to drop the rope and turn round, when Denny’s rifle rang out, and then – somebody was at us! I really do not know exactly how many there were. I had two at me, but by great good luck I drove my big knife into one fellow’s arm at the first hazard, and I think that was enough for him. In my other assailant I recognised Vlacho. The fat innkeeper had got rid of his gun and had a knife much like the one I carried myself. I knew him more by his voice as he cried fiercely, ‘Come on!’ than by his appearance, for the darkness was thick now. Parrying his fierce thrust – he was very active for so stout a man – I called out to our people to fall back as quickly as they could, for I was afraid that we might be taken in the rear also.

But discipline is hard to maintain in such a force as mine.

‘Bosh!’ cried Denny’s voice.

‘*Mein Gott*, no!’ exclaimed Hogvardt. Watkins said nothing, but for once in his life he also disobeyed me.

Well, if they would not do as I said I must do as they did. The line advanced – the whole line, as at Waterloo. We pressed them hard. I heard a revolver fired, and a cry follow. Fat Vlacho slackened in his attack, wavered, halted, turned, and ran. A shout of triumph from Denny told me that the battle was going well there. Fired with victory, I set myself for a chase. But, alas, my pride was checked. Before I had gone two yards, I fell headlong over the body for which we had been fighting (as Greeks and Trojans fought for the body of Hector), and came to an abrupt stop, sprawling most ignominiously over the cow’s broad back.

‘Stop! Stop!’ I cried. ‘Wait a bit, Denny! I’m down over this infernal cow.’ It was an inglorious ending to the exploits of the evening.

Prudence or my cry stopped them. The enemy was in full retreat; their steps pattered quick along the rocky road; and Denny observed in a tone of immense satisfaction:

‘I think that’s our trick, Charley.’

‘Anybody hurt?’ I asked, scrambling to my feet.

Watkins owned to a crack from the stock of a gun on his right shoulder, Hogvardt to a graze of a knife on the left arm. Denny was unhurt. We had reason to suppose that we had left our mark on at least two of the enemy. For so great a victory it was cheaply bought.

‘We’ll just drag in the cow,’ said I – I like to stick to my point – ‘and then we might see if there’s anything in the cellar.’

We did drag in the cow; we dragged it through the house, and finally bestowed it in the compound behind. Hogvardt suggested that we should fetch the other also, but I had no mind for another surprise, which might not end so happily, and I decided to run the risk of leaving the second animal till the morning. So Watkins ran off to seek for some wine, for which we all felt very ready, and I went to the door with the intention of securing it. But before I shut it, I stood for a moment on the step, looking out on the night and sniffing the sweet, clear, pure air. It was in quiet moments like these, not in such a tumult as had just passed, that I had pictured my beautiful island; and the love of it came on me now and made me swear that these fellows and their arch-ruffian Constantine should not drive me out of it without some more, and more serious, blows than had been struck that night. If I could get away safely and return with enough force to keep them quiet, I would pursue that course. If not – well, I believe I had very bloodthirsty thoughts in my mind, as even the most peaceable man may, when he has been served as I had and his friends roughly handled on his account.

Having registered these determinations, I was about to proceed with my task of securing the door, when I heard a sound that startled me. There was nothing hostile or alarming about it; rather it was pathetic and appealing, and, in spite of my previous fierceness of mood, it caused me to exclaim, ‘Hullo, is that one of those poor beggars we mauled?’ For the sound was a faint distressed sigh, as of somebody in suffering; it seemed to come from out of the darkness about a dozen yards ahead of me. My first impulse was to go straight to the spot, but I had begun by now to doubt whether the Neopilians were not unsophisticated in quite as peculiar a sense as that in which they were good-hearted, and I called to Denny and Hogvardt, bidding the latter to bring his lantern with him. Thus protected, I stepped out of the door in the direction from which the sigh had come. Apparently we were to crown our victory by the capture of a wounded enemy.

An exclamation from Hogvardt told me that he, aided by the lantern, had come on the quarry; but Hogvardt spoke in disgust rather than triumph.

‘Oh, it’s only the little one!’ said he. ‘What’s wrong with him, I wonder.’ He stooped down and examined the prostrate form. ‘By heaven, I believe he’s not touched – yes, there’s a bump on his forehead, but not big enough for any of us to have given it.’

By this time Denny and I were with him, and we looked down on the boy’s pale face, which seemed almost deathlike in the glare of the lantern. The bump was not such a very small one, but it could hardly have been made by any of our weapons, for the flesh was not cut. A moment’s further inspection showed that it must be the result of a fall on the hard rocky road.

‘Perhaps he tripped on the cord, as you did on the cow,’ suggested Denny with a grin.

It seemed likely enough, but I gave very little thought to the question, for I was busy studying the boy’s face.

‘No doubt,’ said Hogvardt, ‘he fell in running away and was stunned; and they didn’t notice it in the dark, or were afraid to stop. But they’ll be back, my lord, and soon.’

‘Carry him inside,’ said I. ‘It won’t hurt us to have a hostage.’

Denny lifted the lad in his long arms – Denny was a tall powerful fellow – and strode off with him. I followed, wondering who it was that we had got hold of: for the boy was strikingly handsome. I was last in and barred the door. Denny had set our prisoner down in an armchair, where he sat now,

conscious again, but still with a dazed look in his large dark eyes as he glanced from me to the rest and back again to me, finally fixing a long gaze on my face.

‘Well, young man,’ said I, ‘you’ve begun this sort of thing early. Lifting cattle and taking murder in the day’s work is pretty good for a youngster like you. Who are you?’

‘Where am I?’ he cried, in that blurred indistinct kind of voice that comes with mental bewilderment.

‘You’re in my house,’ said I, ‘and the rest of your infernal gang’s outside and going to stay there. So you must make the best of it.’

The boy turned his head away and closed his eyes. Suddenly I snatched the lantern from Hogvardt. But I paused before I brought it close to the boy’s face, as I had meant to do, and I said:

‘You fellows go and get something to eat, and a snooze if you like. I’ll look after this youngster. I’ll call you if anything happens outside.’

After a few unselfish protests they did as I bade them. I was left alone in the hall with the prisoner; soon merry voices from the kitchen told me that the battle was being fought again over the wine. I set the lantern close to the boy’s face.

‘H’m,’ said I, after a prolonged scrutiny. Then I sat down on the table and began to hum softly that wretched chant of One-Eyed Alexander’s, which had a terrible trick of sticking in a man’s head.

For a few minutes I hummed. The lad shivered, stirred uneasily, and opened his eyes. I had never seen such eyes; I could not conscientiously except even Beatrice Hipgrave’s, which were in their way quite fine. I hummed away; and the boy said, still in a dreamy voice, but with an imploring gesture of his hand:

‘Ah, no, not that! Not that, Constantine!’

‘He’s a tender-hearted youth,’ said I, and I was smiling now. The whole episode was singularly unusual and interesting.

The boy’s eyes were on mine again; I met his glance full and square. Then I poured out some water and gave it to him. He took it with a trembling hand – the hand did not escape my notice – and drank it eagerly, setting the glass down with a sigh.

‘I am Lord Wheatley,’ said I, nodding to him. ‘You came to steal my cattle, and murder me, if it happened to be convenient, you know.’

The boy flashed out at me in a minute.

‘I didn’t. I thought you’d surrender if we got the cattle away.’

‘You thought!’ said I scornfully. ‘I suppose you did as you were bid.’

‘No; I told Constantine that they weren’t to – ’ The boy stopped short, looked round him, and said in a surprised voice, ‘Where are all the rest of my people?’

‘The rest of your people,’ said I, ‘have run away, and you are in my hands. And I can do just as I please with you.’

His lips set in an obstinate curve, but he made no answer. I went on as sternly as I could.

‘And when I think of what I saw here yesterday, of that poor old man stabbed by your bloodthirsty crew – ’

‘It was an accident,’ he cried sharply; the voice had lost its dreaminess and sounded clear now.

‘We’ll see about that when we get Constantine and Vlacho before a judge,’ I retorted grimly. ‘Anyhow, he was foully stabbed in his own house for doing what he had a perfect right to do.’

‘He had no right to sell the island,’ cried the boy, and he rose for a moment to his feet with a proud air, only to sink back into the chair again and stretch out his hand for water.

Now at this moment Denny, refreshed by meat and drink and in the highest of spirits, bounded into the hall.

‘How’s the prisoner?’ he cried.

‘Oh, he’s all right. There’s nothing the matter with him,’ I said, and as I spoke I moved the lantern, so that the boy’s face and figure were again in shadow.

‘That’s all right,’ observed Denny cheerfully. ‘Because I thought, Charley, we might get a little information out of him.’

‘Perhaps he won’t speak,’ I suggested, casting a glance at the captive who sat now motionless in the chair.

‘Oh, I think he will,’ said Denny confidently: and I observed for the first time that he held a very substantial-looking whip in his hand; he must have found it in the kitchen. ‘We’ll give the young ruffian a taste of this, if he’s obstinate,’ said Denny, and I cannot say that his tone witnessed any great desire that the boy should prove at once compliant.

I shifted my lantern so that I could see the proud young face, while Denny could not. The boy’s eyes met mine defiantly.

‘Do you see that whip?’ I asked. ‘Will you tell us all we want to know?’

The boy made no answer, but I saw trouble in his face, and his eyes did not meet mine so boldly now.

‘We’ll soon find a tongue for him,’ said Denny, in cheerful barbarity; ‘upon my word, he richly deserves a thrashing. Say the word, Charley!’

‘We haven’t asked him anything yet,’ said I.

‘Oh, I’ll ask him something. Look here, who was the fellow with you and Vlacho?’

Denny spoke in English; I turned his question into Greek. But the prisoner’s eyes told me that he had understood before I spoke. I smiled again.

The boy was silent; defiance and fear struggled in the dark eyes.

‘You see he’s an obstinate beggar,’ said Denny, as though he had observed all necessary forms and could now get to business; and he drew the lash of the whip through his fingers. I am afraid Denny was rather looking forward to executing justice with his own hands.

The boy rose again and stood facing that heartless young ruffian Denny – it was thus that I thought of Denny at the moment; then once again he sank back into his chair and covered his face with his hands.

‘Well, I wouldn’t go out killing if I hadn’t more pluck than that,’ said Denny scornfully. ‘You’re not fit for the trade, my lad.’

I did not interpret this time; there was no need; the boy certainly understood. But he had no retort. His face was buried in those slim hands of his. For a moment he was quite still: then he moved a little; it was a movement that spoke of helpless pain, and I heard something very like a stifled sob.

‘Just leave us alone a little, Denny,’ said I. ‘He may tell me what he won’t tell you.’

‘Are you going to let him off?’ demanded Denny, suspiciously. ‘You never can be stiff in the back, Charley.’

‘I must see if he won’t speak to me first,’ I pleaded, meekly.

‘But if he won’t?’ insisted Denny.

‘If he won’t,’ said I, ‘and you still wish it, you may do what you like.’

Denny sheered off to the kitchen, with an air that did not seek to conceal his opinion of my foolish tender-heartedness. Again I was alone with the boy.

‘My friend is right,’ said I gravely. ‘You’re not fit for the trade. How came you to be in it?’

My question brought a new look, as the boy’s hands dropped from his face.

‘How came you,’ said I, ‘who ought to restrain these rascals, to be at their head? How came you, who ought to shun the society of men like Constantine Stefanopoulos and his tool Vlacho, to be working with them?’

I got no answer; only a frightened look appealed to me in the white glare of Hogvardt’s lantern. I came a step nearer and leant forward to ask my next question.

‘Who are you? What’s your name?’

‘My name – my name?’ stammered the prisoner. ‘I won’t tell my name.’

‘You’ll tell me nothing? You heard what I promised my friend?’

‘Yes, I heard,’ said the lad, with a face utterly pale, but with eyes that were again set in fierce determination.

I laughed a low laugh.

‘I believe you are fit for the trade after all,’ said I, and I looked at him with mingled distaste and admiration. But I had my last weapon still, my last question. I turned the lantern full on his face, I leant forward again, and I said in distinct slow tones – and the question sounded an absurd one to be spoken in such an impressive way:

‘Do you generally wear – clothes like that?’

I had got home with that question. The pallor vanished, the haughty eyes sank. I saw long drooping lashes and a burning flush, and the boy’s face once again sought his hands.

At that moment I heard chairs pushed back in the kitchen. In came Hogvardt with an amused smile on his broad face; in came Watkins with his impassive acquiescence in anything that his lordship might order; in came Master Denny brandishing his whip in jovial relentlessness.

‘Well, has he told you anything?’ cried Denny. It was plain that he hoped for the answer ‘No.’

‘I have asked him half-a-dozen questions,’ said I, ‘and he has not answered one.’

‘All right,’ said Denny, with wonderful emphasis.

Had I been wrong to extort this much punishment for my most inhospitable reception? Sometimes now I think that I was cruel. In that night much had occurred to breed viciousness in a man of the most equable temper. But the thing had now gone to the extreme limit to which it could go, and I said to Denny:

‘It’s a gross case of obstinacy, of course, Denny, but I don’t see very well how we can horsewhip the lady.’

A sudden astounded cry, ‘The lady!’ rang from three pairs of lips, while the lady herself dropped her head on the table and fenced her face round about with her protecting arms.

‘You see,’ said I, ‘this lady is the Lady Euphrosyne.’

For who else could it be that would give orders to Constantine Stefanopoulos, and ask where ‘my people’ were? Who else, I also asked myself, save the daughter of the noble house, would boast the air, the hands, the face, that graced our young prisoner? And who else would understand English? In all certainty here was the Lady Euphrosyne.

## CHAPTER V

### THE COTTAGE ON THE HILL

**The** effect of my remark was curious. Denny flushed scarlet and flung his whip down on the table; the others stood for a moment motionless, then turned tail and slunk back to the kitchen. Euphrosyne's face remained invisible. On the other hand, I felt quite at my ease. I had a triumphant conviction of the importance of my capture, and a determination that no misplaced chivalry should rob me of it. Politeness is, no doubt, a duty, but only a relative duty; and, in plain English, men's lives were at stake here. Therefore I did not make my best bow, fling open the door, and tell the lady that she was free to go whither she would, but I said to her in a dry severe voice:

'You had better go, madam, to the room you usually occupy here, while we consider what to do with you. You know where the room is; I don't.'

She raised her head, and said in tones that sounded almost eager:

'My own room? May I go there?'

'Certainly,' said I. 'I shall accompany you as far as the door; and when you've gone in, I shall lock the door.'

This programme was duly carried out, Euphrosyne not favouring me with a word during its progress. Then I returned to the hall, and said to Denny:

'Rather a trump card, isn't she?'

'Yes, but they'll be back pretty soon to look for her, I expect.'

Denny accompanied this remark with such a yawn that I suggested he should go to bed.

'Aren't you going to bed?' he asked.

'I'll take first watch,' said I. 'It's nearly twelve now. I'll wake you at two, and you can wake Hogvardt at five; then Watkins will be fit and fresh at breakfast-time, and can give us roast cow.'

Thus I was again left alone; and I sat reviewing the position. Would the islanders fight for their lady? Or would they let us go? They would let us go, I felt sure, only if Constantine were out-voted, for he could not afford to see me leave Neopalia with a head on my shoulders and a tongue in my mouth. Then probably they would fight. Well, I calculated that so long as our provisions held out, we could not be stormed; our stone fortress was too strong. But we could be blockaded and starved out, and should be very soon unless the lady's influence could help us. I had just arrived at the conclusion that I would talk to her very seriously in the morning when I heard a remarkable sound.

'There never was such a place for queer noises,' said I, pricking up my ears.

This noise seemed to come directly from above my head; it sounded as though a light stealthy tread were passing over the roof of the hall in which I sat. The only person in the house besides ourselves was the prisoner: she had been securely locked in her room; how then could she be on the top of the hall? For her room was in the turret above the doorway. Yet the steps crept over my head, going towards the kitchen. I snatched up my revolver and trod, with a stealth equal to the stealth of the steps overhead, across the hall and into the kitchen beyond. My three companions slept the sleep of tired men, but I roused Denny ruthlessly.

'Go on guard in the hall,' said I. 'I want to have a look round.'

Denny was sleepy but obedient. I saw him start for the hall, and went on till I reached the compound behind the house.

Here I stood deep in the shadow of the wall; the steps were now over my head again. I glanced up cautiously, and above me, on the roof, three yards to the left, I saw the flutter of a white kilt.

'There are more ways out of this house than I know,' I thought to myself.

I heard next a noise as though of something being pushed cautiously along the flat roof. Then there protruded from between two of the battlements the end of a ladder. I crouched closer under the

wall. The light flight of steps was let down; it reached the ground, the kilted figure stepped on it and began to descend. Here was the Lady Euphrosyne again. Her eagerness to go to her own room was fully explained: there was a way from it across the house and out on to the roof of the kitchen; the ladder shewed that the way was kept in use. I stood still. She reached the ground, and, as she touched it, she gave the softest possible little laugh of gleeful triumph; a pretty little laugh it was. Then she walked briskly across the compound, till she reached the rocks on the other side. I crept forward after her, for I was afraid of losing sight of her in the darkness, and yet did not desire to arrest her progress till I saw where she was going. On she went, skirting the perpendicular drop of rock. I was behind her now. At last she came to the angle formed by the rock running north and that which, turning to the east, enclosed the compound.

‘How’s she going to get up?’ I asked myself.

But up she began to go, her right foot on the north rock, her left on the east. She ascended with such confidence that it was evident that steps were ready for her feet. She gained the top; I began to mount in the same fashion, finding the steps cut in the face of the cliff. I reached the top and saw her standing still, ten yards ahead of me. She went on; I followed; she stopped, looked, saw me, screamed. I rushed on her. Her arm dealt a blow at me; I caught her hand, and in her hand there was a little dagger. Seizing her other hand, I held her fast.

‘Where are you going to?’ I asked in a matter-of-fact tone, taking no notice of her hasty resort to the dagger. No doubt that was merely a national trait.

Seeing that she was caught, she made no attempt to struggle.

‘I was trying to escape,’ she said. ‘Did you hear me?’

‘Yes, I heard you. Where were you going to?’

‘Why should I tell you? Shall you threaten me with the whip again?’

I loosed her hands. She gave a sudden glance up the hill. She seemed to measure the distance.

‘Why do you want to go to the top of the hill?’ I asked. ‘Have you friends there?’

She denied the suggestion, as I thought she would.

‘No, I have not. But anywhere is better than with you.’

‘Yet there’s some one in the cottage up there,’ I observed. ‘It belongs to Constantine, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, it does,’ she answered defiantly. ‘Dare you go and seek him there? Or dare you only skulk behind the walls of the house?’

‘As long as we are four against a hundred I dare only skulk,’ I answered. She did not annoy me at all by her taunts. ‘But do you think he’s there?’

‘There! No; he’s in the town; and he’ll come from the town to kill you to-morrow.’

‘Then is nobody there?’ I pursued.

‘Nobody,’ she answered.

‘You’re wrong,’ said I. ‘I saw somebody there to-day.’

‘Oh, a peasant perhaps.’

‘Well, the dress didn’t look like it. Do you really want to go there now?’

‘Haven’t you mocked me enough?’ she burst out. ‘Take me back to my prison.’

Her tragedy-air was quite delightful. But I had been leading her up to something which I thought she ought to know.

‘There’s a woman in that cottage,’ said I. ‘Not a peasant; a woman in some dark-coloured dress, who uses opera-glasses.’

I saw her draw back with a start of surprise.

‘It’s false,’ she cried. ‘There’s no one there. Constantine told me no one went there except Vlacho and sometimes Demetri.’

‘Do you believe all Constantine tells you?’ I asked.

‘Why shouldn’t I? He’s my cousin, and – ’

‘And your suitor?’

She flung her head back proudly.

'I have no shame in that,' she answered.

'You would accept his offer?'

'Since you ask, I will answer. Yes. I had promised my uncle that I would.'

'Good God!' said I, for I was very sorry for her.

The emphasis of my exclamation seemed to startle her afresh. I felt her glance rest on me in puzzled questioning.

'Did Constantine let you see the old woman whom I sent to him?' I demanded.

'No,' she murmured. 'He told me what she said.'

'That I told him he was his uncle's murderer?'

'Did you tell her to say that?' she asked, with a sudden inclination of her body towards me.

'I did. Did he give you the message?'

She made no answer. I pressed my advantage.

'On my honour, I saw what I have told you at the cottage,' I said. 'I know what it means no more than you do. But before I came here I saw Constantine in London. And there I heard a lady say she would come with him. Did any lady come with him?'

'Are you mad?' she asked; but I could hear her breathing quickly, and I knew that her scorn was assumed. I drew suddenly away from her, and put my hands behind my back.

'Go to the cottage if you like,' said I. 'But I won't answer for what you'll find there.'

'You set me free?' she cried with eagerness.

'Free to go to the cottage; you must promise to come back. Or I'll go to the cottage, if you'll promise to go back to your room and wait till I return.'

She hesitated, looking towards where the cottage was; but I had stirred suspicion and disquietude in her. She dared not face what she might find in the cottage.

'I'll go back and wait for you,' she said. 'If I went to the cottage and – and all was well, I'm afraid I shouldn't come back.'

The tone sounded softer. I would have sworn that a smile or a half-smile accompanied the words, but it was too dark to be sure, and when I leant forward to look, Euphrosyne drew back.

'Then you mustn't go,' said I decisively; 'I can't afford to lose you.'

'But if you let me go I could let you go,' she cried.

'Could you? Without asking Constantine? Besides, it's my island you see.'

'It's not,' she cried, with a stamp of her foot. And without more she walked straight by me and disappeared over the ledge of rock. Two minutes later I saw her figure defined against the sky, a black shadow on a deep grey ground; then she disappeared. I set my face straight for the cottage under the summit of the hill. I knew that I had only to go straight and I must come to the little plateau scooped out of the hillside, on which the cottage stood. I found, not a path, but a sort of rough track that led in the desired direction, and along this I made my way very cautiously. At one point it was joined at right angles by another track, from the side of the hill where the main road across the island lay. This, of course, afforded an approach to the cottage without passing by my house. In twenty minutes the cottage loomed, a blurred mass, before me. I fell on my knees and peered at it.

There was a light in one of the windows. I crawled nearer. Now I was on the plateau, a moment later I was under the wooden verandah and beneath the window where the light glowed. My hand was on my revolver; if Constantine or Vlacho caught me here, neither side would be able to stand on trifles; even my desire for legality would fail under the strain. But for the minute everything was quiet, and I began to fear that I should have to return empty-handed; for it would be growing light in another hour or so, and I must be gone before the day began to appear. Ah, there was a sound, a sound that appealed to me after my climb, the sound of wine poured into a glass; then came a voice I knew.

'Probably they have caught her,' said Vlacho the innkeeper. 'What of that? They will not hurt her, and she'll be kept safe.'



‘You mean she can’t come spying about here?’

‘Exactly. And that, my lord, is an advantage. If she came here – ’

‘Oh, the deuce!’ laughed Constantine. ‘But won’t the men want me to free her by letting that infernal crew go?’

‘Not if they think Wheatley will go to Rhodes and get soldiers and return. They love the island more than her. It will all go well, my lord. And this other here?’

I strained my ears to listen. No answer came, yet Vlacho went on as though he had received an answer.

‘These cursed fellows make that difficult too,’ he said. ‘It would be an epidemic.’ He laughed, seeming to see wit in his own remark.

‘Curse them, yes. We must move cautiously,’ said Constantine. ‘What a nuisance women are, Vlacho.’

‘Ay, too many of them,’ laughed Vlacho.

‘I had to swear my life out that no one was here, and then, “If no one’s there, why mayn’t I come?” You know the sort of thing.’

‘Indeed, no, my lord. You wrong me,’ protested Vlacho humorously, and Constantine joined in his laugh.

‘You’ve made up your mind which, I gather?’ asked Vlacho.

‘Oh, this one, beyond doubt,’ answered his master.

Now I thought that I understood most of this conversation, and I was very sorry that Euphrosyne was not by my side to listen to it. But I had heard about enough for my purposes, and I had turned to crawl away stealthily – it is not well to try fortune too far – when I heard the sound of a door opening in the house. Constantine’s voice followed directly on the sound.

‘Ah, my darling, my sweet wife,’ he cried, ‘not sleeping yet? Where will your beauty be? Vlacho and I must work and plan for your sake, but you need not spoil your eyes with sleeplessness.’

Constantine did it uncommonly well. His manner was a pattern for husbands. I was guilty of a quiet laugh all to myself in the verandah.

‘For me? You’re sure it’s for me?’ came in that Greek with a strange accent, which had first fallen on my ears in the Optimum Restaurant.

‘She’s jealous, she’s most charmingly jealous!’ cried Constantine in playful rapture. ‘Does your wife pay you such compliments, Vlacho?’

‘She has no cause, my lord. But my lady Francesca thinks she has cause to be jealous of the Lady Euphrosyne.’

Constantine laughed scornfully at the suggestion.

‘Where is she now?’ came swift and sharp from the woman. ‘Where is Euphrosyne?’

‘Why, she’s a prisoner to that Englishman,’ answered Constantine.

I suppose explanations passed at this point, for the voices fell to a lower level, as is apt to happen in the telling of a long story, and I could not catch what was said till Constantine’s tones rose again as he remarked:

‘Oh, yes; we must have a try at getting her out, just to satisfy the people. For me, she might stay there as long as she likes, for I care for her just as little as, between ourselves, I believe she cares for me.’

Really this fellow was a very tidy villain; as a pair, Vlacho and he would be hard to beat – in England, at all events. About Neopalia I had learned to reserve my opinion. Such were my reflections as I turned to resume my interrupted crawl to safety. But in an instant I was still again – still, and crouching close under the wall, motionless as an insect that feigns death, holding my breath, my hand on the trigger. For the door of the cottage was flung open, and Constantine and Vlacho appeared on the threshold.

‘Ah,’ said Vlacho, ‘dawn is near. See, it grows lighter on the horizon.’

A more serious matter was that, owing to the open door and the lamp inside, it had grown lighter on the verandah, so light that I saw the three figures – for the woman had come also – in the doorway, so light that my huddled shape would be seen if any of the three turned an eye towards it. I could have picked off both men before they could move; but a civilised education has drawbacks; it makes a man scrupulous; I did not fire. I lay still, hoping that I should not be noticed. And I should not have been noticed but for one thing. Acting up to his part in the ghastly farce which these two ruffians were playing with the wife of one of them, Constantine turned to bestow kisses on the woman before he parted from her. Vlacho, in a mockery that was horrible to me who knew his heart, must needs be facetious. With a laugh he drew back; he drew back farther still; he was but a couple of feet from the wall of the house; and that couple of feet I filled. In a moment, with one step backwards, he would be upon me. Perhaps he would not have made that step; perhaps I should have gone, by grace of that narrow interval, undetected. But the temptation was too strong for me. The thought of the thing threatened to make me laugh. I had a pen-knife in my pocket. I opened it, and dug it hard into that portion of Vlacho's frame which came most conveniently and prominently to my hand. Then, leaving the pen-knife where it was, I leapt up, gave the howling ruffian a mighty shove, and with a loud laugh of triumph bolted for my life down the hill. But when I had gone twenty yards I dropped on my knees, for bullet after bullet whistled over my head. Constantine, the outraged Vlacho too, perhaps, carried a revolver! Their barrels were being emptied after me. I rose and turned one hasty glance behind me. Yes, I saw their dim shapes like moving trees. I fired once, twice, thrice, in my turn, and then went crashing and rushing down the path that I had ascended so cautiously. I cannoned against the tree trunks; I tripped over trailing branches; I stumbled over stones. Once I paused and fired the rest of my barrels. A yell told me I had hit – but Vlacho, alas, not Constantine; I knew the voice. At the same instant my fire was returned, and a bullet went through my hat. I was defenceless now, save for my heels, and to them I took again with all speed. But as I crashed along, one at least of them came crashing after me. Yes, it was only one! I had checked Vlacho's career. It was Constantine alone. I suppose one of your heroes of romance would have stopped and faced him, for with them it is not etiquette to run away from one man. Ah, well, I ran away. For all I knew, Constantine might still have a shot in the locker; I had none. And if Constantine killed me, he would kill the only man who knew all his secrets. So I ran. And just as I got within ten yards of the drop into my own territory, I heard a wild cry, 'Charley! Charley! Where the devil are you, Charley?'

'Why, here, of course,' said I, coming to the top of the bank and dropping over.

I have no doubt that it was the cry uttered by Denny which gave pause to Constantine's pursuit. He would not desire to face all four of us. At any rate the sound of his pursuing feet died away and ceased. I suppose he went back to look after Vlacho, and show himself safe and sound to that most unhappy woman, his wife. As for me, when I found myself safe and sound in the compound, I said, 'Thank God!' And I meant it too. Then I looked round. Certainly the sight that met my eyes had a touch of comedy in it.

Denny, Hogvardt and Watkins stood in the compound. Their backs were towards me, and they were all staring up at the roof of the kitchen, with expressions which the cold light of morning revealed in all their puzzled foolishness. And on the top of the roof, unassailable and out of reach – for no ladder ran from roof to ground now – stood Euphrosyne, in her usual attitude of easy grace. Euphrosyne was not taking the smallest notice of the helpless three below, but stood quite still with unmoved face, gazing up towards the cottage. The whole thing reminded me of nothing so much as of a pretty composed cat in a tree, with three infuriated helpless terriers barking round the trunk. I began to laugh.

'What's all the shindy?' called out Denny. 'Who's doing revolver-practice in the wood? And how the dickens did she get there, Charley?'

But when the still figure on the roof saw me, the impassivity of it vanished. Euphrosyne leant forward, clasping her hands, and said to me:

‘Have you killed him?’

The question vexed me. It would have been civil to accompany it, at all events, with an inquiry as to my own health.

‘Killed him?’ I answered gruffly. ‘No, he’s sound enough.’

‘And –’ she began; but now she glanced, seemingly for the first time, at my friends below. ‘You must come and tell me,’ she said, and with that she turned and disappeared from our gaze behind the battlements. I listened intently. No sound came from the wood that rose grey in the new light behind us.

‘What have you been doing?’ demanded Denny surlily; he had not enjoyed Euphrosyne’s scornful attitude.

‘I have been running for my life,’ said I, ‘from the biggest scoundrels unhanged. Denny, make a guess who lives in that cottage.’

‘Constantine?’

‘I don’t mean him.’

‘Not Vlacho – he’s at the inn.’

‘No, I don’t mean Vlacho.’

‘Who then, man?’

‘Someone you’ve seen.’

‘Oh, I give it up. It’s not the time of day for riddles.’

‘The lady who dined at the next table to ours at the Optimum,’ said I.

Denny jumped back in amazement, with a long low whistle.

‘What, the one who was with Constantine?’ he cried.

‘Yes,’ said I, ‘the one who was with Constantine.’

They were all three round me now; and thinking that it would be better that they should know what I knew, and four lives instead of one stand between a ruffian and the impunity he hoped for, I raised my voice and went on in an emphatic tone,

‘Yes. She’s there, and she’s his wife.’

A moment’s astonished silence greeted my announcement. It was broken by none of our party. But there came from the battlemented roof above us a low, long, mournful moan that made its way straight to the heart, armed with its dart of outraged pride and trust betrayed. It was not thus, boldly and abruptly, that I should have told my news. But I did not know that Euphrosyne was still above us, hidden by the battlements. We all looked up. The moan was not repeated. Presently we heard slow steps retreating, with a faltering tread, across the roof; and we also went into the house in silence and sorrow. For a thing like that gets hold of a man; and when he has heard it, it is hard for him to sit down and be merry, until the fellow that caused it has paid his reckoning. I swore then and there that Constantine Stefanopoulos should pay his.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE POEM OF ONE-EYED ALEXANDER

**There** is a matter on my conscience which I cannot excuse but may as well confess. To deceive a maiden is a very sore thing, so sore that it had made us all hot against Constantine; but it may be doubted by a cool mind whether it is worse, nay, whether it is not more venial than to contrive the murder of a lawful wife. Poets have paid more attention to the first offence – maybe they know more about it – the law finds greater employment, on the whole, in respect to the second. For me, I admit that it was not till I found myself stretched on a mattress in the kitchen, with the idea of getting a few hours' sleep, that it struck me that Constantine's wife deserved a share of my concern and care. Her grievance against him was at least as great as Euphrosyne's; her peril was far greater. For Euphrosyne was his object; Francesca (for that appeared from Vlacho's mode of address to be her name) was an obstacle which prevented him attaining that object. For myself I should have welcomed a cut throat if it came as an alternative to Constantine's society; but probably his wife would not agree with me, and the conversation I had heard left me in little doubt that her life was not safe. They could not have an epidemic, Vlacho had prudently reminded his master; the island fever could not kill Constantine's wife and our party all in a day or two. Men suspect such an obliging malady, and the old lord had died of it, pat to the happy moment, already. But if the thing could be done, if it could be so managed that London, Paris, and the Riviera would find nothing strange in the disappearance of one Madame Stefanopoulos and the appearance of another, why, to a certainty, done the thing would be, unless I could warn or save the woman in the cottage. But I did not see how to do either. So (as I set out to confess) I dropped the subject. And when I went to sleep I was thinking not how to save Francesca, but how to console Euphrosyne, a matter really of less urgency, as I should have seen had not the echo of that sad little cry still filled my ears.

The news which Hogvardt brought me when I rose in the morning, and was enjoying a slice of cow-steak, by no means cleared my way. An actual attack did not seem imminent – I fancy these fierce islanders were not too fond of our revolvers – but the house was, if I may use the term, carefully picketed, and that both before and behind. Along the road which approached it in front there stood sentries at intervals. They were stationed just out of range of our only effective long-distance weapon, but it was evident that egress on that side was barred. And the same was the case on the other; Hogvardt had seen men moving in the wood, and had heard their challenges to one another repeated at regular intervals. We were shut off from the sea; we were shut off from the cottage. A blockade would reduce us as surely as an attack. I had nothing to offer except the release of Euphrosyne. And to release Euphrosyne would, in all likelihood, not save us, while it would leave Constantine free to play out his relentless game to its appointed end.

I finished my breakfast in some perplexity of spirit. Then I went and sat in the hall, expecting that Euphrosyne would appear from her room before long. I was alone, for the rest were engaged in various occupations, Hogvardt being particularly busy over a large handful of hunting knives which he had gleaned from the walls; I did not understand what he wanted with them, unless he meant to arm himself in porcupine fashion.

Presently Euphrosyne came, but it was a transformed Euphrosyne. The kilt, knee-breeches, and gaiters were gone; in their place was the white linen garment with flowing sleeves and the loose jacket over it, the national dress of the Greek woman; but Euphrosyne's was ornamented with a rare profusion of delicate embroidery, and of so fine a texture that it seemed rather some delicate, soft, yielding silk. The change of attire seemed reflected in her altered manner. Defiance was gone, and appeal glistened from her eyes as she stood before me. I sprang up, but she would not sit. She stood there, and, raising her glance to my face, asked simply:

‘Is it true?’

In a business-like way I told her the whole story, starting from the every-day scene at home in the restaurant, ending with the villainous conversation and the wild chase of the night before. When I related how Constantine had called Francesca his wife, Euphrosyne started. While I sketched lightly my encounter with him and Vlacho, she eyed me with a sort of grave curiosity; and at the end she said:

‘I’m glad you weren’t killed.’

It was not an emotional speech, nor delivered with any *empressement*, but I took it for thanks and made the best of it. Then at last she sat down and rested her head on her hand; her absent reverie allowed me to study her closely, and I was struck by a new beauty which the fantastic boy’s disguise had concealed. Moreover, with the doffing of that, she seemed to have put off her extreme hostility; but perhaps the revelation I had made to her, which showed her the victim of an unscrupulous schemer, had more to do with her softened air. Yet she had borne the story firmly, and a quivering lip was her extreme sign of grief or anger. And her first question was not of herself.

‘Do you mean that they will kill this woman?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid it’s not unlikely that something will happen to her, unless, of course – ’ I paused, but her quick wit supplied the omission.

‘Unless,’ she said, ‘he lets her live now, because I am out of his hands?’

‘Will you stay out of his hands?’ I asked. ‘I mean, as long as I can keep you out of them.’

She looked round with a troubled expression.

‘How can I stay here?’ she said in a low tone.

‘You will be as safe here now as you were in your uncle’s care,’ I answered.

She acknowledged my promise with a movement of her head; but a moment later she cried:

‘But I am not with you – I am with the people! The island is theirs and mine. It’s not yours. I’ll have no part in giving it to you.’

‘I wasn’t proposing to take pay for my hospitality,’ said I. ‘It’ll be hardly handsome enough for that, I’m afraid. But mightn’t we leave the question for the moment?’ And I described briefly to her our present position.

‘So that,’ I concluded, ‘while I maintain my claim to the island, I am at present more interested in keeping a whole skin on myself and my friends.’

‘If you will not give it up, I can do nothing,’ said she. ‘Though they knew Constantine to be all you say, yet they would follow him and not me if I yielded the island. Indeed they would most likely follow him in any case. For the Neopaliens like a man to follow, and they like that man to be a Stefanopoulos; so they would shut their eyes to much, in order that Constantine might marry me and become lord.’

She stated all this in a matter-of-fact way, disclosing no great horror of her countrymen’s moral standard. The straightforward barbarousness of it perhaps appealed to her a little; she loathed the man who would rule on those terms, but had some toleration for the people who set the true dynasty above all else. And she spoke of her proposed marriage as though it were a natural arrangement.

‘I shall have to marry him, I expect, in spite of everything,’ she said.

I pushed my chair back violently. My English respectability was appalled.

‘Marry him?’ I cried. ‘Why, he murdered the old lord!’

‘That has happened before among the Stefanopouloi,’ said Euphrosyne, with a calmness dangerously near to pride.

‘And he proposes to murder his wife,’ I added.

‘Perhaps he will get rid of her without that.’ She paused; then came the anger I had looked for before. ‘Ah, but how dared he swear that he had thought of none but me, and loved me passionately? He shall pay for that!’ Again it was injured pride which rang in her voice, as in her first cry. It did not sound like love; and for that I was glad. The courtship probably had been an affair of state rather than of affection. I did not ask how Constantine was to be made to pay, whether before or after marriage.

I was struggling between horror and amusement at my guest's point of view. But I take leave to have a will of my own, even sometimes in matters which are not exactly my concern; and I said now, with a composure that rivalled Euphrosyne's:

'It's out of the question that you should marry him. I'm going to get him hanged; and, anyhow, it would be atrocious.'

She smiled at that; but then she leant forward and asked:

'How long have you provisions for?'

'That's a good retort,' I admitted. 'A few days, that's all. And we can't get out to procure any more; and we can't go shooting, because the wood's infested with these ruff – I beg pardon – with your countrymen.'

'Then it seems to me,' said Euphrosyne, 'that you and your friends are more likely to be hanged.'

Well, on a dispassionate consideration, it did seem more likely; but she need not have said so. She went on with an equally discouraging good sense:

'There will be a boat from Rhodes in about a month or six weeks. The officer will come then to take the tribute; perhaps the Governor will come. But till then nobody will visit the island, unless it be a few fishermen from Cyprus.'

'Fishermen? Where do they land? At the harbour?'

'No; my people do not like them; but the Governor threatens to send troops if we do not let them land. So they come to a little creek at the opposite end of the island, on the other side of the mountain. Ah, what are you thinking of?'

As Euphrosyne perceived, her words had put a new idea in my mind. If I could reach that creek and find the fishermen and persuade them to help me or to carry my party off, that hanging might happen to the right man after all.

'You're thinking you can reach them?' she cried.

'You don't seem sure that you want me to,' I observed.

'Oh, how can I tell what I want? If I help you I am betraying the island. If I do not –'

'You'll have a death or two at your door, and you'll marry the biggest scoundrel in Europe,' said I.

She hung her head and plucked fretfully at the embroidery on the front of her gown.

'But anyhow you couldn't reach them,' she said. 'You are close prisoners here.'

That, again, seemed true, so that it put me in a very bad temper. Therefore I rose and, leaving her without much ceremony, strolled into the kitchen. Here I found Watkins dressing the cow's head, Hogvardt surrounded by knives, and Denny lying on a rug on the floor with a small book which he seemed to be reading. He looked up with a smile that he considered knowing.

'Well, what does the Captive Queen say?' he asked with levity.

'She proposes to marry Constantine,' I answered, and added quickly to Hogvardt:

'What's the game with those knives, Hog?'

'Well, my lord,' said Hogvardt, surveying his dozen murderous instruments, 'I thought there was no harm in putting an edge on them, in case we should find a use for them,' and he fell to grinding one with great energy.

'I say, Charley, I wonder what this yarn's about. I can't construe half of it. It's in Greek, and it's something about Neopalia; and there's a lot about a Stefanopoulos.'

'Is there? Let's see,' and, taking the book, I sat down to look at it. It was a slim old book, bound in calf-skin. The Greek was written in an old-fashioned style; it was verse. I turned to the title page. 'Hullo, this is rather interesting,' I exclaimed. 'It's about the death of old Stefanopoulos – the thing they sing that song about, you know.'

In fact I had got hold of the poem which One-Eyed Alexander composed. Its length was about three hundred lines, exclusive of the refrain which the islanders had chanted, and which was inserted six times, occurring at the end of each fifty lines. The rest was written in rather barbarous iambs; and the sentiments were quite as barbarous as the verse. It told the whole story, and I ran rapidly over

it, translating here and there for the benefit of my companions. The arrival of the Baron d'Ezonville recalled our own with curious exactness, except that he came with one servant only. He had been taken to the inn as I had, but he had never escaped from there, and had been turned adrift the morning after his arrival. I took more interest in Stefan, and followed eagerly the story of how the islanders had come to his house and demanded that he should revoke the sale. Stefan, however, was obstinate; it cost the lives of four of his assailants before his door was forced. Thus far I read, and expected to find next an account of a *mêlée* in the hall. But here the story took a turn unexpected by me, one that might make the reading of the old poem more than a mere pastime.

'But when they had broken in,' sang One-Eyed Alexander, 'behold the hall was empty, and the house empty! And they stood amazed. But the two cousins of the Lord, who had been the hottest in seeking his death, put all the rest to the door, and were themselves alone in the house; for the secret was known to them who were of the blood of the Stefanopouloi. Unto me, the Bard, it is not known. Yet men say they went beneath the earth, and there in the earth found the lord. And certain it is they slew him, for in a space they came forth to the door, bearing his head; this they showed to the people, who answered with a great shout. But the cousins went back, barring the door again; and again, when but a few minutes had passed, they came forth, opening the door, and the elder of them, being now by the traitor's death become lord, bade the people in, and made a great feast for them. But the head of Stefan none saw again, nor did any see his body; but body and head were gone whither none know, saving the noble blood of the Stefanopouloi; for utterly they disappeared, and the secret was securely kept.'

I read this passage aloud, translating as I went. At the end Denny drew a breath.

'Well, if there aren't ghosts in this house there ought to be,' he remarked. 'What the deuce did those rascals do with the old gentleman, Charley?'

'It says they went beneath the earth.'

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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