

Lynde Francis

Pirates' Hope



Francis Lynde

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I

INTRODUCING MR. MACHIAVELLI VAN DYCK

To those who knew him best and had known him longest, Bonteck Van Dyck, sometime captain of his university eleven, a ball player with the highest batting average on the university nine, a large-lettered star in everything pertaining to athletic accomplishments, and above and beyond this the fortunate – or unfortunate, as one chooses to view it – inheritor of the obese Van Dyck fortune, figured, like the dead kitten discovered on the ash heap by the investigative infant, as "a perfectly good cat, spoiled."

As was most natural, the spoiling was usually charged in a lump sum to the exaggerated fortune. In the university Van Dyck was a breezy, whole-souled, large-hearted man's man, the idol of his set and fraternity and a pathetically easy mark for the college borrower. Past the college period, however, there came rumors of a radical change; sharp-edged hints that the easy mark was becoming an increasingly hard mark; vague intimations that this prince of good fellows of an earlier day was attaining a certain stony indifference to suffering on the part of those who sought to relieve him of some portion of the money burden. Nay, more; it was whispered that he was not above using the bloated bank account as a club wherewith to dash out the brains of his opponents, not only in the market-place, but at the social fireside, where, as a handsome young Croesus, owning a goodly handful of Manhattan frontages, sailing his own yacht, and traveling in his own private car, he was the legitimate quarry of the match-making mothers – or fathers.

Though we had been reasonably close friends in the university days, it so chanced that I had seen next to nothing of Van Dyck during the three years immediately following the doling out of the coveted sheepskins in Commencement Week; and the echoes of these derogatory stories – echoes were all that had drifted out to me in the foreign field to which, as a constructing engineer, I had gone soon after my graduation – were somehow vastly unconvincing. But on a certain memorable autumn evening in a New Orleans hotel, when I found myself sitting across a table for two as Van Dyck's guest, listening while he explained, or tried to explain, why he had cabled me from Havana to meet him at this particular time and place, it was disconcertingly evident that the golden youth of the old university days had really developed into something different – different, and just a shade puzzling.

"You see, Preble, you are the one man I was most anxious to find," he was saying, for the third time since the half-shell oysters had been served. "By the sheerest good luck I happened to run across Bertie Witherspoon in Havana, and he told me that you were, or had been, running the blockade, or something of that sort, down on the Venezuela coast, and that a wire to the Barcado Brothers' New Orleans headquarters would probably reach you."

"Running the blockade!" I broke in derisively. "That is about as near as a New York provincial like Bertie Witherspoon could come to any fact outside of his native Borough of Manhattan! There is no blockade on the Venezuelan coast; and I've been building a railroad from Trujillo up into the Sierra Nevada de Merida. Does this trifling difference make me any less the man you were anxious to find?"

"Not in the least," he returned, with the old-time, boyish smile wrinkling at the corners of his fine eyes. "But I do hope you've got your railroad built and are footloose and free to take another commission."

"No," I said; "the railroad isn't finished. But as it probably never will be, under the present Venezuelan administration, we can leave it out of the question."

"Then you could take a month or so off, if you should feel like it?"

"I could, yes; if the hotel bills wouldn't prove to be too high."

Again the good-natured smile identified the Teck Van Dyck of other days for me.

"There won't be any hotel bills," he said gently. "You are to be my guest on the *Andromeda* for a little cruise."

"On the *Andromeda*?" I exclaimed. "You don't mean to say you've got that baby Cunarder with you down here in these waters?"

"Yea, verily, and for a fact," was the smiling reply. "I came up the big river in her this afternoon. Been knocking about a bit among the islands to dodge the country-house invitations up home."

"Out of tune with the little social gods and goddesses?" I ventured.

"Out of tune with a good many things, Dick. This is a sorry old world, and the people in it are sorrier – most of 'em. Everything's a bore."

I laughed.

"Since when have you been soaking Diogenes and the later Cynics?"

"Chortle if you want to," he returned. "Old Man Socrates had it about right when he said that virtue is knowledge, and Antisthenes went him one better when he said, 'Let men gain wisdom – or buy a rope.' Another time he says, 'A horse I can see, but horsehood I can not see.' That applies to humanity, as well."

"Meaning that things – and people – are not always what they seem?"

"Meaning that people are so seldom what they seem that you can ignore the exceptions. Somebody has said that there are two distinct entities in the ego; the man as he sees himself, and the man as God sees him. That is only a fraction of a great truth. There are as many entities as the man has human contacts; he is not precisely the same man to any two of his acquaintances, and he is a hypocrite with most."

"Bosh!" said I, thinking I had the key to all this hard-bitted, and lately acquired, philosophy. "You have too much money, Bonteck; that is all that is the matter with you."

He put down his oyster fork and looked me squarely in the eye. He was the same handsome, upstanding young Hercules that he had always been, but there was something new and more or less provocative in the contemptuous set of the mouth and the half belligerent emphasis of the well-defined jaw.

"You've said it, Dick; I have too much money, and other people haven't enough," was his rather enigmatical retort. Then: "You may call it madman raving if you like, but I've lost my sense of perspective; I can't tell an honest man – or woman – when I see one."

"All of which leads up to? –"

"To the thing which has brought me to New Orleans, and to my reason for wiring you from Havana. My philosophy has led me to the jumping-off place, Dick. Before I am two months older I am going to know at least one small bunch of people for what they really are under their skins. And you are going to help me to acquire this invaluable information. How does that proposal strike you?"

"It strikes me a trifle remindfully, if you insist on knowing," I said. "I haven't been altogether out of touch with the home people, and quite a few of them have had something to say about this loss of perspective that you've just confessed to. I've been writing most of the gossip off to profit and loss, but –"

"You needn't," was his brusque interruption. "As I've said, this is a pretty rotten world, if anybody should ask."

"Is it, indeed? How many millions does it take to give a man that point of view?"

"That is the devil of it," he said, with a touch of bitterness. "Will you believe me when I say that, apart from yourself and two or three other honest money-despisers like you, I don't really know, as man to man, or man to woman, half a dozen people on the face of the planet?"

"I'll believe that you think so. Still, that is all piffle, as you very well know. So far as the women are concerned, it merely means that you haven't met the one and only."

Van Dyck was silent while the waiter was placing the meat course. During the plate-changing interval I became unpleasantly conscious of the presence – the curiously obtrusive presence – of a dark-faced, black-mustachioed little man sitting two tables away, and apparently engrossed in his dinner. Why this one foreign-looking individual, out of the many late diners comfortably filling the large room, should disturb me, I could not determine; but the vague disquietude came – and remained. Twice I thought I caught the small man watching my tablemate furtively from beneath his heavy eyebrows; and when Van Dyck began to speak again, I was almost certain I detected that half mechanical cocking of an ear which betrays the intentional and eager eavesdropper.

"The one and only woman," said Van Dyck musingly, taking up the thread of the table talk at the point where it had been broken by the shifting of plates. "That is another exploded fallacy, Preble. There are dozens of the 'one-and-onlys,' each with a scheming mamma, or a grafting father, or an impecunious guardian who has been thriftlessly making ducks and drakes of his ward's trust funds. And they are all so immitigably decent and well-behaved and conventional that butter wouldn't melt in the mouth of a single one of them. They never, by any chance, let you see one-sixty-fourth of an inch below the surface."

"I grant you surfaces are more or less deceptive," I admitted. "But your charge is too sweeping. You can't lump humanity any more than you can the stars in heaven."

"Can't I? Wait and you shall see. And it isn't altogether what you are thinking; that I have been 'touched' so often that it has soured me. Heaven knows I've been a perfect Pool of Bethesda to a whole worldful of financial cripples ever since I left the university; but I don't especially mind the graft. What I do mind is the fact that it makes smiling hypocrites out of the grafters, big and little. Not one of them dares show me his real self, and there are times when I am fairly sick at heart for one little refreshing glimpse of humanity in the raw."

"Which is more piffle," I commented. "You didn't cable me to come and eat a New Orleans dinner with you on the bare chance that I'd let you work off a batch of grouches on me, did you?"

His answer was delayed so long that I wondered if he were trying to determine beforehand how much or how little he might be obliged to tell me. But finally he broke ground, rather cautiously, I thought, in the field of the explanations.

"No; I didn't ask you for the purpose of unloading my peculiar and personal grievances upon you, tempting as that may have been. I have a deep-laid plot, and I want you to help me carry it out. It is just about the maddest thing you ever heard of, and I've got to have at least one sane man along – as a sort of sea-anchor to tie to when the hurricane begins ripping the masts out of us, and all that."

"In other words, you are out to pick up a bit of moral backing for the plot. Is that it?"

"You have hit it precisely. You are to go along and hold me up to the mark, Dick. If I show any signs of weakening, you are to jab a knife into me and twist it around a few times. You are on salary, you know – if you care to have it that way."

"If you say money to me again, I quit you cold, right here and now," was my answer to that. And then: "Pitch out and tell me: what is this piratical scheme that you are afraid you may not have the nerve to carry through?"

The plotter sat back in his chair, regarding me through half-closed eyelids; and again I thought I caught the dark-faced foreigner two tables distant stealthily watching him.

"On the face of it, it looks almost as thrilling as an old maids' tea party – and not any less conventional," Van Dyck began. "You have been around and about a good bit in the Caribbean, haven't you?"

"I suppose I might be able to pilot the *Andromeda* into most of the well-known harbors, if I had to," I boasted.

"Good. But you haven't been much out of the regular steamer lanes? – or have you?"

"Now and then; yes. Once, when I was trying to blow around from Carthagera to La Guaira in a coasting schooner, our old tub of a wind jammer was caught in a hurricane and piled up on a coral reef. We were Crusoes on the ghastly little island for nearly a month before a tramp steamer happened along and saw our signals."

Van Dyck nodded as one who is hearing what has been heard before.

"You wrote home about that adventure, as you may, or may not, remember, and the story got around to me. Afterward, I chanced to see in the shipping news the report of the captain of the tramp 'tanker' which had picked you up. Your island wasn't down on any of the charts, and Captain Svenson gave the latitude and longitude as a matter of information. Have you any idea what island it was – or is?"

"No. As you may imagine, I was only too glad to see the last of it when we were taken off."

"It is said to be the Lost Island of the old English plateship harriers – Sir Frankie Drake and the rest," Van Dyck went on. "There is a story that Drake once ran a Spanish treasure ship into the lagoon which encircles the island, shot it full of holes, and finally burned it after a siege lasting a couple of days. The tale adds that during the two-day fight the Spaniards had time to unload and bury some of the gold bars in the galleon's cargo. Drake tried to make his prisoners tell what they had done with the treasure – so the story goes – and when they proved obstinate he sailed away and left them to starve. At a somewhat later period the island appears in the legends as 'Pirates' Hope' – place where the black-flag rovers used to put in to refit. Nobody seems to know why it hasn't been put down on the modern charts."

I closed my eyes and a cold little chill ran up and down my back. Van Dyck's yarn was probably only a figment of the story-tellers, but it brought back most vividly the memory of that despairing month I had spoken of; the dragging hours and days, the pinch of starvation, the hope deferred as we stared our eyes out sweeping the meeting line of sea and sky that never – until that last welcome day – gave back a sign of the world out of which we had been blotted. Also, the story resurrected another memory, one which had been almost forgotten with the lapse of time. There had been relics on the island; a few bits of the iron and woodwork of an ancient wreck, and a few bleached bones – human bones. Still, I had all the incredulity of one who had listened to many marvelous tales of the sea.

"You can hear dozens of yarns like that about every coral island and cay in the Caribbean," I said.

"I know," he agreed. "And on a pleasure voyage it helps out wonderfully if you have some one along who can tell them. How would the old Spanish Main strike you as a winter cruising ground for the good ship *Andromeda*?"

It was at this point that I began to see a few rays of daylight – or thought I did.

"Show me the *Andromeda*'s passenger list and I can tell better," I laughed.

"Your fellow voyagers will be people you know, or used to know – the majority of them," he returned; then, with what seemed to be a curious lack of enthusiasm, he enumerated them. "I've invited the newly married Greys; the Ph.D. Sanfords; Major Terwilliger and his nephew, Jerry Dupuyster; Conetta Kincaide and her dragoness aunt, Miss Mehitable; Madeleine Barclay and her father; young Grisdale and his bull pup; and Hobart Ingerson. And last, but by no means least, Mrs. Eager Van Tromp and her three daughters."

"Heavens!" I interjected. "Why didn't you include all of New York, while you were about it? Do you mean to tell me that you have all these people with you in the *Andromeda*?"

"Not yet, but soon," he qualified. "They are on the way down here in my private car. I'm here to meet them, and so, by the same token, are you."

"Good Lord! If you had hired a Hagenbeck to make your collection it couldn't have been more zoo-like! What under the sun were you thinking of, Teck?"

"They are all people I'd like to know better," he rejoined half absently. "The 'collection,' as you so scoffingly call it, was quite carefully chosen, if you did but know it."

"But Ingerson!" I protested.

"I know. Ingerson is a brute, you would say; and so would I, if I were on the witness stand and obliged to testify. But in condemning him we should be in the minority, Dick. He has the *entrée* to the best houses in New York, and half of the dowagers in that abandoned city would snap at him for a son-in-law."

"That may well be. But to shut yourself up with him in a yacht party for weeks on end – "

"Your point is well taken. But you will remember that I have admitted the madnesses from start to finish. The vital thing, however, is this: Will you consent to go along with us to add the saving touch of sanity? Don't turn me down, Dick," he added, and the adjuration was almost a pleading.

"I'm not turning you down," I hastened to say. "I am merely asking 'why?'"

Van Dyck's face was a study in moody perplexity, and he spoke slowly, almost hesitantly, when he answered my query.

"I don't know that I can explain the exact 'why,' or give a logical reason, even to so good a friend as you are, Dick. The winter-cruise notion originated with Mrs. Van Tromp, I believe; and she is responsible for the inclusion of the major and his nephew. Also, she is the one who asked me to invite Ingerson. She has been playing in hard luck lately, and for the sake of her three girls, who, in her point of view, have simply *got* to marry money, she is obliged to keep the pace. I suppose the prospect of a winter in Florida – the four of them at Palm Beach, with no chance to cut economical corners, you know – appalled her. Besides, she knows the *Andromeda*, and the *Andromeda's chef*. That goes a long way with as good a trencherwoman as she is."

"That will do for a starter," I said. "Let us say that Mrs. Van Tromp and her daughters are bread-and-butter guests. But how about the others?"

Van Dyck did not reply until after the deft serving man had cleared the table and brought the cigars.

"The others, with the possible exception of Billy Grisdale, who is only an infant, are people with whom I should like to become better acquainted, as I have said."

"Which is still purer piffle," I put in. "You've known all of them practically all your life. But go on."

"I've known them, and I haven't known them," he asserted. "There are the Sanfords – the professor and his wife: they typify the older married set, and the casual onlooker would say that they try to give the impression that they are still satisfied and happy. I should like to find out if they really are satisfied and happy. Then there are the Greys; they are still in the billing and cooing stage: I'd like to see if it isn't possible for them to get too much of each other when the doors are all shut and locked and neither of them can duck out for a breath of the fresh air of solitude."

"Jehu!" I muttered. "The blue-bearded old gentleman of the Old-World legend wasn't in it with you. Let's have the rest of it."

Van Dyck's smile barely missed being a saturnine grin, and there was scarcely a suggestion of mirth in it.

"Major Terwilliger poses as a generous, large-hearted old rounder who is eventually going to do something handsome for Jerry Dupuyster, his sister's son. Privately, I have a notion that the major's liberal fortune – which he promises to bestow upon Gerald – is largely, if not wholly, a myth, and that he is selfish enough to keep Jerry dangling as a bait to the scheming mammas – and aunts – for the social advantages and 'side' thereby accruing to Jerry's uncle."

"Conetta Kincaide's aunt, for example?" I interpolated.

"Yes, Aunt Mehitable, if you like. And, this being the case, I have a perfectly normal curiosity to see what will happen when the dragoness gets the major and Jerry in a clear field, with no possibility of a breakaway for them, or of interference with her dragonizing for her."

"Having already used Bluebeard, I'm out of comparisons for you," I said. "What about the Barclays, father and daughter?"

Van Dyck shook his head and the faintest possible shadow of a frown came and sat between his eyes.

"We needn't be ill-natured on the wholesale plan," he evaded. "You wouldn't suspect a man like Holly Barclay of offering his daughter to the highest bidder, would you? Supposing we admit that he has gone through the fortune that his wife's father got together, and let it stand at that."

"You are not letting it stand at that," I countered shrewdly.

"No, perhaps I am not," he admitted, after a thoughtful pause. "I thought I should like to prove or disprove a thing that I have heard, about Holly Barclay – and Madeleine – and – well, you'll guess it if I don't say it – about Ingerson."

"Again with the clear field and no favor, I suppose," I put in a bit savagely. Then: "Van Dyck, you ought to be shot!"

He was glancing at his watch, and his smile was wry.

"I shall get my little drink of hemlock before the table is cleared, never fear," he said soberly. "Any time you may think I am not getting it, you have my permission to blow the gaff; to call the others together and tell them what I've done to them. That is fair, isn't it?"

I nodded, and again he relapsed into thoughtful silence. Our dinner appointment had been for a rather late hour in the evening, and by now the great dining-room was all but empty, though the small dark-faced man on our right was still dallying with the sweets and the black coffee. A heavy, intoxicating fragrance drifted across from the flowering cereus in the palm room, and the distance-mellowed strains of an orchestra playing in an alcove on the opposite side of the rotunda added another sensuous touch. The glamour of the tropics, a far-reaching breath of the beckoning mystery of shimmering seas, and coral reefs singing to the beat of the murmuring surf – the mystery whose appeal is ever and most strongly to the senses and the passions – was in the air when I said, gravely enough, I make no doubt:

"I'll go with you, Bonteck; and chiefly for the reason you have just given – the reason and the permission. Let this be your fair warning: if at any time your little farce threatens to grow into a tragedy, I shall most certainly call you down."

"I was rather hoping you'd say something like that," he agreed, with what appeared to be the utmost sincerity.

"At the same time," I went on, "it is only fair to add that your expensive experiment will fail. Nothing will happen on the *Andromeda* that couldn't, or wouldn't, happen in a house party at your country place in the Berkshires. You will come back as wise – or as foolish – as you are now."

"Oh, well," he said, pushing his chair back and casting the napkin aside, "we needn't pull the bud in pieces to find out what kind of a flower it's going to be. I can't promise you that you will be greatly edified, and it is quite within the possibilities that you may find yourself frightfully bored. But, in any event, it will help out a little if we leave something to the imagination, don't you think? – something to speculate about and to look forward to. I know it does look rather cut-and-dried in the prospect; eight bells breakfast, luncheon when you like to have it, dinner in the second dog-watch, and cards – always cards when Mrs. Van Tromp can find a partner and a table – in the evening."

He had got upon his feet and was standing before me, an acutely attractive figure of a well-built, well-groomed man in faultless evening dress. The identifying smile of other and less cynical days was drawing at the corners of his eyes when he went on.

"We'll live in hopes. Perhaps we shall be able to smash the *Andromeda* on some reef that isn't down on the charts. Failing that, there is always the chance of a stray hurricane – with the other chance of the engines breaking down at the inopportune moment. We shall find excitement of some kind; I can feel it in my bones."

"Small chance on a baby Cunarder," I grumbled, rising in my turn.

"Oh, I don't know," he offered, in gentle deprecation. "At any rate we can still be hopeful. Now if you are ready we'll go to the railroad station and meet the players. I told you they were on the

way down from New York, but I omitted to add that they are due to arrive to-night; within fifteen or twenty minutes, to be strictly accurate. Let's gather up a few for-hire autos and go to the rescue."

II

THE SHIP'S COMPANY

We were on the sidewalk – "banquette," as it is called in New Orleans – in front of the hotel, and Van Dyck was marshaling a number of vehicles for a descent upon the railroad station, when a small man with his soft hat pulled well down over his eyes appeared at my elbow as silently as if he had materialized out of the rain-wet pavement.

"Pardon, M'sieu'," he murmured, in the broken English which placed him, apparently, as a native of the French quarter, "ze brother of my cousin ees h-ask me to fin' out for heem w'en M'sieu' Van Dyck's steamsheep comes on N' Orlean. 'Ees h-oncle been de *chef* h-on dat sheep, an' 'ee's want sand heem lettaire. *Oui*."

Van Dyck had started his procession of cabs, and he called to me as the last of the vehicles pulled up to the curb to take us in. Almost mechanically I gave the soft-spoken and apologetic questioner his answer.

"Mr. Van Dyck's yacht came up the river to-day. Tell your cousin's brother he will have to hurry his letter. The *Andromeda* will sail either to-night or to-morrow morning, I believe."

It was not until after I had joined Van Dyck in the waiting taxi, and we were sluing and skidding over the wet pavements on the way to the railroad station, that my companion said: "Didn't I see you talking to a little fellow in gray tweeds and a soft hat just before we drove away from the hotel? Do you know the man?"

"No; he was a stranger to me," I returned. "He asked a question and I answered it. He is the man who sat two tables away on your right in the hotel dining-room. He said he was the cousin of a cousin of somebody who wanted to send a letter to the *Andromeda's* cook, and he wanted to know when the yacht would arrive."

"You told him the *Andromeda* is already here?"

"Yes."

"That's a bit odd," was Van Dyck's comment.

"What is odd?"

"That this little sallow-faced fellow should turn up here in New Orleans practically at the same moment that I do. I spotted him while we were at dinner and wondered if he could be the same one."

"The same one as who? And why shouldn't he be here?" I asked, rather more than mildly curious.

"The same one I have seen at least twice before in the past few weeks. The first time was at our anchorage in the Hudson when he, or somebody very much like him, was the last man overside as we were leaving port a month ago. I understood then that he was a friend of some member of the *Andromeda's* crew and had come aboard for a farewell visit."

"And the second time?"

"The second time was some three weeks later, and the place was Havana. There he, or again somebody exactly like him, was hanging around the water front chinning with any member of the crew who happened to have shore leave. That time he wasn't trying to mail a letter; he was trying to find out why it had apparently taken us three weeks, instead of something less than one, to make the run down from New York to Cuba."

"Did he find out?" I inquired, with a little private wonderment of my own to prompt the query.

"I can't say as to that," was Van Dyck's half-guarded reply. "What is puzzling me now is his – er – omnipresence, so to speak. So far as I know, we left him in Havana. How does he come to be here in New Orleans on the very day of our arrival?"

"That is easy," I said; "the method, I mean – not his object. He could have come by railroad from Key West in less time than it took the *Andromeda* to steam across the Gulf."

"Of course," Van Dyck agreed, quite as if this simple explanation had not occurred to him. And then, since we had reached the station, where, upon inquiry, we found that the New York train was already in, there was time only for a hospitable dash to the platform upon which our prospective ship's company was at the moment debarking.

Though I knew all of Van Dyck's guests well enough to need no introductions, the mob of them that was pouring out of the private car *Kalmia* was overwhelming by sheer weight of numbers.

"Heavens!" I said to Van Dyck as we came upon the scene, "I don't wonder that you wanted help," and therewith we plunged in to bring order out of the platform chaos of mingled humanity and hand baggage.

It was after we had the human part of the chaos marching, with an army of laden red-caps, upon the line of chartered taxis, that Van Dyck thrust a sheaf of baggage checks into my hand.

"Be a good fellow, Dick, and see to it that the heavy dunnage gets started for the *Andromeda's* wharf before you leave, won't you?" he asked. "I'll go on with the crowd, and have one of the taxis wait for you – T. and P. wharf, foot of Thalia Street, you know."

That was how it came about that I was left alone to wrestle with the baggage-masters and the transfer people, and after I had seen the last truck-load of steamer trunks sorted, tarpaulined, and started on its way over town, I returned to the cab rank and found my taxi awaiting me, as Van Dyck had promised.

It was not until I was climbing into the covered cab that I discovered that it was already occupied. As I ducked for shelter from the rain, which was now falling smartly, a voice that I should have recognized if I had heard it on another planet said, "I hope you found my little green trunk with the others. It has all my dinner gowns in it."

"Conetta!" I gasped; and then I saw what Van Dyck had done, either with malice aforethought or in sheer heedlessness. In the taxicab loading there had been an overflow of one, and Conetta Kincaide had been left behind to share the waiting vehicle with me.

"You – you knew this was my cab?" I stammered, after I had accumulated wit enough to shut the door and tell the driver to go on.

"Of course. Bonteck put me in and said you'd be along in a few minutes; that you'd gone to look after the baggage. How do you happen to be here with Bonteck?"

"That," I evaded, "is a rather tedious story. Later on you may have it for what it is worth, if you still care to hear it. Excuse me a moment," and I leaned forward and stuck my head through the open window at the taxi-driver's ear to whisper: "Take your time, and don't bother to make any short cuts."

"What was that you were saying to the man?" was the question I had to answer after I had fallen back into the seat beside the possessor of the cool voice and self-contained manner.

"I was telling him he needn't hurry," I confessed brazenly. "In a few minutes you will be one of the crowd again, and there are three years to be bridged, in some fashion, in those few minutes."

I felt, rather than heard, her little gasp of dismay.

"Do you mean to say that – that you are going along in the *Andromeda*?" she asked faintly.

"It is even so – more is the pity. I had committed myself to Bonteck, in a way, before I knew the names on his passenger list."

"And if you had known, you would have refused?"

"I don't know. Most likely I should; and not altogether out of consideration for you. You see, I am quite frank."

"You are; most refreshingly frank. One might have hoped that time, and – and –"

– "And absence and new fields and faces, and all that, would make me forget," I finished for her. "Unhappily, they haven't. But that is neither here nor there. Though I have kept pretty well out

of the civilized world for the past three years, there has been a word now and then from home. Tell me plainly, Connie – how much does Jerry Dupuyster know?"

"He knows that three years ago we were engaged to be married, you and I." The cool voice trembled a little, but it was still well under control.

"That is better," I commented with a sigh of relief; and it was better because, if Jerry hadn't known, there would have been chances for hideous complications on the proposed cruise of the *Andromeda*, or at least, in some inchoate way, I felt there would. "Does Jerry know why it was broken off?" I went on.

"He thinks he does."

"Which is to say that he accepts your Aunt Mehitable's version of it; the one she published broadcast among our friends – that, without any cause assigned, we simply agreed to disagree?"

"I suppose so."

Silence for a square or so, broken only by the drumming of the taxi's motor. Then I took the bull by the horns.

"Shall I tell Bonteck that, for reasons which I don't care to explain, I shall have to drop out of this badly mixed ship's company of his?"

The cool voice had fully regained its even tones when she said: "Why should you?"

"There is no 'why' unless you care to interpose one of your own making. But I should think, with Jerry Dupuyster along – "

"The *Andromeda* is a reasonably roomy little ship," was the calm retort. "And, besides, there are enough of us to afford protection – the protection of a crowd. If you have promised Bonteck, you can hardly break with him at the last moment, can you?"

"You don't care, then?"

"Why should I care? What is done is done, and can't be helped. Aunt Mehitable thinks I ought to marry; I suppose she thinks I owe it to her to marry and set up an establishment of my own. Perhaps I do owe it to her. I've been a charge upon her generosity all my life."

"So you are going to marry Jerry Dupuyster, a lisping club-lizard who apes the English so hard that he forgets that he has a string of American ancestors as long as your arm?" I flamed out.

"Well, if I am, what is it to you, Dick Preble? Or to any one else besides Jerry and me? Also, I might ask what right I have given you to put me upon the rack?"

"None; none whatever," I admitted gloomily. "Still, I have a right, of a sort – the right of the first man. You seem conveniently and successfully to have forgotten. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to forget, though I have tried all of the customary antidotes."

"Other women?" she asked, with the faintest possible touch of malice.

I was resentful enough to meet her baldly upon her own ground.

"There was a young woman in Venezuela; a pure Castilian, with the blood of kings in her veins. I could have married her."

"Why didn't you?" she asked sweetly.

"I have wished many times that I had. I wonder if you can understand if I say that I was afraid?"

"Mr. Kipling says that we can't understand – that we can never understand. But I think I know what you mean. You may have been Adam – the first man, again – for her; but she wasn't, and never could be, Eve – the first woman – for you. Was that it?"

The taxi was finally approaching the quarter of the city in which our wharf lay. There were other things to be said, and they had to be said hurriedly.

"Let us get things straightened out – before the crowd messes in," I said. "Three years ago we were engaged to be married. One day I was obliged to tell your Aunt Mehitable that the comfortable fortune my father had left me had been swallowed up in an exhausted Colorado gold mine, and that I'd have to go to work for a living. She then told me – with what seemed to me to be unnecessary spitefulness – that her will was made in favor of some charitable institution, and since you would thus

be left penniless, it was up to me to set you free and give you a chance to marry somebody who could provide for you. Am I stating it clearly?"

"Clearly enough."

"Then she went on to say that the news of my misfortune had preceded me; that you had already been told all there was to tell; and that it would be a kindness to you if I should agree not to see you again."

"And you did me the kindness," she put in calmly. "I ought to be thankful for that. Perhaps I am thankful."

"I was furious," I confessed. "If you will permit me to say it this long after the fact, your aunt carries a vicious tongue in her head, and she didn't spare me. Also, I'll admit that my own temper isn't exactly patient or forgiving. It was the next morning that I had the chance to go to South America thrust at me, and the ship was sailing at noon. I left a letter for you and disappeared over the horizon."

"Yes," she replied in the same even tone; "I got the letter."

"That brings us down to date," I went on, as the taxi drew up at the wharf. "The next thing is the *modus vivendi*— the way we must live for the next few weeks. You say that Jerry knows that we were once engaged. If he is half a man, there will be plenty of chances for misunderstanding and trouble. We must agree to be decently quarrelsome."

"You have begun it beautifully," she said, with a hard little laugh. "Admitting your premises, what will Jerry think of this taxi drive – without a chaperon?"

"Jerry will never know that you came over with me – unless you tell him."

"Aunt Mehitable can tell him," she retorted, again with the touch of malice in her voice.

"But, for the sake of Major Terwilliger's money, she won't tell him," I ventured drily; and a moment later I was handing her up the *Andromeda's* accommodation ladder with a sharper misery in my heart than I had suffered since the night three years in the past when her dragoness aunt had goaded me into effacing myself.

There was a pleasant bustle of impending departure already going on aboard the yacht when we reached the deck. Most of the women – all of them, in fact, save the youngest of the Van Tromp trio and Annette Grey – had gone to their several staterooms, and the men were scattered – "dotted" was Conetta's word – here and there, apparently trying to find themselves, like so many cats in a strange garret.

"You will go below?" I said to Conetta when I had shown her the way aft.

"Yes; and by myself, if you please." Then, with a quick turn of the proud little head, and a look in the slate-blue eyes that was far beyond any man's fathoming: "Good-night, Dick, and good-bye. Perhaps our quarrel would better begin right here and now." And with that she was gone.

It was possibly five minutes later that I met Grey, the newly married, roving in search of his mate.

"Annette?" he queried. "Have you seen her anywhere, Preble?"

"She is with Edie Van Tromp on the bridge," I told him. Then I linked an arm in his and drew him to the shoreward rail, saying: "Don't rush off. Throw that vile cigar away and light a fresh one, and tell me how the New York law partnership is getting along. Remember, there are some weeks ahead of you in which you won't be able to get any farther away from Annette than the length of the *Andromeda*— no matter how badly you may want to."

The married lover twisted his arm out of mine and dropped the stub of his cigar over the rail.

"Preble, you're a brute," he remarked, quite conversationally. And then he added: "By Jove, don't you know, I wouldn't be a bachelor again for the shiniest million that was ever minted! I didn't realize, until within the last few weeks, what a crabbed, dog-in-the-manger beggar it would make of a man."

"Thanks," I laughed. "Experience counts for something, even if it is short and pretty recent, as you might say. Where is the major?"

Grey clipped the end of the fresh cigar I had given him and lighted it. He was sparing me a few moments merely to show me that it was possible for him to stay that long out of sight and sound of the loved one.

"The major is in a class by himself, as you ought to know if you've preserved any fragment of memory, Preble. He is down in the yacht's smoking-room, hobnobbing with a glass of hot brandy and soda, and finishing a novel that he has been reading all the way down from Chattanooga. Think of it – hot toddy in this weather!"

"A veteran – even a Spanish War Veteran – has to do something to individualize himself," I jested; and then Grey took his turn at me.

"You are a veteran yourself, Richard – of a sort. They tell me you have been knocking around here in the tropics so long that you've forgotten all the little decent and civilized ameliorations. Why don't you marry and settle down?"

I laughed.

"Go up yonder on the bridge and ask Annette why some men marry and some don't; she'll tell you," I said; and he promptly took me at my word, at least so far as leaving me was concerned.

A short time after this, just after I had identified the two smokers in the wicker lounging chairs under the afterdeck awning as Ingerson and Madeleine Barclay's father, the last truck-load of trunks came. While the baggage was going into the *Andromeda's* forehold, Dupuyster, looking more English than any Briton to the manner born, came lounging aft and greeted me chirpingly.

"Lo, old chappie; dashed glad to know you're comin' along, what? Bonty was just tellin' me he'd scragged you for the voyage. Topping, I'll say."

"Topping, if you say so, Jerry. How long have you been over?"

"Eh, what? – how long have I been over? I say, old dear – that's a jolly good one, y' know. But tell me; where is this bally old tub of Bonty's goin' to sail for? Bonty won't tell us. He's as mysterious about it as – as –"

Realizing that he was feeling around in his ultra-British vocabulary for a fitting Anglo-maniacal simile, I helped him out.

"As a bag of tricks, let us say. I don't know, any more than you do, Jerry. Summer seas in midwinter, and all that, I suppose. What do we care?"

"Haw! dashed little, so long as the *Andromeda's* well found in the provision lockers: eh? what? And Bonty will have seen to that." Then: "I've been lookin' about a bit for Conetta. Did she come aboard with you?"

I nodded. "She has gone to her stateroom, I believe."

The young man whose chief end in life seemed to be to out-English the English lighted a cigarette and lounged on farther aft. I followed the movements of his white-flanneled figure with the gaze speculative. Quite as truly as in the case of Bonteck Van Dyck – though in a vastly different manner – here was a "perfectly good cat, spoiled." I had known Jerry Dupuyster quite intimately in the university days; known him for a lovable fellow with rather more, than less, than his fair allowance of brains and ability. But something, either the bait of the major's hypothetical fortune, or too much idleness – or both – had turned him into.. the speculative train paused. I didn't know what the compelling influences had turned Jerry Dupuyster into, but whatever it might be, it seemed too trivial to warrant the effort needful to try to define it.

Sauntering forward on the starboard promenade I saw that Grey had joined his wife and Edie Van Tromp on the bridge, and that Van Dyck and a lean, hatchet-faced man whom I took to be the yacht's sailing-master, were with them. While I looked on, Goff, the sailing-master, came down to the rail to direct the stowing of the last load of luggage through the open port below. Like some other things in this Caribbean cruise entourage, this man Goff was a new wrinkle, and a rather astounding one. Hitherto – at least in my knowing of them – the *Andromeda's* skippers had been of

the Atlantic-liner class, spick and span martinets in natty uniform, with fine, quarter-deck manners, and maintaining a discipline comparable only to that of the Navy.

But Goff was at the other end of the gamut of extremes; a gaunt, hard-bitted old Yankee fishing-smack captain, if appearances counted for anything; hungry-looking, lank and weather-beaten, with a harsh voice and a bad eye. And to emphasize the oddities, the sailormen he was directing seemed to be all foreigners; another sea change sharply opposed to Van Dyck's former notions about manning his yacht.

As it appeared, there was to be no loss of time in the outseting. While the trunks were still tumbling into the hold baggage-room, a subdued clamor came up from the fire hold, and the yacht's twin funnels began to echo to the roar of the stirred fires. A minute later the lower-river pilot, a hairy-faced giant who might have taken the heavy villain's part in comic opera, climbed aboard. With a bare nod to the sailing-master, the giant ascended to the bridge, and almost immediately the yacht's searchlight blazed out, the order to cast off was given, and the trim white hull, shuddering to the thrust of its propellers, edged away into the brown flood of the Mississippi, and made a majestic half-circle in midstream to pass the lights of the city in review as it was headed for the Gulf.

Dodging the pair of smokers under the after-deck awning, I went around to the port promenade, where I stumbled upon Billy Grisdale sitting alone with his bull pup between his knees.

"Hello, Prebby," he said, much as if it had been only three days instead of as many years since he had come down to the East River pier, a fresh-faced prep. school-boy, to see me off for the tropics. "Come over here and sit down and give me a smoke." And when I had done all three: "Rum old go, isn't it? If I wasn't such an ass about carrying a tune, I'd be warbling 'My native land, good-night.' Got your life insured?"

"I'm an orphan and a bachelor; why should I carry insurance, Billy?" I said, laughing at his doleful humor.

"I don't know. Guess I've got a bad case of the hyps. Can't think of anything but that bloody-bones jingle of Stevenson's:

'Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,
Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!'

Teck Van Dyck's a pirate. He's gone daffy over something, and we're all going to heaven in a hand-basket."

Of course this was all froth; pure froth. But there was usually a little clear liquor in the bottom of Billy's stein.

"What ails you?" I asked.

An impish grin spread itself over his smooth, boyish face.

"I'm in love, if anybody should ask you. Everything looks green to me, and I want to chew slate-pencils. *Ergo*— which is college slang for 'Ah, there, stay there' — I'm as daffy as Teck. Don't laugh or I'll set Tige on you. Say, Prebby, do I look like an invalid?"

"Yes; about as much as Mr. John Sullivan did when he carried the world heavy-weight wallop in his good right hand."

"Yet I am an invalid. Doc Fanning says I am, and he's like George Washington. He might lie if he could, but he can't because he's lost the combination."

"What on earth are you gibbering about, Billy?"

"Facts; iron-clad, brass-bound, blown-in-the-bottle, sold-only-in-the-original-package facts. Fanning's the family physician, you know, and he has gone on record as declaring that I need half a winter off in a mild climate. And I don't know to this good minute whether I succeeded in fooling him, or whether he was just plain good-natured enough to size the thing up and fool the governor — I don't, really, Prebby."

"But why?" I persisted.

"The 'why' is a girl, of course; you ought to know that without being told. She's a lulu and a charmer, and if I can't marry her I'll end it all with a bare bodkin. Her name? I'm going to tell you, Prebby; and, again, if you laugh, I'll make Tige bite you. It's Edith."

"Not Edie Van Tromp!"

"Prebby, you're the one only and original wizard. You could make your fortune if you should set up as a guesser."

"Ye gods and little children!" I commented. "Edie Van Tromp is eighteen, if I remember correctly; and you are –"

"I was twenty a few days ago, if you don't mind," he returned, tickling the cropped ears of the bull pup. And then: "'Crazy,' you say? Maybe so – quite likely so. I've got to keep the pace, you know. This little ship's full of crazy people. I'm crazy about Edie, and, if you listen to what you hear, Jerry Dupuyster's crazy about Conetta Kincaide – just like you used to be – and Jack Grey's crazy about his Annette, and Ingerson and Teck are both crazy about Madeleine Barclay. So there you are. And if the wind gets around into the sour east, Teck's going to sink the ship in the deep-blue Caribbean, and drown us all – all but Madeleine – and live happily ever after. Apropos of nothing at all, Prebby, this is a rotten cigar you gave me, and I'm all mussed up and discouraged. What's that bell clanging about?"

"It is striking five bells in the first night watch – otherwise, or landsman-wise, half-past ten o'clock."

"Good! – excellent good. Let's turn in, so we can turn out bright and early for our first shot at the blue water. What do you say?"

I said the required word, and we went below to our respective staterooms. The next morning when I turned out and drew aside the curtain shading the stateroom port light, the sun was shining brightly, and for a horizon there were only the tumbling wavelets of the Gulf of Mexico.

III

THE MAJOR – AND OTHERS

The first morning in blue water developed the fact that breakfast on the *Andromeda* was destined to be a broken meal. In the white-lacquered dining-saloon, only three members of the ship's company, Major Terwilliger, Madeleine Barclay's father, and Professor Sanford were at table, though Van Dyck and Billy Grisdale had been still earlier, had already breakfasted and had gone on deck.

As I took my place, the major, affecting the bluff heartiness which was merely a mask for an ease-loving, self-centered habit which never for a moment lost sight of the creature comforts, was trying, quite ineffectually, to draw Sanford into a discussion of the merits and demerits of certain French liqueurs – a subject upon which the clean-living, abstemious professor of mathematics was as poorly informed as any anchorite of the desert.

"Vermuth, now; a dash of vermuth in your morning bitters," the major expatiated; "there's nothing like it for an appetiser. I'm not saying anything against the modern cocktail, properly compounded; it has its place. But for a morning eye-opener it is crude. Believe me, a Frenchman knows the meaning of the word *apéritif* much better than we do."

"Yes?" said the professor, with a palpable effort to galvanize an interest which he was evidently far from feeling.

"Quite so," declared the major; after which he proceeded to enlarge upon American backwardness in the matter of picking and choosing among the potables, inveighing with all the warmth of a past master in the art of good living against the barbarism of taking one's liquor raw.

While the major was giving his alcoholic homily, and not omitting, meanwhile, to keep his plate well supplied with the crispest bits of bacon and the hottest of the rolls, I had an opportunity to observe the silent man whose place was opposite my own. Holly Barclay had changed greatly in the three years which had elapsed since I had last seen him in New York. I never knew – I do not yet know – what particular form his dissipation took, but it had left its indubitable record in the haggard face, the deep-sunken eyes, and in the womanish hands which trembled a bit in spite of an evident effort to hold them steady.

Fragmentary gossip of former days had said that Holly Barclay's bane was women; other whispers had it that it was the gaming table; still others that it was the larger gaming table of the Street. Whatever it was, it had apparently left him a rather ghastly wreck of a man; a prey, not to remorse, perhaps, but certainly to fear. And with the fear in the deep-set eyes there was a hint of childish petulance; the irritable humor of a man who has fought a losing battle with life and expects to be waited upon and coddled as a reward for his defeat and humiliation.

It was a relief to turn from this haggard wreck, and from the sham-hearty major, to the mild-eyed professor. Sanford I had known in the university, and a less self-conscious or more lovable man never lived. Deeply immersed in the natural sciences, which were his hobby, and absent-minded at times to a degree that put to shame the best efforts of the college-professor-joke makers, he was nevertheless the most human of men; a faculty member whose door was always hospitably open to the homesick Freshman, and whose influence for good in the lush field of the college campus was second only to that of his plain-featured, motherly wife.

"Ah, yes," he was saying, in answer to the major's eulogy of chartreuse as a cordial, "it is said to be a distillation from the leaves of *Urtica pilulifera*, the much-abused nettle, I believe. Those old Alpine monks had a wonderful knowledge of the scanty flora of the high altitudes where they built their monasteries. Which reminds me: I hope Bonteck will give us an opportunity to study some of the remarkable plant forms peculiar to the tropics before we return. It would be most enlightening to a stay-at-home like myself."

The major's facial expression was that of a person who has been basely betrayed into casting pearls before swine. That any one could be so benighted as to associate a divine cordial only with the crude materials out of which it might be made was quite beyond his powers of comprehension.

"Hum," he muttered, "I've always understood that the process of chartreuse-making was a secret that was most jealously guarded." And with that he let the pearl casting stop abruptly.

Here was a striking example, one would say, of the ill-assortment of our mixed ship's company manifesting itself at the introductory breakfast at sea. Throughout the meal Barclay said nothing to any of us. His few remarks were addressed to the serving steward, and they were all in the nature of complaints. His coffee was too weak, the bacon was too crisp, the cold meats were underdone. What with the gourmet appetite of the major, and Barclay's apparent lack of any appetite at all, the broken meal was anything but a feast of reason and a flow of soul, and I was glad to break away to the freedom of the decks.

Finding the after-deck untenanted, I strolled forward. The *Andromeda* was loafing along over a sea as calm as a mill-pond, and her course, as nearly as I could guess it from the position of the sun, was a little to the east of south. Van Dyck and Billy Grisdale were on the bridge, and one of the foreign-looking sailormen had the wheel. On the main-deck forward three members of the crew were swabbing down, and two others were polishing brass. As I paused at the rail in the shadow of the bridge overhang, Goff, the sailing-master, came stumping along. Though no one had as yet told me that he was a Gloucesterman, I took a shot at it.

"This is not much like cracking on with a schooner for the Banks, is it, Captain?" was the form the shot took; and the grizzled veteran of the sea stopped and looked me over with an eye militantly appraisive.

"What you know about the Banks?" he inquired hostilely.

"Little enough," I admitted. "One trip, made when I was a boy, in the schooner *Maria Ann*, of Gloucester, Captain Standifer."

"I want to know!" he said, thawing perceptibly. "Old *Maria Ann's* afloat yit, but Standifer's gone; run down in a dory in a fog." Then, lowering his voice: "You don't belong to this New York clanjamfry, do ye?"

"Not strictly speaking; I signed on in New Orleans."

"Know these waters putty middlin' well?"

"I've sailed them a few times."

"Friend o' Cap'n Van Dyck's, I cal'late?"

"As good a friend as he has on earth, I hope."

At this the old sea dog thrust an arm in mine and led me aft until we were out of earshot from the bridge.

"What d' ye know about this here winter cruise?" He fired the question at me belligerently.

"About its course and destination? Little or much, as you choose to put it. What should I know?"

He paid no attention to my question.

"Cap'n Van Dyck's all right, only he's too dum hardheaded," he confided. "Picked up his 'tween-decks lackeys in New York an' Havana. Don't like the looks o' some on 'em. If you're a friend of the Cap'n's, you keep a weather eye on that slick lookin' yaller boy that waits on table in the dinin'-saloon."

"How am I to keep an eye on him?" I asked.

"When you're eatin' with the folks, you keep 'em from talkin' about things that yaller boy hadn't ought to hear," he bit out, and with that he left me.

Here was a little mystery on our first day at sea. What was it, in particular, that the mulatto serving boy shouldn't hear? My mind went back to the talk of the previous evening, across the table in the dining-room of the New Orleans hotel. Now that I came to analyze it, I realized that it had been only cursorily explanatory on Van Dyck's part. While he seemed at the time to be perfectly frank with me, it occurred to me now that I had all along been conscious of certain reservations. A winter

cruise in the Caribbean; for the ship's company a gathering of people whom he had threatened to know better before the cruise ended; these were about the only definite objects he had set forth.

But two things were pretty plainly evident. Goff was deeper in Van Dyck's confidence than I was; and, beyond this, the sailing-master was making the mistake of thinking that I knew as much as he did. It was no great matter, I thought. If the mulatto under-steward needed watching, I'd watch him, trusting to the future to reveal the reason – if any there were – why he should be watched.

Making my way to the awning-sheltered after-deck lounge, which was still untenanted, I picked out the easiest of the wicker chairs and sat down to fill my pipe for an after-breakfast smoke. Before the pipe had burned out, Ingerson put in his appearance, lighting a black cigar as he came up the cabin stair. If I had been free to select, he was the last man in our curious assortment whom I should have chosen as a tobacco companion, but short of a pointed retreat to some other part of the ship, there was no escape.

"Hello, Preble," he grunted, casting his gross body into a chair. "Monopolizing the view, are you? Seen anything of Madeleine?"

"Miss Barclay hadn't appeared when I breakfasted," I returned; and if I bore down a bit hard on the courtesy prefix it was because I hated to hear Madeleine's Christian name come so glibly off his tongue.

"How many days of this are we in for?" was his next attempt.

"That, I suppose, will be left to the wishes of the ship's company."

"All right," he grinned; "I guess I can stand it as long as Van Dyck can."

I stole a glance aside at his heavy featured, half-bestial face. It was the face of a man prematurely aged, or aging, by the simple process of giving free rein to his passions and appetites. Though he couldn't have been more than thirty-two or three, the telltale pouches were already forming under the bibulous eyes. Though I suppose he was fresh from his morning bath, I fancied I could detect the aroma of many and prolonged midnight carousals about him. Van Dyck's intimation that there was even a possibility of Madeleine Barclay's throwing herself away upon this gross piece of flesh came back to me with a tingling shock of repugnance. Surely she would never do such a thing of her own free will.

We had been sitting in uncomradely silence for maybe five minutes when Mrs. Van Tromp, mother of marriageable, and as yet unmarried, daughters came waddling aft to join us. How far she might go in letting Ingerson's wealth atone for his many sins, I neither knew nor cared, but that the wealth had its due and proper weight with her was proved by the alacrity with which she relieved me of the necessity of taking any part in a three-cornered talk. So, when I got up to empty my pipe ashes over the rail, I kept on going, quite willingly abandoning the field to inherited money and its avid worshiper.

With such an unfruitful beginning, one might predicate an introductory day little less than stupefying. But later on there were ameliorations. After luncheon, which, like the breakfast, was a straggling meal with only three or four of us at table at the same time, I found myself lounging on the port promenade with Beatrice, the middle member of the Van Tromp trio, a fair-haired, self-contained young woman with a slant toward bookish things which set her well apart from her athletic older sister and tomboyish younger.

"'Westward Ho!'" I said, glancing at the title of the book lying in her lap.

"Yes; I've been trying to get the atmosphere. But Kingsley takes too much time with his introductions. Whereabouts are we now?"

I marked the slow rise and fall of the ship as it swung along making its leisurely southing. As in the early morning, the *Andromeda* was logging only loafing speed.

"We are still a long way from the scene of Sir Francis Drake's more or less piratical exploits," I told her. "Do you take Kingsley at his face value?"

"He calls it war, but it seems to me more like legalized buccaneering," she rejoined. Then: "How much of it do you suppose is true?"

I laughed.

"Have you already learned to distrust history, at your tender age?" I mocked. "Isn't it all set down in the books?"

She turned large and disparaging eyes upon me.

"Of course you know well enough that all history is distorted; especially war history where the victors are the only source of information. The other people can't tell their side of it."

"True enough," I admitted. "I fancy old Sir Francis was a good bit more than half a pirate, if all the facts were known. That story about his burning of the Spanish galleon at Pirates' Hope, for example."

"I haven't heard it. Tell it to me," she urged.

I gave her the story as Van Dyck had given it to me, omitting – for no good reason that I could have offered – all mention of my own unnerving experiences on the island of the legend.

"Left those poor wretches to starve because they wouldn't buy their lives off him?" she commented, with a belated horror in her voice.

"It is only a legend, you must remember," I hastened to say. "Most likely there isn't a word of truth in it."

Her gaze was upon the distant merging line of sea and sky, and there was a dreamy look in her eyes.

"I should like to see that island," she said. "I wonder if we shall go anywhere near it?"

If I smiled it was only at the hold the ancient tale had apparently taken upon her.

"Bonteck will doubtless make it a port of call, if you ask him to. But it is hundreds of miles from here."

"What does it look like?"

"Very much like any or all of the coral islands you may have seen pictured in your school geographies, only it is long and narrow instead of being circular, like the Pacific atolls. But it is a true coral island, for all that; a strip of land possibly a quarter of a mile wide and a mile long, densely wooded – jungled, you might say – with tropical vegetation; a beach of white sand running all the way around; beyond the beach, a lagoon; and enclosing the lagoon, and with only a few passages through it here and there, the usual coral reef. The lagoon is shallow for the greater part of it, but outside of the reef the bottom goes down like the side of a mountain."

"Why, you must have seen the island!" she said.

"I have," I answered, rather grimly.

"Did you land on it when you were there? – but of course you must have, to be able to describe it so well."

"Oh, yes; I landed upon it," I admitted.

Again she let her gaze go adrift to leeward. She was evidently reveling in something that seemed to her more tangible than Kingsley's famous story of Amyas Leigh and his voyagings.

"You say it is called Pirates' Hope. Was that on account of Sir Francis Drake's battle with the Spanish galleon?"

"Oh, no; I imagine it got its name at a much later date; in the time of the bold buccaneers. There are two little bays, one on the north and another on the south. Either would be a good place in which to careen the little cockleshell ships of our ancestors and scrape their bottoms. Possibly Morgan or some of the others put in there for that purpose and thus gave the island its name."

"Did you find any relics when you were there?"

It didn't seem necessary to tell this open-minded young woman about the bones, so I turned her question aside.

"The last of the buccaneers was permanently hanged some time in the closing decade of the seventeenth century, if I remember rightly. You'd scarcely expect to find any traces of them or their works now."

"No; that's so," she conceded.

Into the pause that followed I thrust a query of my own.

"Where has Conetta been keeping herself all day?"

"She is with her aunt. It seems that Miss Gilmore isn't a very good sailor."

I laughed because I couldn't help it. If the dragoness was upset by the easy swinging of the *Andromeda* over a sea that was more like a gently undulating mirror than anything else, what would happen to her if we should encounter a gale, or even half a gale?

"You needn't laugh," Beatrice put in reproachfully. "There is nothing funny about seasickness."

"I was laughing at the idea of anybody's being seasick in weather like the present," I explained. "But I fancy it is the old story in the case of Miss *Mehitable*. If she had nothing worse than a toothache, Conetta would have to play the part of a nurse."

"My-oh!" said my pretty lounging-companion; "it is perfectly easy to see that there is no love lost between you and Miss *Mehitable*."

"There isn't," I replied shortly; and there that matter rested.

Still later in the day – just at sunset, to be strictly accurate as to the time – there was another compensation for a day which had been hanging rather heavily on my hands. I had gone alone into the yacht's fore-peak, and was wondering if I should have time to smoke another pipe before the dinner call should sound, when a mocking voice behind me said: "Isn't it about time we were quarreling some more?"

I went on filling my pipe without looking around.

"You've been careful not to give me an earlier chance," I said. "How is your Aunt *Mehitable* by this time?"

"She is able to sit up and take a bit of nourishment." Then: "How you do hate poor Aunt *Mehitable*, don't you?"

"As I see it, I haven't any particularly good reason to squander any part of my scanty store of affection upon her. Did she know I was going to make one of this mixed-up ship's-quota?"

"Honestly, I don't think she did. She said a tremendous lot of things last night when she saw you with Bonteck. Aren't you going to be decent to her?"

"She is Bonteck's guest, or one of them, and I'm another. South America and the tropics haven't sacked me of quite all of the conventionalities."

"How nice! Of course, we've all been supposing they had. When are you going to tell me some more about the Castilian princess? the one you could have married, and didn't – to your later sorrow."

Strange as it may seem, all this light-hearted mockery cut into me much more deeply than any real bitterness could have. Because, let me explain, it was precisely the attitude she used to hold toward me in the old days when the mockeries were only so many love taps, as one might say; a sort of joyous letting down, or keying up, for her, after a day-long immurement with a crotchety, sharp-tongued maiden aunt.

"I've told you all there is to tell," I said, as gruffly as I could.

"Oh, dear, no; I'm sure you haven't. Was she – is she – very beautiful? But of course she must be; luminous dark eyes burning with – er – with all sorts of things; midnight hair; an olive skin so clear and transparent that you can almost see through it; little aristocratic hands – blue-blooded hands; and a figure.. tell me, is she large and queenly? or petite and child-like?"

I laughed derisively.

"You seem to have forgotten that not all Spaniards are black. There are some among them as fair as you are. The 'princess,' as you call her, has hair about the color of yours, and her eyes are blue, even bluer than yours. But I don't see what interest you can have in her. I didn't marry her."

"But you may go back there – wherever it is – and correct that dreadful mistake."

"In that case I should first be obliged to murder her present husband. Perhaps I omitted to tell you last night that she was very successfully married to a wealthy young coffee planter, just before I left Trujillo."

"Well, you wouldn't let a little thing like that stop you if you wanted to go back, would you?"

"Oh, no; certainly not. Don Jesus Maria Diego de Traviano would probably do the stopping act – with a soft-nosed bullet. He is a crack shot with a Mauser, as I happen to know."

"Poor you!" she murmured. Then, with the lightning-like change of front which had been one of her chief attractions – for me – in the old days: "Why don't you quarrel? – say something that I'll have to get mad and bitter at?"

I turned to face her and the sheer beauty of her shook me. Yet I did contrive to strike back, after a fashion.

"The voyage is yet young. There will doubtless be many quarrelsome occasions. Just now I don't think of anything more vital than this: if you are meaning to keep Jerry Dupuyster in hand, you are going the wrong way about it. If you seem to prefer my company to his, I have an idea that he would be just Quixotic enough to let you have your own way."

"Thanks, awfully," she laughed, but behind the laugh the slate-blue eyes were saying things out of a very different vocabulary. "That will do very nicely for a beginning. I suppose I shall have to give Jerry a few lessons in the proper reactions. Isn't that the tinkle-tinkle of the dinner gong?"

It was; and a few minutes later our ship's company, lacking only Miss Mehitable, who was still confined to her stateroom, gathered for the first time as a whole around the long table in the dining-saloon of the *Andromeda*. And in the seating I took blessed good care to have Beatrice Van Tromp on my left and motherly Mrs. Sanford for a bulwark on my right.

IV

THE LOG OF THE ANDROMEDA

During the first few days of our southward voyaging the routine on board fell easily into the rut predicted by Van Dyck in the talk across the dinner-table in the New Orleans hotel; three meals a day, a good bit of more or less listless lounging under the awnings between times, and rather half-hearted battles with the cards in the evenings.

Day after day we had the same cloudless skies, and the same gentle breeze quartering over the port bow; and each morning there was apparently the same school of porpoises tumbling in the swell under the yacht's forefoot. Marking the course, I saw little change in it from day to day. We were still steering either south or a few points east of south, and if Van Dyck had any intention of touching at any of the Central American ports, the telltale compass in the ceiling of the dining-saloon did not indicate it.

Of the growth of Bonteck's cynical scheme of human analysis there were as yet no signs visible to the casual bystander. Mrs. Eager Van Tromp and Conetta's dragoness aunt sat in the shade of the after-deck awning, reading novels, and fanning themselves in moments when the breeze failed; and the Van Tromp trio, sometimes with Conetta and Madeleine Barclay, and always with Billy Grisdale and his bull pup, when they were not pointedly driven away, roamed the ship from bow to stern, and from bridge to engine-room. The Greys, prolonging their honeymoon, hid themselves in out-of-the-way corners like a pair of lovers; and the Sanfords, serenely enjoying their first real vacation, could be stumbled upon now and then – so Billy Grisdale averred – holding hands quite like the younger pair.

As for the men, candor compels the admission that the deadly blight of *ennui* seemed to be slowly settling down upon at least four of us. Van Dyck, though scrupulously careful of his responsibilities as host, was anything but good company when he was off duty. The major and Holly Barclay, with Ingerson and anybody who could be dragooned into taking a fourth hand, played cards hours on end in the yacht's smoking-room; for nominal stakes, John Grey hinted, when neither Ingerson nor Van Dyck was sitting in, but with the sky for the limit when either of the two really rich men was present and betting.

The second time Grey mentioned this I thought it might be well to dig a little deeper.

"You are Bonteck's guest, Jack, and so am I," I said bluntly. "Are you making charges?"

"Not me," returned the married lover, with a lapse into premarital carelessness of speech. And then, after a reflective moment, "But for that matter, I don't have to make them, Preble. Everybody buys wisdom of the major now and then over the card table. It has come to be a proverb, back home. For a supposedly rich man he plays a mighty thrifty game – and that remark is not original with me, not by a long shot."

"Possibly the major is saving his money for Gerald," I suggested, more to see what Grey would say than for any other reason.

Grey's slow wink was more expressive than many words.

"That worn-out joke doesn't fool you any more than it does me," he asserted baldly. "You've never seen Major Terwilliger in his great and unapproachable act of coupon-clipping, have you?"

I was obliged to admit that I had not.

"Well, neither has anyone else, I venture to say. He is a shrewd, shifty old rounder, Preble; no more and no less. And there are men in New York who will tell you that he sails pretty close to the wind a good bit of the time – that he has to to save his face. It's a nasty thing to say, but I more than half believe he is playing Gerald up to Conetta for purely fiduciary reasons."

"But Conetta has no money," I protested.

"No; but Aunt Mehitable has – a barrel of it. And it will come to Conetta, sooner or later – always provided Conetta marries to please Aunt Mehitable."

Now this statement was not exactly in accordance with the facts, as I knew them, or thought I knew them, and I said so.

"Miss Mehitable's will is already made, and I happen to know that her money will not go to Conetta. It will be divided among a number of charitable institutions."

We were on the starboard promenade forward, and Grey looked around as if to make sure there were no overhearers.

"I'm going to breach a professional confidence and tell you something, Preble, taking it for granted that it will go no farther. One day about three years ago, while I was reading for my Bar examinations in the office of Maxim, Townsend and Maxim, Miss Mehitable did make just such a will as you mention; I know it because I made the transcript of it. That will was left in the office safe, and something like a week later she came back, asked for it, got it, and destroyed it. Then she had Townsend draw another – which I also copied. That one, so far as I know, is still in existence and unchanged. It leaves a few bequests to the charity folk, and the bulk of the property to Conetta."

If Grey had drawn off and hit me in the face I could scarcely have been more dumfounded. For some inscrutable – and wicked – reason of her own, Aunt Mehitable had wanted to break our engagement, Conetta's and mine, and the loss of my patrimony had given her an easy half of the means. Upon hearing of my loss she had quickly supplied the other half by making the will which she didn't mean to let stand – which she had promptly destroyed as soon as I had been safely eliminated. The grim irony of her expedient might have been amusing if I hadn't been so angry. She might easily have lied to me about the disposition of her property, but that would have been against her principles. To quiet what she was probably calling her conscience, she had actually made the will with which she had clubbed me to death; a will which she fully intended to revoke, and did revoke – after I was out of the way.

How much or how little Grey suspected the turmoil he had stirred up in me by his breach of office confidence I do not know, but he was good enough to give me a chance to get back to normal, searching his pockets for a cigar, and, when he had found one, turning his back to me – and the breeze – while he lighted it.

"Do you think Miss Gilmore believes in the major's coupon clipping?" I asked, after I had contrived to swallow the shock he had given me.

Again he let me see the slow wink.

"That is the farcical part of it. For a sharp-eyed, keen-witted maiden lady who has made a good bit of real money buying and selling in the Street, it is little less than wonderful. But it's a fact, Preble; she *does* believe in it. She lets the major write himself off at his own valuation, and never dreams of asking to see a certified check. She seems to regard Jerry Dupuyster as one of the few really desirable matrimonial propositions on the market. That is why she is here – with Conetta."

This last assertion of Grey's told me nothing that I had not already set down as an obvious fact, but his gossip talk afforded a luminous commentary upon the manner in which an isolated group of human beings will secrete all sorts of small uncharities, if the isolation be only complete enough. These little incidents to the contrary notwithstanding, however, I could not see that Van Dyck was making much progress in his unmasking experiment. Up to this time, and outwardly, at least, we were still only a party of winter loiterers, pleasers, decently grateful to our host and decently and conventionally well-behaved. If there were any plots or conspiracies of the money-hunting sort in the air, they were not suffered to become unpleasantly obtrusive.

But for one member of the party I was conscious of a great and growing contempt. In former days we of the younger set had known Holly Barclay as a sort of reincarnation of the Beau Brummell type; an idler of the clubs who lived upon his wife's money, and who was much too indolent to be even manfully vicious. Good-looking, in a way, self-centered, and even more finically careful for the

creature comforts and luxuries than Major Terwilliger, I remember it had seemed grossly incredible to us younger folk that he could be the father of the thoughtful, high-minded and convincingly beautiful young woman who paid him the compliment of being his daughter.

From the beginning of the voyage Barclay's attitude had been sufficiently apparent to me, or I thought it was. I decided that he was somewhat anxiously weighing the pros and cons as between Van Dyck and Ingerson in the matrimonial scale; weighing them strictly with reference to the results as they might affect him, individually, and quite without concern for his daughter's future happiness. That Bonteck was a clean man and a gentleman, while his rival was everything that Van Dyck was not, appeared to cut no figure.

It was hugely farcical, if one could but shut his eyes to the possible tragedies involved. Holly Barclay had joined the *Andromeda's* company to dispose of his daughter. Ingerson had come as a cold-blooded buyer to the market. Miss Mehitable was hoping to corner the major and Gerald Dupuyster; and Mrs. Van Tromp, yielding precedence, of course, to Barclay and his schemings, had come on the chance of dividing the spoils, since one of the two chief matrimonial prizes would be left after Madeleine – or rather Madeleine's father – had secured the other.

That Mrs. Van Tromp's armament was only a secondary battery might have been denied by some. Alicia, the oldest of the trio, was, as I may have said, an attractive young woman of the athletic type, a rider to hounds, a champion swimmer, and a good comrade where men were concerned. In the modern meaning of the term she was a man's woman, with a sort of compelling charm that was all her own.

Beatrice, the second daughter, had, as has been noted, a bookish turn. If she had chosen to study surgery she would have been a ruthless vivisector. As a result of this inquiring bent, she had an astonishing, and sometimes rather disconcerting, knowledge of things as they are. But to offset the touch of the blue-stocking, she owned a pair of long-lashed eyes that kindled quickly at any torch of sentiment, and they were set in a face of uncommon sweetness – winsomeness, one would say, if the word were not so desperately outworn.

Edith, for whose sake Billy Grisdale was cutting a good half of his Sophomore year, was a replica, in rounder lines and easier curves, of her sister Alicia. Having been carefully held back to give her older sisters a clear field, she was still something of a tomboy, but her very roughnesses were lovable, and Billy's callow folly found, it must be admitted, its full and sufficient excuse in its object.

It was Edie Van Tromp, roaming the yacht like a restless bit of misdirected energy, as was her custom, who came to fling herself into the steamer chair next to mine; this in the afternoon of the day when John Grey had given me still less cause to love Miss Mehitable Gilmore.

"I'm bored, Mr. Richard Preble – bored to extinction!" she gasped, fanning herself with a vigor that was all her own. "Is nothing ever going to happen on this tiresome ship?"

"There are things happening all the time, if we only have eyes to perceive them," I told her, laughing. "In your own case, for example, there is Billy Grisdale. To an interested and sympathetic onlooker like myself it would seem that he is constantly happening in as many different ways as he can devise."

"Oh, Billy – yes," she admitted, with pouting emphasis. Then, with a great show of confidence: "Uncle Dick – I may call you Uncle Dick, if I want to, mayn't I? – if you were only a little older and grayer I might tell you something."

"Tell me anyhow," I urged. "I am old enough to be perfectly safe, don't you think?"

"It's Billy, and you started it," she went on pertly. "That boy is fairly worrying the life out of me. Positively, I'm getting the dreadful habit of carrying my head on my shoulder. He – he's always just there, you know, if I look around."

"Is that why you are bored?"

"I suppose it is; it must be. Nothing can ever come of it, of course. Billy is nothing but just a handsome, good-natured, sweet-tempered *boy*. It would be years and years, and then more years before – "

"So it would," I agreed. "And, besides, Billy has three brothers and two sisters coming along, and Grisdale *père* is only moderately well-to-do, as fortunes go nowadays."

Instantly Miss Edith's straight-browed eyes flashed blue fire.

"Money – always and forever money!" she flamed out. "I haven't heard anything else all my life! One would think that heaven itself was paved with it and that the angels wear gold coins for charmstrings. I *hate* it!"

"Oh, no, you don't," I hastened to say. "It's a good, broad-backed little beast, and you can always count upon it for carrying the load. And Billy will probably have to make his own way, without even so much as a loan of the little beast."

"I don't care! I think it is perfectly frightful the way we bow down and kowtow to your beast – the great god Cash! I'd rather wash dishes and make bread – for two!"

This seemed to be verging toward the edge of things serious. I knew that Mrs. Van Tromp was suffering Billy only because he was so absurdly young as to be supposedly harmless. But if Edith, the healthy-bodied and strong-willed, were even beginning to take notice, there was trouble ahead.

"We can none of us afford to defy the conventions, my dear girl," I cautioned, taking the avuncular rôle she had tried to thrust upon me. "And we mustn't let ourselves get into narrow little ruts. The play's the thing, and we are only a part of the audience – you and I."

"The play?" she echoed doubtfully. "You mean the – the – "

"I mean the great human comedy, of course. It is going on all around us, all the time."

"I don't get you," she said, in the free phrase which may have been her own, or may have been a Billy Grisdale transplantation.

"You are too young and inexperienced," I asserted in mock gravity. "Otherwise you could hardly have lived a week in the *Andromeda* without realizing that the stage is set, with the call-boy making his last hasty round, beating upon the doors of the dressing-rooms and summoning the people of the play to come and take their places."

"I can't understand a word you say!" she protested petulantly. "Do you mean Conetta and Jerry Dupuyster?"

"Miss Kincaide and Jerry are only two, and the cast of characters is large. Wait patiently, Edie, and you shall see. Meanwhile, if I am not mistaken, that long, low streak in the west – you can just make it out if you shade your eyes from the sun glare on the water – is land."

She was up and gone at the word, flying to the bridge and crying her discovery – or mine. What the land was, I could not tell. Van Dyck had made a joking mystery of the yacht's course, which, naturally, none of us could determine with any degree of accuracy merely by looking now and then at the telltale compass in the cabin ceiling. I fancied that Van Dyck's object in keeping us in the dark was chiefly to add something to the zest of the cruise, the interest lying in the uncertainty as to what landfall we should first make. As to this, however, nobody seemed to care greatly where we were going, or when we should arrive, so, as one may say, the small mystery had hitherto fallen flat.

But now there was a stir among the after-deck idlers, and Major Terwilliger, thrifty grasper at opportunity, immediately made a pool upon the name of the landfall – with Jack Grey whispering to me that the major had already fortified himself by casually questioning the hard-faced sailing-master as to the yacht's latest quadrant-reading – from which he had doubtless been able privately to prick off the latitude and approximate position of the *Andromeda* upon the cabin chart.

V

ANY PORT IN A STORM

As an easy matter of course, Major Terwilliger won the pool. The land sighted proved to be Cape Gracias á Dios, the easternmost point of Nicaragua. It would say itself that the Mosquito Coast, low, swampy, and with only three practicable harbors along its three-hundred-mile sweep, could have no attractions for a party of winter pleasers, and we were leaving Cape Gracias astern when the *Andromeda's* course was suddenly changed and she was headed for land.

Climbing to the bridge a little later, where I found Van Dyck setting the course for the Madeira-man who had the wheel, I learned the reason for the unannounced change.

"Trouble in the engine-room," Van Dyck explained. "The port propeller shaft is running hot and threatening to quit on us. We'll have to lay up for a few hours until Haskell can find out what has gone wrong."

"The shaft hasn't been giving any trouble heretofore, has it?" I asked.

"No; Haskell says it began to heat all at once, shortly after we sighted land."

"You'll put in at Gracias?"

He nodded. "The harbor isn't much, and the town is still less. But we don't need anything but an anchorage. Haskell thinks we won't be held up very long."

That was a cheering prediction, but the event proved it to be too optimistic. The mechanical trouble turned out to be in the thrust bearing of the propeller shaft, and it was more serious than Haskell, chief of the engine-room squad, had supposed it would be. The bearing which, like everything else on the yacht, had been cared for with warship thoroughness, had apparently run dry and it was badly scored and "cut," as a machinist would say. The repair called for hours of patient scraping and filing, and Haskell, who had served as an assistant engineer in the Navy, was properly humiliated.

"It sure gets my goat, Mr. Preble," he confided to me when I climbed down into his bailiwick some three or four hours after we had dropped anchor in Gracias á Dios harbor. "It looks as if it was on me, and maybe it is, but I've never had anything like this happen to me before – not since I began as an oiler on one of the old Cunarders. We have automatic lubrication; all the latest wrinkles; and yet that cussed shaft's tore up like it had been runnin' dry for a week. You're an engineer – I just wish you'd look at it."

To oblige him I donned overalls and crawled down into the shaft tunnel. A glance at the excoriated bearing showed that Haskell hadn't exaggerated. Quinby, Haskell's first assistant, was scraping and smoothing in a space that was too confined to let a man take the kinks out of his back, and in which there was no room for two men to work.

"That is no hurry job," I told Haskell, after I had crawled out. "I think I may safely tell our people that they may have shore leave, if they want it."

"You can that," Haskell grinned. "We'll be right here to-morrow morning, and blamed lucky if we can heave up the mud hook by some time to-morrow afternoon."

It was too late to spread the news after I left the engine-room. When I reached the main deck all of our ship's company had apparently turned in, though there were lights in the smoking-room to hint that the card-players were still at their favorite pastime. But as I went aft to smoke a bed-time pipe I found Madeleine Barclay curled up in one of the deep wicker chairs.

"Pardon me," I said; "I didn't know there was any one here. Don't let me disturb your maiden meditations. I'll vanish."

"You needn't," she returned quite amiably; then, seeing the pipe: "And you may smoke if you want to. You know well enough that I don't mind. How long do we stay here?"

"That is upon the knees of the gods. I've just been below, and I should say we are good for twenty-four hours, or maybe more, though Haskell thinks we may get out by to-morrow afternoon."

"Do we go ashore?"

I shook my head. "The others may if they want to; I shan't."

"Why not?"

"The *Andromeda* after-deck is much more comfortable than anything to be found ashore in this corner of Nicaragua."

"You have been here before?"

"Yes; I came around here once, something over a year ago, on a steamer from Belize. We made a stop of a few hours and I was besotted enough to leave the ship. I shan't make any such mistake again."

"Gracias á Dios," she said musingly. "I wonder who said it first – and why he was thanking God – particularly?"

I laughed. "Some storm-tossed mariner of the early centuries, I imagine, who was glad enough to make a landfall of any sort."

"Storm-tossed," she repeated. "Aren't we all more or less storm-tossed, Richard?"

"I suppose we are, either mentally, morally, or physically. It's a sad enough world, if you want to take that angle."

"But I don't want to take that angle. When I do take it, it's because I have to."

Being as much of a hypocrite as any of those whom Van Dyck had proposed putting under his analytical microscope, I said: "But there are no constraining influences at work upon any of us aboard this beautiful little pleasure ship – there can't be."

"Do you think not?" she threw in; and then, without warning: "How about you and Conetta, Richard?"

In common justice to Conetta I had to feign an indifference I was far from feeling – which was more of the hypocrisy.

"That was all over and done with three years ago, as you must know, Madeleine. She wasn't aware of the fact that I was to be in the *Andromeda* party; and I didn't know she was to be – at least, not until after I had committed myself to Bonteck. Of course we promptly quarreled the moment we met. Perhaps you may have noticed that we've been quarreling ever since."

She smiled soberly.

"You have made it obvious – both of you; perhaps a little too obvious." Then, after a momentary silence: "Did Miss Mehitable give the real reason for that other and mortal quarrel, three years ago, Richard?"

"The reason she gave was enough, wasn't it?"

"Some of us thought it wasn't. I don't know how you were acting, but Conetta didn't give a very good imitation of a person who has 'agreed to disagree.'"

"I can fill out the picture for you," I said grimly. "I was acting like a man who had been fool enough to lose his temper at the invitation of a crabbed and rather spiteful person who was old enough to be his mother."

"Ah!" she said; "I thought it was Miss Mehitable." Then: "Was it because you had lost your money?"

"Yes," I said, merely because the simple affirmative seemed to afford the easiest way of brushing aside explanations which might not explain.

It was then that Miss Madeleine Barclay became a plagiarist, stealing the very words uttered so hotly by Edie Van Tromp only a few hours earlier.

"Money – always money! I *hate* it, Dick Preble!"

I did not answer her as I had answered Edith.

"It is a holy hatred, Madeleine. The love of money, and what money will buy, has proved the undoing of – but I don't need to preach to you. Let's talk about something pleasant. Have you ever seen a finer night than this?"

"A fine night, and ideal conditions. In a way, we've almost left the strugglesome, toiling, avariciously dollar-chasing old world behind us, haven't we?"

"You say 'almost'; why not quite?"

She made a little gesture inclusive of the *Andromeda* as a whole.

"Too many reminders of the money and what it will buy. We'd need to be shipwrecked upon some uninhabited island to make the isolation perfect. As that isn't going to happen, I think I'll make the most of what we have and go to bed. Good-night." And she left me.

My pipe had gone out and I refilled it. While I had called the night fine, it was measurably warm. With the yacht at anchor there was little breeze, and what little there was came from sea. My stateroom was on the port side, and as the *Andromeda* was lying with that side toward the land, I was reluctant to leave the open air for the closer quarters between decks.

It was while I was smoking a second pipe in comfortable solitude that I fell asleep. The lapse into unconsciousness seemed only momentary, but when I picked up the pipe which had fallen into my lap there was no fire in it and the bowl had grown cold. Also, in the interval, long or short, the yacht's lights had been switched off and the after-deck was shrouded in the soft darkness of the tropical night. From somewhere in the under-depths came a faint clatter of tools to tell me that Haskell and his men were still at work on the disabled shaft, but apart from this the silence was unbroken.

Descending the cabin stair I groped my way to the door of my room, which was the farthest forward on the port side, and I remembered afterward that I thought it odd that the saloon lights were all off. On all other occasions when I had been up late I had found a single incandescent left on; one, at least.

Inside of the luxurious little sleeping-room that had been assigned to me I felt for the wall switch and snapped it. Nothing happened. I snapped it back and on again, and still nothing happened. Down in the machinery hold I could hear the fluttering murmur of the small auxiliary engine which ran the lighting dynamo, and since it was running, there seemed to be no reason why the lights shouldn't come on. But they wouldn't.

While I was speculating upon this curious failure of the lighting system and wondering if it were worth while to go below to ask Haskell what was the matter with the cabin circuit, sounds like the subdued splashing of oars cautiously handled came floating in through the open port. Since I judged it must be midnight or worse, it was only natural that I should want to know why a boat should be coming off to the *Andromeda* after all the yacht's people save myself were abed and asleep. Not being able to see anything from the stateroom port-light, I hurried back through the darkened saloon and up to the deck. From the rail on the shoreward side I could make out the dim shape of the approaching craft. As nearly as I could determine, it was a large row-boat with at least four men in it; at all events there were four oars. I could see and count the phosphorescent swirls as the blades were dipped.

It was evident at once that the boat was coming off to the *Andromeda*. We were anchored well out in the harbor, and there was nothing beyond us; nothing but the harbor mouth and the open sea. Visions of banditry began to flit through my brain. When I had been last in the Caribbean, some three months earlier, Nicaragua had been in the throes of one of its perennial guerrilla wars. A rich man's yacht, offering dazzling loot, might easily be a tempting bait to any lawless band happening to be within striking distance.

While I was straining my eyes to get a better sight of the approaching boat, and deliberating as to whether or not I hadn't better call Van Dyck or the sailing-master, a voice at my elbow said: "So you are up late, too, are you, Dick?" and I faced about with a prickling shock of surprise to find Bonteck standing beside me.

"I must be getting weak-kneed and nervous," I said. "I thought I was the only person awake at this end of things, and you gave me a start. What boat is that?"

"A shore boat, I suppose," he answered evenly. "After I found that we were likely to be delayed until to-morrow, I told Goff he might give some of his men shore leave for a few hours. They were asking for it."

"But that isn't one of the *Andromeda's* boats," I objected.

"No; they didn't take one of our boats; they hailed a harbor craft of some sort. I fancied they'd make a night of it, but it seems they didn't."

"What time is it now?" I asked.

"Two bells in the middle watch – otherwise one o'clock."

While we were talking, the boat was pulled up to the port bows of the yacht and a number of men, some half-dozen or more, came aboard. We could see dark figures climbing the rail, but since the yacht was painted white, and Van Dyck and I were both wearing yachting flannels, I suppose we were invisible to the group at the bows. In a minute or so the boat pushed off, cut a clumsy half circle in turning, and headed for the shore, and there was just enough of my foolish nervousness left to suggest that the oarsmen were still trying not to make any more noise than they could help. But the second thought made me smile at the remains of the nervousness. What more natural than that our returning shore-leave men had cautioned the boatmen against making a racket and waking everybody on the *Andromeda*?

"I take it you've been down with Haskell," I said to Bonteck, after the shore boat had become a vanishing blur in the darkness.

"Yes. He is as sore as a boil about that propeller shaft. Says he never had anything like that happen to him before, and that it reflects upon him as chief. He tried to tell me how unaccountable it was, but I hardly know enough about mechanical things to keep me from spoiling."

"It is rather unaccountable," I offered. "I was down a few hours ago and crawled into the shaft tunnel to have a look at it. Ordinarily, when a bearing as large as that begins to run dry, it gives warning some little time beforehand. But Quinby, Haskell's second, says he put his hand on it less than an hour before it began to complain, and it was perfectly cool."

"Oh, well," was Van Dyck's easy-going rejoinder, "such things are all in a life-time. We're in luck that it didn't 'seize,' as Haskell says, and twist itself off. You're yawning as if you were sleepy. Better turn in and get whatever this hot night will let you have. Good-night."

That was the end of the day for me, save that when I went to my stateroom and once more tried the wall switch the lights came on as usual.

The next morning, after a breakfast so early that I sat alone at the long table in the white-lacquered saloon, I went below and offered my services as those of a highly educated jack-of-all-trades to Haskell.

"By golly, you're saving my life, Mr. Preble," said our chief mechanic, whose eyes were looking like two burned holes in a blanket. "If you'll boss the job and let me get about a couple of hours in the hay –"

"Sure," I agreed; and crawling into the extra suit of overclothes, I proceeded to do it, becoming so mechanically interested in a short time that I not only neglected to call Haskell when his two hours were up, but also let the luncheon hour go by unheeded.

By keeping faithfully at it, our gang got the recalcitrant thrust bearing in shape by the middle of the afternoon, the fires were broken out and the blowers put on, and by four o'clock the *Andromeda* was once more under way and pointing her sharp nose for the open water. As I came up out of the engine-hold to make a bolt for a bath and clean clothes, I saw that Van Dyck had the wheel and was apparently heading the ship straight out toward the Mosquito Cays. As the trim little vessel – which was little only by comparison with the great liners of which it was a copy in the small – went shearing its way at full speed through the heaving ground swell with the westering sun fairly astern, I could not

help wondering what our next port of call would be, and if it would be a disabled piece of machinery which would drive us into it.

VI

A SEA CHANGE

With the Nicaraguan coast fairly astern, and the *Andromeda* picking her way gingerly among the cays and reefs which extend from fifty to one hundred miles off the eastern hump of the Central American camel, we soon made the open Caribbean, and our course was once more laid indefinitely to the south and east. If we were to hold this general direction we should bring up in due time somewhere upon the Colombian or Venezuelan coast of South America.

Watching my opportunity, I cornered Van Dyck on the bridge at a moment when he had relieved the man at the wheel; this on our second evening out from Gracias á Dios. As I came up, he was changing the course more to the southward, and I asked him if we were slated to do the Isthmus and the Canal.

"I hadn't thought very much about it," he answered half-absently. "Do you think the others would like it?"

"The Isthmus is pretty badly hackneyed, nowadays," I suggested; "and for your particular purpose – "

"Forget it!" he broke in abruptly. And then: "It's a hideous failure, Dick, as you have doubtless found out for yourself."

"Which part of it is a failure – your experiment, or the other thing?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'the other thing'," he bit out.

"Then I'll tell you: You thought it wouldn't be such a bad idea to show Madeleine Barclay what a vast difference there is between yourself and Ingerson as a three-meal-a-day proposition; as a steady diet, so to speak, in an environment which couldn't very well be changed or broken. Wasn't that it?"

"Something of the sort, maybe," he admitted, rather sheepishly, I thought.

"And it isn't working out?"

"You can see for yourself."

"What I see is that you are giving Ingerson a good bit more than a guest's chance."

"You don't understand," he returned gloomily.

"Naturally. I'm no mind reader."

While the *Andromeda* was shearing her way through three of the long Caribbean swells he was silent. Then he said: "I'm going to tell you, Dick; I shall have a fit if I don't tell somebody. Madeleine has turned me down – not once, you know, but a dozen times. It's the cursed money!"

"But Ingerson has money, too," I put in.

"I know; but that is different. Can't you conceive of such a thing as a young woman's turning down the man she really cares for, and then letting herself be dragooned into marrying somebody else?"

"You are asking too much," I retorted. "You want me to believe that a sane, well-balanced young woman like Madeleine Barclay will refuse a good fellow because he happens to be rich, and marry the other kind of a fellow who has precisely the same handicap. It may be only my dull wit, but I can't see it."

"I could make you see it if you were a little less thick-headed," he cut in impatiently. And then he added: "Or if you knew Mr. Holly Barclay a little better."

It was just here that I began to see a great light, with Madeleine Barclay threatening to figure as a modern martyr to a mistaken sense of duty. Did she know that her father would make his daughter's husband his banker? And was she generously refusing to involve the man she loved?

"It ought to make you all the more determined, Bonteck," I said, after I had reasoned it out. "It is little less than frightful to think of – the other thing, I mean. Ingerson will buy her for so much cash down; that is about what it will amount to."

"Don't you suppose I know it?" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Good Lord, Dick, I've racked my brain until it is sore trying to think up some way of breaking the combination. You don't know the worst of it. Holly Barclay is in deep water. Strange as it may seem, his sister, Emily Vancourt, named him, of all the incompetents in a silly world, as her executor and the guardian of her son. The boy is in college in California, and next year he will come of age."

"And Barclay can't pay out?"

"You've said it. He has squandered the boy's fortune as he has Madeleine's. I don't know how he did it, but I fancy the bucket-shops have had the most of it. Anyway, it's gone, and when the fatal day of accounting rolls around he will stand a mighty good chance of going to jail."

"Does Madeleine know?" I asked.

"Not the criminal part, you may be sure. She merely knows that her father is in urgent need of money – a good, big chunk of it. And she also knows, without being told, that the man who marries her will be invited to step into the breach. Isn't it horrible?"

"You have discovered the right word for it," I agreed. And then: "You are not letting it stand at that, are you?"

He did not reply at once. From the after-deck came sounds of cheerful laughter, with Alicia Van Tromp's rich contralto dominating; came also the indistinguishable words of a popular song which Billy Grisdale was chanting to his own mandolin accompaniment. Presently Jack Grey's mellow tenor joined in, and in the refrain I could hear Conetta's silver-toned treble. It jarred upon me a little; and yet I tried to make myself believe that I was glad she was happy enough to sing. True to her word, she had consistently maintained the barrier quarrelsome between us; and Jerry Dupuyster was playing his part like an obedient little soldier.

"You'd say it was a chance for a man to do something pretty desperate, wouldn't you, Dick?" Van Dyck said, breaking the long pause in his own good time.

"I think you would be justified in considering the end, rather than the particular means," I conceded.

"I have had a crazy project up my sleeve – a sort of forlorn hope, you know. But after working out all of the details time and again, I've always weakened on it."

"Perhaps some of the details are weak," I suggested, willing to be helpful if I could.

"One of them is, and I can't seem to build it up so that it will seem reasonably plausible. Of course you know that I'd pay the father out of the prison risk in the hollow half of a minute if I could make it appear as anything less than sheer charity. But I can't do anything like that openly; and if I should do it in any other ordinary way, Madeleine would be sure to find out about it and argue that I was merely lowering myself to Ingerson's plane – paving the way with the money that she despises. And she'd turn me down again – with some show of reason. I am still sane enough to foresee that."

"If Miss Barclay only had some money of her own with which to buy her release from that unspeakable father of hers," I began.

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