

HARPER  
*of*  
HEAVEN

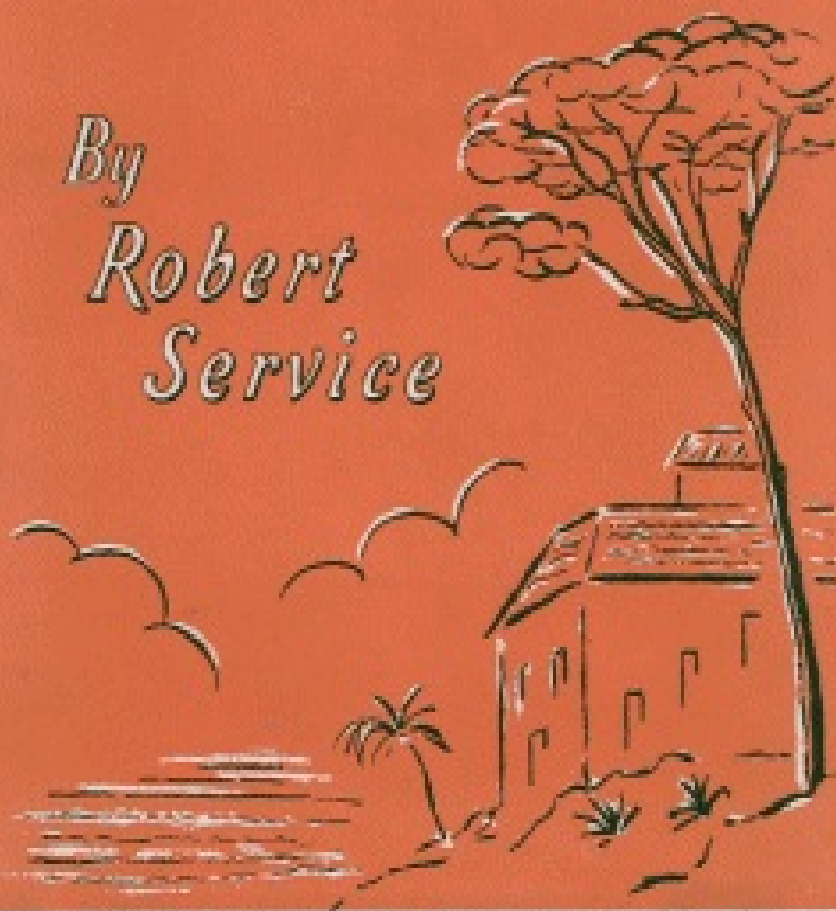
*Robert  
Service*



# HARPER *of* HEAVEN

*By*  
*Robert*  
*Service*

*Benn*



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HARPER  
OF  
HEAVEN

# BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SPELL OF THE YUKON  
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BALLADS OF A CHEECHAKO  
RHYMES OF A ROLLING STONE  
RHYMES OF A RED CROSS MAN  
BALLADS OF A BOHEMIAN  
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BATH TUB BALLADS

## *Autobiography*

PLOUGHMAN OF THE MOON  
HARPER OF HEAVEN

# HARPER OF HEAVEN

*A Record of Radiant Living*

*by*

ROBERT SERVICE

*Author of PLOUGHMAN OF THE MOON*

*Although my sum of years may be  
Nigh seventy and seven,  
With eyes of ecstasy I see  
And hear the Harps of Heaven.*

NEW YORK  
DODD, MEAD & COMPANY  
1948

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TO MY WIFE AND DAUGHTER

*Who have helped me to a  
Heap of Happiness*

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Harper of Heaven, A Record of Radiant

# Living

## *Chapter One*

### SINISTER ISTAMBOUL

Wistfully I watched a yellow dog water the sacred stone of Saint Sophia. As if suspecting that I would fain do likewise, a Turkish sentry eyed me malevolently. So, slinking into a hollow of the wall, I lit my pipe. . . . The next instant I found myself sprawling in the gutter.

What had happened? I was staring at the business end of a bayonet with, beyond it, that truculent Turk. Like magic a crowd had gathered, in their eyes bitter hostility. A nice position for a would-be war correspondent. What was *going* to happen?

Then the crowd parted and a beautiful young man surged to my rescue. With one hand he yanked me to my feet, and with the other tore open my Burberry. There on the sleeve of my new uniform was the brassard of the Crimson Crescent. Pointing to it triumphantly he harangued the crowd. The effect was magical. Scowls became smiles; growls, cheers; even the sentry cringed as if he wanted to kiss my hand. So with salvos of applause my saviour lugged me away.

“Would you strike a match on the tomb of your ancestors?” he demanded reproachfully. Privately I thought I would, but I hastened to say: “Certainly not.”

“Well, that wall was the back of a SHRINE, and you, an infidel, were desecrating it. No wonder that mob was ready to rend you apart. But you should wear your Red Crescent armband *outside* your coat, then they would forgive you anything. Also, you should wear a fez. I have an uncle who sells them. Come! We will see him.”

He was a masterful young man and, with the memory of six inches of cold steel jabbing at my diaphragm, I went willingly. Besides, he was a most attractive creature

—tall, with blond hair and velvety eyes. He made me think of the David of Michael Angelo. I have always admired handsome men; yet I noticed that women we passed averted their eyes, while when I remarked on their charms he responded with indifference. So he led me to the shop of an old Armenian near Galata Bridge where the Fez was stacked in variety. I hesitated between khaki and crimson, but finally chose one of grey Persian lamb which I wore with a rakish tilt in place of my honey-hued fedora. David looked at me approvingly.

“You look a regular Turk! But you should not smoke that filthy pipe. Here everyone smokes the cigarette. I have an uncle who sells them. I will lead you to him.”

So we mounted the hill to Pera and in a little shop another old Armenian, who looked twin-brother to the first, sold me a box of gold-tipped cigarettes too pretty to smoke. Sighing I stuffed my friendly briar into my pocket; then, as I felt that David was getting bossy, I took the initiative. “I suppose you have not got an uncle who sells liquid nourishment? If yes, lead me to him.”

So presently behold me seated on the terrace of a grand café on a busy boulevard. It was the first time I had sat on the terrace of a café and it enchanted me. “Order something exotic,” I told David. He called the waiter. “A *Susanna*,” he commanded. The man brought two bottles, one golden, the other crystal. He poured a portion of each into a tall glass and the result was an amber liquid, pleasing to the eye. Hopefully I tasted it. . . . Bah! “It’s like medicine,” I said.

“A blend of gentian and aniseed—good for the kidneys. . . . No, I won’t have one. A Turkish coffee, if you please. But try again. I think you’ll get to like it.”

I did try. . . . No grimace this time. My third and final swallow was almost agreeable. A sense of comfort surprised me. Suddenly bold I called the waiter. “*Encore un Susanna*.” As he compounded his nectar I looked for the approbation of David. There, like a blot of mud, was his coffee but he was gone. So also was my honey-coloured hat of Austrian velours. . . . Then I saw him at the back of the café trying it on before a mirror. He was prinking and posing like a woman and I must say he looked very fetching. Presently he returned. “Please sell me your hat, Sir, now you do not need it any more. I have no money but I will serve you as a guide.”

“Nothing doing,” I said. “You don’t imagine I’m going to sport this goddam fez all my life.” Then I looked at him more closely. Though he wore some gaudy rings and stank of cheap perfume the poor devil was pathetically shabby. . . . “But I have a nice polka-dot tie I’ll give you.” He swallowed his disappointment, and I some more *Susanna*. It was having a buoyant effect on me. From contentment I soared to happiness, then to joy. And so in a sunshiny mist I reviewed the past month.

---

I never liked Germans, and from the first that Luxury Liner intimidated me. So different from the roach-ridden old tramp in which I had crossed fifteen years before. There was a gilt elevator I never dared take, for the liftman awed me. He was dressed like a major of hussars and looked at me haughtily. Yet when we left the boat he lined up like the rest. As I had never availed myself of his services I felt I did not owe him anything; but there he was, obviously expectant, and I had not the moral courage to pass him up. Yet to this day I recall his look of contempt at the *half-dollar* I gave him. I thought he was going to hand it back.

Then there was the Captain, a porcine man, crusted with medals and smeared with gold braid. He was only visible in the evening when he had a chair placed next to the orchestra and listened to every note of the music. He was pig-eyed and sausage-necked; but he had the soul of a musician, and probably envied the meanest member of the band.

But our celebrity was a Publisher—a little grey man who looked like a pocket edition of General Grant. He accentuated this by sitting for an hour in the gymnasium every morning on the mechanical horse, very military as he rose in the saddle. Perhaps he thought the chubby young man who waited there was admiring him, but I was saying: “Darn the little blighter! When will he let me have the gee gee? . . . Although I have four best-sellers to my credit he takes no more notice of me than if I was an earwig. No one does on this bloody boat. I’m just a lousy little nobody.”

It was galling, but my inferiority complex rode me most at meal times. There were four at our table—a German American, a German Jew and his wife. The first was plump, pasty, important, a specialist in velours hats, and he was now going to Vienna to buy for a New York firm. He noted my honey-coloured fedora. “A cheap hat,” he said, and asked to examine it. Sadly I gave it, but his face lit up. “Why, this is first-class! I wouldn’t be surprised if I had imported it myself.” Then he turned to the group around us. “This gentleman is the possessor of a very fine velours hat, and I should know.” Though their interest was of the politest I could see respect for me was born. I might have written a dozen books but the ownership of that hat gave me more prestige.

The German Jew and his wife were a honeymoon couple from Chicago where he was in the garments trade. She was pretty but temperamental and when the two men talked in German, which she did not understand, she bridled. The first time it happened she turned to me: “Let’s have a little huddle of our own.” The second time she left the table. When we reached Gibraltar I bought some roses and innocently gave them to her, but he made a fuss. Told me I had a nerve giving flowers to his

wife. Only the end of the voyage saved me from unpleasantness.

The nicest men on board were professional gamblers, yet after I had told them I loathed cards they lost interest in me. There was a German Jewess who was a playwright. She was going to Berlin to see the latest successes and consider their exploitation possibilities. There was a well-known caricaturist who was asked by the playwright to make a sketch of her. She must have been very sorry. Oh, what a beak he gave her! But if I was disdained by everyone we were all ignored by a German Baron with a Brunehilde of a wife, who was too haughty to mix with anyone. A big blond man, he became an ace in the war, and when he was shot down I was glad he was killed, not because he was a dangerous enemy but because he had been so imperious! However, the whole boat was tainted with Teutonism, till one felt one was despised by even the meanest member of the crew.

Naples leapt at me with a riot of colour and a roar of life. In my Yukon cabin I had read the travel sketches of Theophile Gautier and longed to write jewelled prose. Now I tried to depict this beauty that amazed my sight, but the best of my word-painting was vain. Yet I was conscious that a ferment of filth and ancient corruption lay beneath the loveliness. Being a bit of a Puritan I was shocked at the physical frankness and sex freedom of the common people. . . . A man relieving himself in the hollow of a wall and tipping his hat to a passing female friend. . . . Guides who begged me to visit mirrored rooms where naked girls displayed the twenty-nine Postures of Pompeii. . . . A boy with the face of an angel who sought to sell me his thirteen year old sister for a lira or two. . . . All these gave me an inkling of a sensuous life to which I was a stranger. I am naturally attracted to the slums of a city but those of Naples nauseated me.

The railway journey to Brindisi found me spellbound gazing at the Italian landscape. There were so many tunnels it was like running through a flute—blinks of brilliance, then gulps of gloom. At Taranto a Roman nobleman joined us and insisted on spraying the compartment with a disinfectant. I wanted to keep the window open but the conductor closed it. "Heem seek," he said, pointing to the patrician, so I realised I was in a land of aristocratic privilege. He also asked me not to smoke, so politely I put my pipe away.

I have a memory of moonlight on the Aegean that made me think of "magic foam on fairy seas forlorn," of Athens and the Parthenon, serenely lustrous like a jewel in a sunset of mellow gold. . . . If only I could have been free to enjoy it, but I was a peon of the pen, condemned to turn it into copy. Some day, I thought, I will enjoy travel for its own sake and to hell with this tyranny of the typewriter. So by seas of cornflower blue I came to ten-tiered Istamboul with its domes and minarets gleaming

in the sunrise. . . . And now I was on the terrace of its finest café with a fez cocked over one eye, a gilt-tipped cigarette between my lips and a gorgeous concoction called a *Susanna* at my elbow—marvellously happy and delightfully lit up.

---

In this mellow mood I was aware of a familiar figure regarding me furiously—or rather regarding David. Then David vanished and the figure approached. It was my boss in the Red Cross, Doctor Dilly who looked like a duck. He had a spatulate nose, beady eyes and a negligible chin, yet he was no quack. At first I thought he was peevish about my Turkish get-up, but it was not that. “Do you know whose company you were in?” he began.

“That was David. Charming fellow. Saved me from the bayonet of a *bazi-bazouk* or something. Might have been massacred by the mob but for dear David.”

“That, Sir,” said the Doctor grimly, “is one of the most notorious fairies of Istamboul.”

“What’s a fairy?” I asked blankly.

“Good God! I mean a pansy, an Oscar Wilde chap.”

“Heavens! I didn’t know such people existed. We had nothing of that kind in the Yukon.”

“Well, we cannot have you consorting with company of that kind. Remember the uniform you are wearing.”

“But he saved me from bloody butchery. Besides, I promised him a polka-dot tie.”

“Forget it. What’s that poison you’re drinking? Ah, a mixture of gentian and anisette. Hum! Very bad for the kidneys. Well, I’ll have one anyway.”

So he ordered a *Susanna* and mellowed under its spell while we watched the passing throng. . . . But perhaps I should explain why I came to be in the Red Cross Section of the Turkish army. It was over breakfast at the hotel when we encountered, and after we had talked awhile he said: “You’re the sort of chap we want. Why don’t you join us?”

I looked at the Red Crescent on his arm, the Turkish equivalent for the Red Cross, and I thought it might be a good idea. As a war correspondent I was a dud. Although I could hear the guns of Tchatalje I could not get near them. This might be my chance. I did not care a darn for the Red Cross but I wanted to get copy. “I’m on,” I said.

So next day I bought a khaki uniform and pinned the Red Crescent on my arm. As I saw myself in the mirror I felt quite impressed, a semi-soldier, capable of deeds of near-danger. Then I reported and was given a job in the mosque of Saint Sophia,

now turned into a hospital. There in the palace of Constantine, amid marble magnificence, each tiny cot held its mite of misery. Their hollow faces seemed all eyes that gazed with pitiful pleading. I would have given anything to help them but all I could do was to hand dressings to the male nurses. The wounded suffered from bed sores and were like pathetic animals with oh such trust and gratitude in their liquid eyes! When I realised I was doing this to make grist for my pen I felt rather a low dog. Even as I fetched water and passed bandages I was exploiting their sufferings. So I put in eight hours a day, mostly hanging round, and returned to the hotel to sleep.

---

To my satisfaction the Doctor ordered a second *Susanna*, making me almost feel as if I had invented it, and we sat there more or less bemused and watched the scene. Troops passed continually, now a long defile of convalescents, lagging forlornly, each a picture of hopeless misery. . . . Then a Turkish regiment with new uniforms, stepping snappily. Their German trained officers shouted to the men to stamp the left foot every time they brought it down; but while those in their vicinity obeyed, the stamps decreased with distance till they finally died out. . . . Now a company of mountain Kurds, small wiry men with donkeys carrying light guns and wearing no special uniform. . . . Lastly streams of refugees, peasants with ox-drawn wagons loaded with sacks of grain, seeking a new home. And over all boomed ceaselessly the guns of Tchatalje.

The Doctor stared at the passing procession, then turned to me and indicated two men at a nearby table. "German agents," he whispered. "This place is infested with them. The Germans are running the whole show. Yesterday I found my room had been entered and someone had gone through my papers. You want to be careful. Lock up everything, or carry it about with you. The woman who runs the hotel is a German spy."

"They have nothing on me," I said. "I'm a simple writer hoping to be a war correspondent. Oh, if I only could get to the Front!"

"I could get you a little nearer than you are," he said thoughtfully. "You're not much use to us at Saint Sophia. If you like I'll send you down to the cholera camp at San Stephano where you might grab more material and maybe help us out a bit. Of course, there's a certain amount of danger. You don't want to die of the plague, I imagine?"

"Not particularly. But anything's better than stagnating here."

"Well, we're establishing a post there and I'd like you to take a ton of rice down tomorrow. You'll have to get it through the Customs, load it on our boat and deliver

it at the camp. The Turks will charge you duty on it, even though we are bringing it to feed their own soldiers. Rotten bastards! Well, I'd better give you money to pay the duty."

From his breast pocket he drew a leather bag full of gold and counted out thirty sovereigns. "There, that should be enough. Better keep it on your person. Here are the papers you need."

As I stowed them away I noticed the two supposed agents watching us intently, but I doubted if they were Germans. They were more like Levantines, capable of cutting a throat for a dollar. I was sorry the Doctor had not slipped me the coins more discreetly. Right then I determined to be very careful. So, with wishes for good luck he left me; but as I went my own way I happened to turn. . . . There were the two following me. Somehow my heart sank and I had a sense of danger.



## *Chapter Two*

### CHOLERA CAMP

When I returned to my flea-infested room I gazed around anxiously. My imagination was working and I looked for signs of secret searching. Were the toilet articles just as I had left them? Had my bag been unstrapped? My papers—was it thus I had arranged them? And indeed it seemed to me there was disorder everywhere. But then I realised I was suffering from a muzzy headache, so I lay down and dozed for a few hours. I would not return to Saint Sophia, I decided, salving my conscience with the thought that I would never be missed. “Where’s that reporter?” someone might say. “Well, the bastard was only in the way anyway.”

At dinner I joined two genuine war correspondents—Grimstone an Australian, morose and lean; McHaggie a Scot, bandy-legged and loquacious. Both were aching to be at the Front and to send some copy to their papers. They had read some of my work, though they were rather ribald about it. They humbled me, for their experience put me at a disadvantage. Their talk was of the difficulties of getting stories out with the greatest speed, either by telegraph or courier. I could do nothing like that. I had a commission to send in articles at so much a word and by mail. They were newsmen; I an itinerant journalist.

“We canna get leave to go to the bloody Front,” said McHaggie (usually known as McHaggis) “so we’re thinkin’ of buyin’ an old car and slippin’ off. Nae doot we’ll be stoppit and pit under arrest but we’ll maybe get some stuff before they catch us. Now, if you care to come along and share expenses you’ll likely see some fun. There’s a big battle due out Adrianople way. We might get in on it.”

“And you might come in useful,” added Grimstone, “with that chocolate soldier uniform of yours. I’m told you speak a bit of French too.”

“I’ll come,” I said. “It’s decent of you to take me. I’ll only be doing articles so I won’t interfere with any scoop you get.” Of course I envied them their chance of getting a big story hot on the wire, but I thought my stuff might make up in colour and vitality for its tardiness. Stevens and Harding Davis were my models and I could ape them. Yes, I would share the adventure.

In the meantime I had to consider San Stefano, and as my headache persisted I thought I would go for a walk. Crossing Galata Bridge I found myself in the sinister byways of old Istamboul. Fascinated I wandered on, hardly meeting a soul. It was like a city of the dead, the only sound the howling of the pariah dogs that scoured the gutters for offal. The sky was flushed by floods of light and guns boomed at intervals. An eerie atmosphere. I rather enjoyed it, till I was suddenly conscious that I was being shadowed.

As I stood on Galata Bridge I had been aware of the two men. I would not have noticed them had there not been something familiar in their appearance. Where had I seen them before? Then I remembered—the Levantines on the terrace of the café. Yet without apprehension I watched them cross the bridge and disappear into the gloom beyond.

And now, as I looked back, I could see them at the end of the street. I tried to laugh. Perhaps it was imagination, but all the same I hurried my pace. Rounding the corner I almost ran to the end of another street and waited there in the shadow. I saw them halt under the light as if searching, and now I was certain it was the couple of the café. I remembered how they had watched the Doctor hand me that gold, and how I had stowed it away under my tunic. I admit I was nervously keyed up, yet that was hardly an excuse for the panic that now seized me. Again that instinct of danger possessed me, and I ran as if for my life.

The street I was in was short, but before I had reached its end I saw the two hot on my heels. I had no doubt now that they were after me, so I took the first turning and ran blindly. This street was longer and to the right was a big blank space. I plunged into its darkness, stumbling forward till I fell over an obstacle. A little stunned I lay there panting, then I realised I had tripped over a tomb. Around me vaguely I could see others and I knew that I was in a Turkish cemetery.

Suddenly I saw the pair passing only a few yards away. They, too, were running and I blessed the blackness that divided us. Moving ever so quietly I shrank deeper into the darkness. I had just reached what I considered a safe spot when I saw my pursuers doubling back. For what seemed ages they halted, staring into the cemetery, then as if reluctantly they gave up the chase.

For a full hour I lay there not daring to move. Perhaps it was the Doctor's caution, perhaps the gold I carried, perhaps the sinister surroundings, but I was in an unreasonable funk. Until the coast was clear I would not venture out of my hiding place—no, not if I had to wait until dawn. How long I would have remained I do not know had I not spied another figure coming down the long street. Crawling nearer to the edge of the cemetery I saw that it was a man in a military cloak, so letting him get

a fair start I hurried after him.

He was a Turkish officer dressed in a sky-blue uniform. He had a grey moustache and a pleasant face. I said in my bad French: "I have lost my way," and I displayed my brassard of the Red Crescent, whereon to my surprise he spoke to me in English: "You are indiscreet to wander in Istamboul after dark. It is dangerous for strangers. But come, I will guide you to Galata Bridge."

As we walked he took from a paper bag a very fine apple and asked me to accept it. I did so, munching with pleasure as I told him of the New World. I was happy in his company but my joy was complete when we passed two loitering men and I recognised them as my pursuers. But I gave them such a bold look now, swaggering past with my military escort. The soldier conducted me to the bridge where I thanked him almost hysterically. To this day I have never forgotten him and he has made me think kindly of Turks. He was a true gentleman.

---

The night passed dolefully, punctuated by the pounding staves of watchmen and the booming of those guns within whose range I longed to be. Quite early I sought the wharf on the Golden Horn and put the rice through the Customs. As we loaded the sacks on the Red Cross launch the scene was richly colourful, oriental craft of all kinds plying busily on the sprightly water. A brilliant morning when Istamboul masked its misery by a front of sunny insouciance. In the bow of the launch I chatted gaily as we churned the waters of the Bosphorus and it was near noon when we arrived at San Stefano. In peace time it had been a summer home for wealthy Turks, but now it was turned into a hell-hole. I went ashore with misgivings, past coquette villas, to the horror of the cholera camp.

The Greek school had been made into a hospital. As I peered through the doorway the stench caught me by the throat and the sight smote my eyes with horror. Lying on the bare floor were hundreds of soldiers—dead or dying. Heavy beards failed to hide their haggard faces and under their tattered khaki their bodies were skin and bone. Making no moan they waited for death to take them. Looking like a ghost a Red Cross nurse stood at my elbow. He addressed me hoarsely: "Hope you've come to help us, Doc. We're having a tough time. For twenty-four hours I haven't been off shift and I'm like to drop."

"I'm not a doctor," I explained with shame. "Just a sort of amateur helper attached to the commissariat department." I did not like to tell him I was a newspaper man. Somehow in this mulch of misery I was ashamed of my profession. He saw my repugnance to the sinister scene and went on reassuringly: "There's no danger really. It's not infectious. You have to take the germ through the lips to catch

the plague. It's really a violent form of dysentery. There are three men back there who died this morning. You might give me a hand to pack them out."

Picking my way among the limp bodies I aided him to carry the poor devils to the porch. Then hastily I made my escape. I felt sorry for the nurse who was obviously all in, but it was not my kind of a job and I felt incapable of helping him. The stink of death was in my nostrils, so I sought the beach and there in the Sea of Marmora I swam till I felt fairly clean again.

Yet horror fascinates, so once more I mounted to the village. Beyond, in a vacant plain, thousands of tents had been set up, and in each half a dozen men lay on the bare ground, writhing and retching. Every now and then one would get feebly to his feet and stagger to the door of the tent. Alongside was a shallow ditch, and on the edge of this he would cower weakly, convulsed by violent spasms of diarrhoea, and scarcely able to unbutton his breeches. There was a long line of these men, crouched on the edge of the ditch, their lean buttocks gleaming pallidly in the pale sunshine. Then they would stumble to their tents again, not bothering to button their garments. This was to be my lasting memory of San Stefano—hundreds of Turkish soldiers hunched over a slit in the ground, and the acrid odour of an agonising dysentery.

The Red Cross had a mess somewhere but I did not go there. Somehow I felt I was butting in, for though I was a helper I was an unpaid one. In the professional sense I did not belong. So I found a tiny Turkish restaurant where I had an omelette served by a woman proudly pregnant. It was not a cheerful meal, but neither was my appetite. Then in a villa near the sea, rented by our organisation, I wrapped myself in a borrowed blanket and slept on the floor. In the various chambers were a number of Austrian women nurses, but though they pitied the poor devil on the porch not even the homeliest of them would invite him to share her couch.

After a breakfast of bread and coffee I paced the beach, awaiting the arrival of the Red Cross launch. I felt a repugnance to revisit that accursed village—the putrid confusion of the Greek hospital, the acrid stench and the tattered figures in khaki evacuating into the ditch. Instead I had another swim, thinking of Leander and wondering where the hell was the Hellespont. When the launch arrived I was greeted by Doctor Dilly with a cheerful grin, but there was another with him who gave me a stare of cold surprise. He was a tall man, with a blond moustache and a military manner.

"That's our Colonel," said the Doctor. "A grand chap, a *pukka* soldier." I gave him the balance of the gold and the Customs clearance papers, and he thanked me heartily. I also told him of my adventure in Istamboul and he reverted to his

obsession of German agents. "I warned you," he said excitedly. "I can feel they're all about us. The Turk and the Teuton are hand in hand." I thought of my officer friend, suggesting they were just common thugs. He shook his head; then he asked me what I thought of conditions up in the village. "Putrid mess, I expect. Well, we must do our best for the poor devils."

During our conversation the Colonel had been standing aloof, a monocle in his eye. Now he beckoned to the Doctor and I heard him snap: "Who's that fellow?" While the Doctor was accounting for me he listened with a sour smile. "Quite! One of those newspaper pests. Proper poison, those chaps. Tell the bounder we've no use for him. Get rid of him."

All this I heard distinctly. And now the Doctor came to me: he was embarrassed and his manner was apologetic. With a hum and a haw he began: "Awfully sorry, old chap, but we'll be obliged to let you go. Really there's no job here worthy of you. However, we're so much obliged for the way you've helped us."

"That's all right," I said. "I quite understand. Well, thanks for giving me a hand. I've no doubt I've the makings of an article from the little I've seen."

Thus we parted good friends, but the Colonel took no notice of me. So, by way of being polite I sauntered up to him. "When is the boat going to leave?" I asked. He gave me an up and down look through his monocle. "You mean—when is MY boat going to leave." "*Quite*," I said and turned away. He expected me to ask permission to go on board, but not for a king's ransom would I have done so.

And that evening I paid my fare on a paddle steamer. It was crowded with Anatolian troops, whose officers slapped them with the flats of swords to make them pack closer. But when I reached the city again I had a great feeling of relief. I went to my room, changed into civilian clothes, folded my uniform and put it away. I looked with distaste at the Red Crescent. Thank God I was free again!

At supper that evening I informed Grimstone and McHaggie of my experience with the Colonel. Said McHaggie: "I would have told the bastard to stick his boat up his erse."

"I couldn't do that," I said, "being in uniform. After all, he was in his rights. News hounds *are* a nuisance." But McHaggie wouldn't have it. "Any numbskull can be a sodger," he said, "but it takes brains to be a writer. Well, you can come along with us and write up the battle of Adrianople."

I said I would go gladly; but the fates were to decide otherwise, for that evening as I sat in my room there was a knock on the door. Two shabby men waited there. "The police," one said. I asked them in and they looked around appraisingly. I thought they were going to make a search but one, who had a scaly nose, spoke to

me in halting French. "Monsieur, we would like to see your papers."

Anxiously I waited as they scanned my documents. They did not seem satisfied. They jabbered, grimaced and looked at me suspiciously. Finally Scaly-nose handed me a paper, saying grimly: "Monsieur, you are convoked for tomorrow at three o'clock at the *Commissariat de Police*." Then bowing stiffly they retired.

What trouble was I in now? I stared at the summons distastefully. Then I had an idea. There was a Travel Agency near the hotel and it was still open. "When is there a boat to Constanza?" I asked. There was one leaving next day. I was so worried that I could not sleep all night, for I have a horror of authority. So, at eleven next morning I boarded the Roumanian steamer and at the time of my interview with the police I was vomiting over the rail into the unsympathetic Black Sea.

## Chapter Three

### INNOCENT ABROAD

Installed in the smoking room of the Orient Express ruefully I took stock of myself. Evidently I had done something that had roused the ire of Turkish officialdom. Well, I had made a slick getaway, but where I was going I did not know. That was the heaven of it—not to know where I was going. Grimstone and McHaggie would wonder at my flight. . . . Ah! If only I could have joined them—for they finally succeeded in getting a ringside seat at the biggest battle of the war. . . . I was running away from all that, and I rather despised myself. No dashing Dick Davis, no scintillating Stevens, I; yet I flattered myself that given a chance I could have done a decent job.

While I was brooding thus I was aware of a man regarding me with friendly interest. He had a Viking moustache and mastiff eyes. His nose was high-bridged, his hair iron grey. He was tall, thin, immaculately groomed, with the erect carriage of an old soldier. Presently he addressed me: "I am about due for a drink. Won't you join me?" I smiled agreeably and we exchanged cards. His read: *Sir Pelham Pelham, Bart.*<sup>[1]</sup>

Over a second whisky and soda he beamed on me paternally. "I feel, my boy, I ought to offer you a word of advice," he said. "Your path is beset with danger which may be summed up in one word—*women*. Beware of their wiles. Now, I have a perfectly good wife who sits at home tatting while I gad about Europe, but I always carry a large photograph of her which I put in a conspicuous place in my room. 'There,' I say to my female friend of the moment, 'is my one and only love.' I regard it with reverence, and if things look compromising I kiss it. It fobs them off effectually. Young fellow, if you have not a wife get a portrait of a fictitious one. In many a delicate situation it may save you."

I thanked him, and one of my first purchases on arriving at Bucharest was a beautiful photograph of a woman. Proudly I placed it on the mantelpiece of my room in the Athenee Palace. "There," said I to the admiring chambermaid, "MY WIFE." I regarded it with real affection, and in the end I came to be as much in love with the

charming creature as if she had been my veritable spouse.

I did not want to go to a Palace Hotel but Sir Pelham insisted. "Mustn't let our country down," he said. I suspected he was taking me in hand as a raw colonial to be steered into the channel of sophistication. Although I snobbishly resented his title I felt flattered by his interest in me. A bit of a Casanova, I thought, for women responded readily to his charm.

He sported a monocle, and I decided that as soon as I found my feet I would wear a pane of glass in my eye. Ye Gods! What would my friends in the Yukon think? Well, that wild life was left behind me forever. Now I would play a new part in a new world. . . . There I was—always playing parts. Would I ever be just myself? Once I played my very self in a cinema drama and the Studio people were dissatisfied. They told me: "You are not the type."

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Bucharest thrilled me. I wrote bright articles of army officers in Merry Widow uniforms, of gargantuan coachmen driving their teams like the wind, of gay incongruities where east meets west and crude peasants gaze at the debonair boulevards. For the city prided itself on being a little Paris, and perhaps it was as far as virtue was concerned. This characteristic was brought home to me a few days after my arrival and I almost fell a victim to it.

One morning the concierge of the hotel said to me: "Would you like a girl to come to your room this evening?" Thinking he was joking I laughed. "Sure. Send one along!" "What would Monsieur prefer—fair or dark?" Still joking I said: "Oh, let's have a nice bouncing brunette." "Would Monsieur like a Parisian?" "Fine! I'll be glad to improve my High School French with a conversation lesson." So I left him, thinking no more about it.

That evening about nine I was working on an article when I heard a gentle tap on my door. "Come in!" I said rather testily, and a dark little woman entered. She was plump, dainty, dressed in black, with little make-up or jewellery—most respectable looking. "*Bonsoir, Monsieur,*" she said, gay as a geranium. Then, sitting familiarly on the edge of my bed, she lit a cigarette. I was taken aback. "You'll find this armchair more comfortable," I suggested.

She took it, making herself at home. She was about thirty, with dark eyes and pretty teeth. A charming professor! I was a little lonely in the evening and somehow I did not mind this interruption to my work. "Perhaps you would give me the pleasure of taking some light refreshment?" I asked politely. "Would you prefer coffee or a liqueur?" "But you are too amiable, Monsieur. A *Crème de Menthe* would be nice," she agreed.



So I rang for the waiter who took the order. When we were comfortably seated over our drinks she looked at me archly. "I am Madame Yvette. You sent for me—well?" "Oh, I thought I might brush up my French a bit," I said, "at, say, twenty-five francs a lesson." She nodded thoughtfully. "*Très bien, Monsieur*. Shall we begin with the verb *aimer*? It is a very nice verb. You will like it."

I did. When I began to conjugate the present tense she drew closer to me. When we got to *nous aimons* she sighed and paused. There was a languishing look in her eyes, and she softly patted my hand. Feeling strangely embarrassed I rose abruptly and went to the photo on the dressing table. "Rosalind—my wife," I said. "Ah, *comme nous nous aimons*! I miss her so much."

"I do not wonder," said Yvette. "She is so beautiful. But I did not think you were a married man. You seem so care-free."

"Nevertheless, I've been wedded for quite a number of years. Why, I have two little girls, the dearest of children."

"You must miss them a lot."

"I do, but I am a war correspondent and when duty calls I obey. I wish I could show you their pictures—such angels. I left their photos behind, but at least I have Rosalind," I sighed and, taking down the picture, I kissed it.

Yvette was impressed. "I too have a little girl," she told me. "Such a darling!" Then she went on to speak of her tiny Antoinette, and time passed quickly. Soon I saw that half an hour had gone, the limit of a lesson, so I thanked and paid her. I thought she rose rather reluctantly. Then I had a sudden idea. "By the way, I have a friend in number thirteen *bis* along the corridor. He spoke about taking French lessons, and I think he is now in his room. You might ask if he wants a professor. But please do not mention my name. You may call him Sir Pelham."

She thanked me. "You have been so *gentil, Monsieur*. It is nice to meet a man who is *comme il faut*." Then I saw her knock at number thirteen *bis* and presently enter. Soon after, the waiter appeared, but this time he carried a bottle of Heidsieck. Sir Pelham was no piker! I did not see him till next day at lunch when he made no mention of having had a visitor. However, his eyes had a faraway look and his usual vitality seemed lacking.

Next morning the concierge accosted me with a greasy grin. "Mistaire, and how you like your visitor?" "Fine," I said. "I had a very good French lesson." "You like another?" I tried to stall. "Well, I'm kinda fed up with brunettes. Have you any blondes on tap?" "Sure. I send you a blonde—a *fraulein*." "Good," I laughed. "Trot her along. I'll be glad to brush up my German a bit."

By evening I had forgotten my promised blonde and was at work as usual when

again there was a timid tap on my door. With braids of golden hair and eyes of cornflower blue a maiden greeted me. Politely I bade her sit in the armchair while I offered her a cigarette. "*Guten abend*," she said. "*Ich bin Irma*," and I realised my German was even rustier than my French.

"I thought you might be able to give me a short lesson in your language," I said; "but first can I offer you a little light refreshment?" "*Bitte, mein herr*," she answered as demure as could be. "They have a very good Heidsieck here." I thought of Dawson and the dancehall girls, and I said: "Nix on the wine. I reckon beer will hold you." She took my reproof with good nature and the Pilsner with gusto. "Shall we begin with the verb *lieben*?" she suggested. So I repeated after her: "*Ich liebe*," till we came to *Wir lieben*; when she paused.

In those days skirts were long and to show stocking was indiscreet. In the street even an ankle display made one turn to admire. But now I could scarcely help remarking that Irma was revealing a shapely limb. Perhaps she did not realise it, I thought, so I kept my eyes averted, and at the same time I decided she was even more appetising than Yvette. Again my moral semaphore signalled danger, so I rose and drew her attention to my photograph. "My wife—Beatrice," I said tenderly. "I carry her picture with me wherever I go. It seems to bring her closer to me. Ah! How I long for the day when I will be with her again."

I do not know if she understood all I said, but she seemed touched. German women have the family sense and are sentimental. As she gazed at the photo tears came into her eyes. "It is wonderful to be so faithful," she said. "How I would love to have a husband like you. I would make him a lovely home." I believed she would, too, for she was really a sweet girl. But pity is dangerous and I thought it was about time to part. "I have an article to get off by the mail," I said, "so let us call it a lesson." Accordingly I paid her and said goodbye. Then I had an afterthought. "In number thirteen *bis* there is a lonely man who craves a German professor. You might knock on his door and find out if he is free. But don't say I sent you."

Evidently Sir Pelham was free for I saw her disappear into his room and shortly afterwards a waiter mounted with another bottle of Heidsieck. As I returned to my work I had a feeling of virtue, but next day at lunch I again saw my friend. He looked absolutely shattered, and there and then I decided I would not try to pass off any more of my charming visitors on the poor chap.

But a few days later he got back at me. It was towards evening in the lavatory of the hotel when he said. "Look here, old man, I want to introduce you to a Princess."

"Oh no, please," I said with alarm. "I never in my life met with high nobility—and a Princess!"

“Tush, man! You must get over your anti-peerage prejudices. The Princess wants to meet you. She’s charming. Besides, she says she’s read your books.”

“Do I have to kiss her hand?”

“It’s customary, but it’s quite easy. Take it caressingly in both of yours and raise it heart high. Then bend your head gallantly and brush the back of it with your lips. Here, I’ll show you. Imagine me the Princess.”

We had a little rehearsal there in the lavatory. He extended his hand back up and showed me how to raise it to the right height and to bend with proper respect—all to the obvious entertainment of two Roumanians who no doubt took us for homosexuals. Then, having duly primed me, he said: “Now for the Princess. By the way, I’ve told her you’re a best seller—oodles of oof and so on, so be sure to play up.”

Worse and worse. I neither looked nor felt wealthy. Rather miserably I allowed myself to be conducted to the lounge where the lady awaited us. At sight of her my inferiority complex descended to a new low, for she was a majestic creature, over six feet high and built in proportion, with blond hair so natural it looked artificial. I fumbled with the hand she extended to be kissed and rather muffed it. However, she was condescendingly gracious, though I wondered whether I should address her as Your Highness or Your Grace. Sir Pelham should have posted me on that.

“Let us find a quiet corner and chat a bit,” she suggested. “You know, I’ve read your *Rhymes of the Unicorn*, and I’ve been dying to meet you. Come and tell me all about yourself.”

Ensnared in a nook I ordered cocktails. I need not have worried about conversation, for in excellent English she babbled with brook-like continuity. I do not believe she had read any of my books but she had seen some reviews and she made a bluff. Where the subject is myself I am a good listener so I primed her with another cocktail and let her prattle. Sir Pelham had discreetly disappeared, leaving the field clear.

I wondered if the Princess was the real article but she speedily dispelled my doubt by her allusions to the Court, where she had at one time served as a Lady-in-Waiting. Then she went on to talk of Paris, Rome and Vienna. There I felt out of my depth and floundered hopelessly, so I ordered more cocktails hoping she might get mildly mellow. But it was I who got lit up so, greatly daring, I asked her to dine with me. It’s going to set me back quite a bit of dough, I thought, but it will be Experience.

We had dinner in the hotel. It had the reputation of being expensive. It was, I thought, as I scanned the huge menu card. I had never dared to dine there, preferring

humbler eateries where I could get value for my money. But the Princess was quite at home and called the head waiter Jules. He embarrassed me by standing with poised pencil and a smirk, so I said to her: "These French bills of fare get me all tangled up. Would you mind ordering?"

To tell the truth I understood them well enough but hoped, as she was doing the choosing, she would soft pedal on the price. Alas, my hope was speedily dashed, for she said: "Poor man, I expect you are simply ravenous. I must order a really nice dinner for you. . . . Let me see. . . . Suppose we begin with Chilled Cantaloup followed by Caviare. Jules, is the caviare Beluga? Good—then we'll have some. . . . *Sole Normande*? Yes, that will be nice. Then, shall we say *Filet Mignon*—or perhaps you prefer *Poulet à la crème*?"

"Okay," I said gloomily. "Let's have the chicken." So she went on: "They have some asparagus *Primeur*. That will be nice, and then we might finish up with a *Pêche Melba*. . . . As to wine—let me see the list. Ah! They have some of that *Chateau Yquem* of '98. Or would you prefer a champagne? There is a Heidsieck here that is extra dry." I saw that it was slightly cheaper so I said I would prefer it, then I sighed deeply as I thought of what the bill was going to be. Never in my life had I ordered such a repast. And never again, I thought, cursing Pelham Pelham.

However, my guest strove to be entertaining and I was not surprised so enormous a woman should have so capacious an appetite. That consoled me somewhat. She was not one of those who toyed with expensive food. It would have enraged me to see delicate dishes wantonly wasted. But the Princess seemed to be really hungry, so that one would have imagined she had gone without lunch. Despite my misgivings as to the ultimate bill we both did justice to a delicious dinner.

Over coffee the *addition* was brought, face down on a silver platter. I hated to turn it over but finally did so with an attempt at nonchalance. It was worse than I could have imagined—many times worse. I looked in my wallet while the Princess tactfully looked away. No, I had not enough bills to cover it and I did not like to ask them to charge it. What to do? Then I remembered I had a book of traveller's cheques in my hip pocket, so I peeled off one for twenty dollars, signed it and asked the waiter to cash it at the office. Even then the proceeds were scarce enough to pay the bill, and I had to supplement them with the cash in my wallet. As I performed this operation the Princess seemed to watch me with surprise, while I imagined she looked with some contempt at my traveller's cheques.

"You are a best seller, are you not?" she asked after a pensive moment. "You must make a lot of money."

"Not so much. It's my publishers who collar most of the dough. But I get two

cents a word for my travel articles. Oh, I manage to pay my way all right.”

Somehow she did not seem happy about something, and I wondered if her conscience was reproaching her for letting me in for such a big bill, for presently she said: “Let’s go up to your room for a drink.”

Draped extensively over my one armchair I thought what a fine figure of a woman she was—every *foot* a Princess. As she stalked majestically out of the restaurant, while I trotted poodle-like at her heels, I had heard someone say: “*Quelle carcasse!*” There and then I decided to deprive myself of her, but it was not going to be so easy. There she sat chain-smoking, sipping a liqueur and making herself at home. She gabbled vivaciously saving me the effort of making conversation. When I looked surreptitiously at my wrist watch I saw it was nearly eleven. Still she made no attempt to move and I began to despair. She noticed my two valises in a corner and asked: “Where’s the rest of your baggage?” “I haven’t got any,” I answered. “I travel light—not even a dinner jacket. I’m afraid I’m rather a common person.”

“I like your frankness,” she said. “You don’t pretend to be more than you are. I am a Princess but I think I could be happy with a man like you.” With that she rose, threw away a half-smoked cigarette and squatted on the edge of the bed. Again I sensed the danger signal, but there on the dressing table was my stranglehold on respectability—my photo. Rapidly I collared it. “As it happens I belong to someone else,” I said. “My wife—God bless her!” Then I handed her the picture.

She stared at it. “Is this your wife?” she asked incredulously. “Yes,” I replied. “I’m quite an old married man. I miss her dreadfully. When I think of her waiting for me in our little cottage in the Maine woods I want to pack my bags and return by the next boat.”

Then the Princess laughed with ringing laughter. But suddenly she stopped. “Liar!” she hissed and, with one action, she tore the photo in two and flung it at my feet. “There,” she cried, “your precious wife! Do you know who that is? I should, for before I was divorced I was her bosom friend. . . . Fool! Impostor! That picture on the floor is the portrait of Her Royal Highness the *Queen of Roumania*.”

And with these words she gave me a stinging box on the ear and bounced from the room.

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[1] The repetition of his name he told me, he owed to a great-aunt who, when asked what he should be called, said: “Why, Pelham, of course. Where could you find a nobler name?” I asked him

why he did not hyphenate it and stick another Pelham in front,  
but he gave me his “We are not amused” look.

## Chapter Four

### AUSTRIAN INTERLUDE

My departure from Bucharest was by way of being an escape. Sir Pelham and his Princess were threatening to bore me, so one morning I strapped my suitcases and left without a word of farewell. Unfortunately the railway clerk sold me a third-class ticket by mistake, and I had not the gumption to go into the first and pay the difference. Thus I travelled with a peasant family consisting of the grand-parents, the father and mother and three children. Indeed, I thought it might be a good idea to contact the common people and contrast them with the sophisticates of the Palace Hotel.

But my proletarian plunge was little to my liking. I was penned in a narrow compartment with seven scions of the soil, and though I may sing of honest sweat I hate to inhale it—especially if it is mingled with an odour of garlic and unwashed garments. But over all there was one smell that simply appalled me—a rancid corruption that suggested decay and death and seemed to emanate from the ancient couple. . . . The youngest child was unweaned. This I discovered as the mother, who sat opposite me, let out several buttons of her tunic and applied the infant to one of the monstrous mammals that immediately protruded. Modestly I tried to avert my eyes from that snowy circumference, but as she seemed proud of those twin mounts of milky nourishment I finally came to gaze unabashed. Between that and the scenery I divided my attention.

By and by they brought from the basket a roast goose and proceeded to dismember it, offering me a drumstick which I gracefully refused. Then, with garlic and dry bread, they scraped its bones and threw them under the seat. Finally they produced a tiny *vase de nuit* on which they sat Katinka, a child of about four, watching anxiously and going Ka! . . . Ka! . . . till I felt like joining in their inspiring but unavailing efforts.

Still, I was glad to study a people so natural and unspoiled. I was particularly attracted by Katinka who had the face of a cherub. Such blue eyes and blond curls Correggio might have delighted to paint. Her innocence was adorable and I watched

her prattle and play with something like joy. I was pleased when after a while she overcame her shyness and stood by my knee. I let her toy with my wrist watch, taking it off so that she might hear it tick. Rarely have I seen such an angel child. Yet she was laughing up at me when suddenly I saw her face change. Into those big blue eyes came a look I could only describe as divine discontent. Then the shadow passed and she was gay again.

Suddenly I saw the family gazing at me with horror. Then the mother grabbed her and pulled her into the corridor. The whole family followed, leaving me alone. I cannot say I was sorry. I took up my *Daily Mail* and settled comfortably to read. We passed several small stations where people got in but no one seemed inclined to disturb my privacy. Very considerate of them, I thought. They looked—then backed away. I flattered myself that it was out of respect for me, a distinguished foreigner, and I was smugly grateful. But as more passengers stopped, stared and shied away I began to wonder if I was not some kind of a pariah. Was there something the matter with me?

Then I happened to look down. . . . I understood! Oh, that angel child! That look of divine discontent! Clutching my *Daily Mail* I dashed to the men's haven with it where it served a purpose for which it was never intended. And for the rest of the trip I stood in the corridor, glued to the open window. . . . But the point I want to make is that the seven smells pervading that compartment were so welded into an invincible whole that an extra one was undetectable.

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At Budapest I tried to take a taxi, but the porter said he would carry my baggage to an hotel for half the cab fare, so I foolishly agreed. It took longer then I reckoned and he had to rest several times before we finally arrived. I felt so sorry for the poor devil that I paid him the cost of two cab fares. Then I registered, saw my bags to my room and went out to explore the city. Wandering around haphazardly I found a big café where a *tzigane* orchestra was playing, and so much was the entertainment to my taste I lingered till quite late. When at last I rose I found I had forgotten the name of my hotel.

How awkward! It was a smallish hotel, one of a score in the neighbourhood, and I had left my key in the office. All I could remember was that the reception clerk had a wen on his nose. So I wandered up and down, peering into hotel lobbies and looking for a fat man with a wen. Finally I returned to the station and tried to retrace the way I had come, but it was too intricate. It was near midnight now, and I was more than a little tired. What to do? Again I sought the station but my porter was no longer on duty. I was in despair when I was accosted in English by a cab driver. I



explained to him what had happened and he said he would drive me to a score of the most likely hotels. He did so while I continued my search for a clerk with a wen on his nose. I was lucky, for at the fifth descent I found my man, and glad was I to claim my key and mount to the warmth of my room.

The most remarkable feature of my stay in Budapest was that, apart from the few words necessary to supply my needs, I did not speak to a soul during the month I remained in the city. And how I enjoyed my silence! I glutted my hunger for obscurity. I realised how self-obliteration was a passion with me. Content to observe the life about me I dreamfully absorbed my impressions. Dear to me was my shabby room, one corner of which was the yellow-tiled wall of the huge stove. It was always so gratefully warm, for the season was Christmastide, and comfort was kindly to mind and body. And how happy I was hunting cheap restaurants in back streets, where I ate the rich greasy food of the people! Again I realised there was something common, even vulgar, in my nature that made me prefer the poor to the rich and the slums to the sleek boulevards.

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But after a month of monologue even Buda began to pall, so I decided to shove on to Vienna. Here, however, destiny and a cabman who thought all Americans were millionaires conducted me to Sacher's Hotel where the first person I met was Sir Pelham Pelham. I was not quite pleased, for when I thought of the Princess my cheek still burned, but I was flattered by his lack of disinterest in me. On the first night we dined together I ventured to ask him his age. "Seventy-four," he told me, "but I feel like a four-year-old." Then thoughtfully polishing his monocle his gaze went round the room till it rested on a dark lady of no uncertain charm. "Another Princess?" I ventured. "No, a Spanish Countess." "Anyway, she's mighty handy with her toothpick," I said, "She uses it between every course." "A Castilian custom," said Sir Pelham loftily, feeling no doubt he must defend his caste.

I was impressed. I have a surreptitious weakness for toothpicks, but so far I had concealed it in the interest of good form. Now, however, I could claim Castilian etiquette as my sanction. "Well, I'll say she's an elegant eyeful," I admitted. "But, of course you know her?" "Unfortunately no. I do not believe the lady understands English. However, in the language of love do we not all speak Esperanto?"

"Good gracious! You're not thinking of making love to her?"

"My love making days are *not* over," said Sir Pelham proudly.

I looked at him with admiration. What a buck he must have been at his best! "Well, if you can't be good, be careful," I said. "Don't go biting the Spanish Countess on the neck."

He adjusted his monocle and gave me a cool stare. "Will you bet ten pounds I won't bite the Spanish Countess on the neck?"

"I wouldn't be a party to such an outrage."

"Don't worry about the outrage part. That's my affair. Will you wager I won't bite the Castilian Countess on the neck?"

"I'll take you," I said reluctantly. "But when are you going to bring off this cave man stunt?"

"On the first opportunity. You shall see me do it."

"Oh no," I said uneasily, "I'll take your word for it."

"It's only fair you should have a show for your money. You shall be a witness—unseen."

"Of course you'll get to know the lady first," I said. Sir Pelham looked down his high-bridged nose with asperity. "If I knew the lady do you think I would allow you to witness so intimate an act? No, Sir. She shall remain the utter stranger she is to me at present. That is—until the thing is accomplished. After that . . ."

He shrugged his slim shoulders with an air of Fate and at that moment the lady passed out of the dining-room. "She looked at you as if you were invisible," I remarked.

"She'll look at me in quite another way before long," said Sir Pelham gnawing his moustache.

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That evening I was in my room when a page boy handed me a note: *Am in lounge with Donna Margarita. Get concierge out of way and watch events at discreet distance. P. P.* So I hurried down to the hall which at this hour was deserted but for the concierge. I asked to have a bottle of Vichy served in my room and he departed to give the order. Peering through the doorway of the lounge I saw it was deserted but for two people—Sir Pelham and the Countess. She was writing at a little table and he stood by another table covered with periodicals. He seemed to turn them over idly but under his eyebrows he looked towards the door where peered my plebeian mug. He nodded faintly and I nodded back to show the coast was clear.

The moment had come and my heart beat faster. With popping eyes I watched Sir Pelham cross the room. There was the Countess scribbling busily. A gorgeous shawl lay over the back of her chair and from a bodice of black silk her dazzling shoulders emerged superbly. In its milky smoothness and grace of curve her neck was swanlike. Surely, I thought, the brute will not dare to fix his fangs in an object so exquisite. But Sir Pelham did dare. Behold, he was gliding across the carpet; now he

stood behind the unconscious lady; now he swooped down . . . There! he had done it.

What followed must be described rapidly, as rapid events ought to be described. First the lady sprang up as if she had been stung, which was exactly what I expected her to do. Then she swung round with fear in her face (all according to Hoyle). Then—and this was not at all consistent with the logic of the situation—with a glad cry she flung her arms around Sir Pelham's neck. Feebly trying to disengage those clinging arms he staggered back. His monocle dropped, his mouth gaped, his eyes bulged. Indeed, his entire face expressed consternation.

But I saw nothing further for at that moment the concierge returned and, with commendable loyalty, I took the man by the arm and conducted him to the door where I invited him to admire the moon. Then when I had exhausted my stock of lunar conversation I turned and saw that the lounge was deserted.

It was about eleven that evening when I knocked at the Baronet's door. He was in a dressing gown, reading the *Morning Post*. He greeted me with suave courtesy. We discussed the uppishness of the Labour Party, the Royal Family and other subjects dear to the hearts of Englishmen, when he remarked casually: "By the way, what do you know about duelling? I may be obliged to ask you to act as my second. I'm afraid I've got myself into a devil of a scrape."

"There! I knew you would," I said with rising indignation. "I'm sorry I ever had anything to do with it. It was perfectly outrageous."

"Well, it's too late to regret it. And by Gad! I don't know that I do. For I never nibbled a more enchanting neck. But did you see the whole show? Ah! you missed the *denouement*. Take a cigar and I'll tell you about it. . . . You see, when I made that bet I had a plan. Concealed in my hand was a dead wasp. My idea was to stoop quickly and pinch her neck lightly with my teeth, then when she swung around on me I would proudly exhibit the insect, tell her I had seen it crawling on the nape of her neck and nipped it off with my fingers. Ingenious, wasn't it? . . . But it didn't work. It seemed I had reckoned without my own fatal charm. Anyhow the lady, instead of excoriating me, wound her arms round me and fell on my chest. It was quite a minute before I succeeded in disentangling myself. 'Calm yourself, Madame!' I cried. 'I will explain.'"

"To my amazement she replied in English: 'But there is nothing to explain. You love me. I have seen it. But you were too timid to speak. Then your passion overcame you. Oh, how glad I am! You know, I was just waiting for you to do something like that.'

"Like what?" I said with pretended innocence. Then, remembering my wasp, I

held it up triumphantly. ‘Behold, Madame, the cause of my impetuous action. I was calmly reading when I saw this dreadful thing parading on your neck. There was not a moment to lose. Quick as thought I sprang forward, pinched it up and crushed it between my fingers.’

“She looked at me doubtfully, and I could see she wasn’t at all pleased. But she was so beautiful in her petulance I was sorry I had made my explanation. However, it was too late to retract, so I persisted in my story. As she went to a mirror and examined her neck I could see she was wavering. But when she turned to me again her brow was dark with wrath. ‘Look at that!’ she hissed.

“Then to my horror I saw on her ivory skin the marks of my front teeth. ‘What have you to say now?’ she blazed at me. ‘Do you mean to tell me your *fingers* made these marks?’

“‘I have very small hands,’ I said, rather taken aback, ‘and my nails are in proportion. That’s just the kind of mark they *would* make.’

“I saw she was half convinced, when suddenly she began to cry. ‘How am I going to make my husband believe it was your nails?’ she sobbed. ‘And he comes in a few hours. That mark will be there. I can never hide it from him. He is a passionate man and of a furious jealousy. He will kill me.’

“She wept so bitterly I was greatly distressed, especially as I saw that she had good reason for her fears. On her alabaster skin the mark showed like an angry scar. In my excitement I must have bitten harder than I intended. I did my best to comfort her. ‘I’m dreadfully sorry, dear Countess, to have innocently brought this trouble upon you. All I can suggest is that you should tell your husband the truth. Then, if he does not believe it refer him to me.’

“‘You do not know him. He would never believe it. He is a famous duellist and he would kill you. . . . No, leave me to face him. But you—fly while there is yet time.’

“‘A Pelham never flies,’ I told her haughtily. ‘I will face the music. If your husband does not choose to accept my explanation I will give him all the satisfaction he desires. I will stand by you, Countess, in your hour of peril.’

“She dried her tears. ‘And if he should divorce me will you marry me?’

“‘That, Madame,’ I said, ‘I would do only too gladly, but for one reason: there is a perfectly sweet old lady who has been my wife for fifty years. I am a great grandfather.’

“She stamped her foot with such an air of huff that I was not sorry to see her disappear up the lift. She didn’t even say good-night. . . . Well, that’s all. Only now I suppose I have to deal with her fire-eater of a husband. I expect he’s a blood-thirsty

devil with a blue-black Spanish face and the deadly ferocity of a toreador. He will spit me like a frog. It had better be pistols, I think.”

Sir Pelham wistfully polished his monocle and I gazed at him glumly. “I don’t believe in duels,” I said, “but as the challenged party you have the choice of weapons. Couldn’t you suggest *feet*? The one who could kick the other’s fanny the hardest . . .”

“I am a man of honour,” said Sir Pelham coldly; and I answered: “Well, I’m glad I’m not. But if the worst comes to the worst you can depend on me.”

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The following morning we met. “I have passed a wretched night,” said Sir Pelham. “Dreadful dreams! Thought a ferocious fellow with the dash of a matador was perforating me in the tummy with a beastly rapier. And this morning the concierge informed me that in the early hours a Spanish nobleman had arrived to join his wife. I wonder what’s going to happen?”

But nothing particular happened except that the Countess did not appear at lunch, and in answer to discreet enquiries we were informed that she had motored to Semmering. With her husband, of course.

It was at dinner when the Countess reappeared. We were half-way through the fish course when she sailed triumphantly into the room. She had the most wonderful Spanish shawl in the world, and her blue-black hair was brilliantly arranged. Never did she look so beautiful. But behind her waddled a fat little man with a bald head and a wavy moustache. Was this the famous fire-eater—the deadly duellist? Sir Pelham sighed with relief. Then instinctively our eyes went to the lady’s neck and we saw that she was wearing one of those dog collars one associates with duchesses. Behind that barricade of pearls no one could see any tell-tale tooth marks.

“That must be Don Alphonso,” I said. “I wonder if he knows?”

“He doesn’t look as if he was worrying,” said Sir Pelham. “He gobbles his dinner like a duck.”

And indeed the attention of the Count seemed focused on his food, so that he had no eyes for the radiant beauty beyond it. But the Countess paused in the picking of her teeth to flash Sir Pelham a dazzling smile. We lingered over our coffee and, as the couple made their exit, she cast the now emboldened baronet a still more bewitching glance.

“I can’t understand it,” said he. “They’ve gone to the lounge. Let’s barge in and find out something. This uncertainty is getting on my nerves.”

We found them installed on a big divan, and with his chubby hands clasped over his fat stomach Don Alphonso snored audibly. The Countess was smoking a

cigarette and glancing at *Vogue*, but she beckoned Sir Pelham to approach.

"When my husband wakes I'll introduce you," she told him.

"But you said he was jealous."

"Not of great grandfathers. But do sit down. I know you are dying of curiosity and I'm going to tell you what happened. Don't be afraid—he doesn't understand a word of English."

So this is what she told him and what he told me. She would, she decided, receive her husband in the dark. She would plead a headache and ask him not to turn on the light. Perhaps by morning the incriminating marks would have disappeared. So it came about that he undressed in the drawing-room of their suite and joined her without getting a good look at her.

"Then (and here it is necessary to go with some delicacy) one may assume there followed the caresses and cajolings that might be expected of a Spanish husband who has not seen his young and beautiful wife for months. And in the midst of it the Countess had a brilliant idea. Gently but firmly she pressed her neck against the marcelled moustache of Don Alphonso, just where I'd bitten her. Whether he, too, bit or not I don't know, but she gave a tiny scream and pretended he had. I've no doubt she called him a naughty, nice name, told him he'd hurt her, that she liked to be hurt, but that he must not do it again. Then in the morning she showed him the mark—my mark—and told him it was his. Well, the poor fellow was so contrite he drove her to Semmering and bought her that pearl necklace to conceal it.

"And the result is that I am invited to their castle in Andalusia for the autumn shooting. Will I go? I don't think so. You see, it might be dangerous—even though I *am* a great grandfather."

"Are you scared you might bite her neck again?" I asked.

"No," said Sir Pelham wistfully. "What I am afraid of is that she might bite mine."

Next day the Countess and her husband vanished, and on the following Sir Pelham bade me adieu. I was sorry to see him go for he had been mighty decent to me, tolerant of my uncouthness and my slang. On the other hand I had derived much entertainment from his English mannerisms. I was inclined to think, however, that most of his conquests existed in his imagination. I was not to meet him again for a number of years, but even then he was to appear in the character of a cardboard Casanova.

What I did as soon as he left was to go to a cheaper hotel. I hated this international atmosphere, and wanted to be in touch with the people. So I found a small room behind St. Stephen's Cathedral and resumed my grubby poking amid mean streets, getting the local colour that most appealed to me. I found life incredibly

cheap, for I was putting myself on the same plane as a student or a shopman. I wrote assiduously and received by mail a cheque for three hundred dollars in payment for four articles. It would go a long way here and it pleased me to pretend I was a poor scribbler making my living precariously. It's fun pretending one is poor when one isn't—and it saves a lot of money.

I often wish I had preserved the work I wrote with such effortless facility in those days, for some of it, I suspect, was fairly decent. But when I saw it in print I would not be bothered reading it. Writing it exhausted my interest. As to my book royalties—I ignored them utterly. They were paid into my bank and sometimes I received statements, but more often not. In money matters I was careless and casual. Crabbed figures in a tiny book gave me no thrill. I could scarcely realise that they meant real cash.

Meantime in my shabby room I scratched my flea bites, bathed in my wash basin and scribbled contentedly. It tickled me to think that while I lived on a dollar a day I was making ten times that amount. So I took long walks, returning cheerfully tired and brimming over with health. I had a delightful time and felt one with the simple folk about me. In after years when asked what city I most loved in pre-war Europe I answered Vienna. But that was after I had tired of Paris. For fifteen years Paris was to be my only love, and it was now to this golden goal I turned my eyes.

## Chapter Five

### THE LATIN QUARTER

I will never forget my first forenoon in Paris. As I stepped forth the morn looked like a newly minted coin—ringing with rapture. Rills of clear water glittered in the gutters and the trees flirted their first April finery. Curdles of cloud accentuated the ingenuous blue of the sky. “Notre Dame,” I called to a cabman. Cheerily he grinned and with a flourish of his whip we were off. He wore a glazed tile hat, a black cape and was as rubicund as the *cocher* of my dreams. Indeed, as we ambled along, so many things made me think of dreams coming true. My reading of Paris had been ravenous; from every corner remembered names leapt at me. I was living again in the pages of Hugo, Daudet, Zola. In that adorable Spring morn each twist and turn gave me a new thrill. I felt as if I were coming home and my heart sang. Here, I thought, is where I fit in. I will remain at least a couple of months . . . I remained for fifteen years.

Poignant moment! Notre Dame at last. I had studied a model in the Metropolitan Museum so that the original looked like an old friend. It was even more beautiful than I had hoped, and sitting in the serene square I regarded it with beatitude. Bless the Gods who have given me the gift of rapture, for that marvellous morning I knew ecstasy as I have never known it since. Yes, all that immemorial day one radiant moment crowded on another, till I felt like shouting from sheer joy that surged within me.

After a blissful spell of contemplation I started out on the grandest walk in the world. Skirting the Seine, past hundreds of book-bins, till I came to the Institut de France, I crossed the Pont des Arts to the Louvre. Then I kept on up the Tuileries to the Place de la Concorde. From there I mounted the Champs Elysees to the Arc de Triomphe. On that brilliant day everything was at its best and I had no words to fashion my delight. So from one seductive street to another I marched on till I came to the Madeleine and from there to the Opera.

After a leisurely lunch on the terrace of the Café de la Paix I resumed my enthusiastic exploration. The Eiffel Tower, the Invalides, the Boul’ Miche’ and the



Luxembourg—I visited them that afternoon and though I was footsore, in the evening I climbed to the Sacré Coeur and Montmartre. But my joy was sustained to the last, till with a prayer of thanksgiving I crowned the most delectable day of my life. To be young, free, primed with romance and with a full purse—what could be nearer Paradise than Paris in the spring?

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Soon I left my seven-franc room near the station and took a four-franc mansard in an old hotel on the Quai Voltaire. From there I could watch the Seine, its toy-like steamers, its strings of barges, its torpid fishermen. The shining river, the trim quays, the gay green of the poplars and the book-bins beneath all gave me an exquisite pleasure, so that I dreamed for hours by my mansard window. From it I could see the spires of the Sainte Chapelle and the towers of Notre Dame, while down river were the gay gardens of the Tuileries, with the lace-work of bridges culminating in the Pont Alexandre. That panorama never failed to enchant me, so that from dawn to dark I could sit there entranced.

Absorbed in my city I was some time in making human contacts. The first was the Paris correspondent of a New York daily who interviewed me at my hotel after ordering a golden omelette. As he gobbled and gabbled I listened with admiration. An Englishman with a rich voice he knew every capital in Europe. “Come with me to breakfast at Ciro’s tomorrow at noon,” he said. By that he meant lunch but I took him literally, and he was a little chagrined when I asked for ham and eggs and tea. Even the great Ciro shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m cross with our New York office,” my host told me. “I sent them a story of a Prince sailing from India with a cargo of monies and they printed it ‘a cargo of monkeys.’ All the time they try to make a monkey out of me. I think I’ll resign. . . . Have you any girl friends? I can introduce you to some of the little dancers of the Opera, but I warn you presents of hats are very expensive, and the simpler they are the more they cost.” This discouraged me so that I declined his kind offices. How one vice will cancel out another! My Scotch parsimony has always prevented me making a fool of myself where women are concerned. To my mind not the most beautiful woman in Paris was worth a thousand francs for an evening of distraction.

I would never be a dashing blade like my newspaper friend. He had a personality I lacked and he made me look a poor dub, even though I *had* written best sellers. I visioned success for him and I was not wrong. In the World War he became a Colonel, wrote a book, made a handsome marriage and clinched his career with a knighthood.

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My best friends were a Canadian couple, and they too symbolised the romance of destiny. Sweethearts in the same prairie village, linked by a love of art, they had studied in city schools and finally gravitated to Paris. From there they roamed with brush and sketch-book through Europe, returning with joy to their studio in Montparnasse. Theirs was an ideal marriage for not only were they devoted in their ordinary lives, but their art was a spiritual passion binding them. So in their painting and etching they shared each other's pains and triumphs. In their perfect partnership they inspired me, and for years I enjoyed their gentle friendship, until like so many they passed on. . . .

Through them I met other painters till gradually my life took an artistic trend, and I conceived myself in the role of a *rapin*. At school I had been tops in design and had a knack of sketching from life. When other boys were playing I spent happy hours copying pictures from *Punch*. In those days I dreamed of being a real artist, and here I was playing at being one; for I bought a sketch-book and took lessons in the studio of Colorossa in the Rue de la Grande Chaumière.

For one franc we were admitted to the life class where with some trepidation I watched the girl model undress. As it was the first time I had seen a naked female I fear my conscientious nudes were affected by my modesty. However, with sepia pencils sharpened to a long point I succeeded in getting good effects of light and shade. I learned a lot of painter lingo and looked wise when I stood before a picture. I went to *salons* dressed in a broad-brimmed hat with a butterfly tie and velveteen jacket. I dramatised myself in my new *role*, for, like an actor, I was never happy unless I was playing a part. Most people play one character in their lives; I have enacted a dozen, and always with my whole heart.

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This *Vie de Bohème* phase must have lasted a year, during which I learned to loaf on the terrace of the Dôme Café, waggle a smudgy thumb as I talked of modelling, make surreptitious sketches of my fellow wine-bibbers and pile up my own stack of saucers. Drinking so continuously I stuck to small *bocks* which did me little harm and I reverted to my pipe. I also visited the picture galleries, of which the Luxembourg was most to my taste—the Louvre lulling me to somnolence. On the other hand excessive modernism irritated me, and when a Russian woman showed me a cubistic nude in which even the sex organ was rectangular I gazed without conviction. . . .

I got to know many of the long-haired freaks who spent their time between the Dôme and the Rotonde, crossing from the one to the other their only exercise. Poles and Swedes were peculiar enough but the Muscovites were the maddest of all.

There were middle-west Americans, too, who absorbed the colour of the Quarter to the point of eccentricity. One of the charms of living in Europe is its leisurely appeal. There is not the goad to achievement of the New World and life often becomes a protracted holiday in which one dreams of doing things instead of getting them done.

On the other hand, however, were American artists who worked with passion, grudging every moment they could not be at their easels. They would be off in the early morning to the country, painting with eager intensity, and when the light failed returning tired but tranquil to their studios. Often I would accompany them on their daily excursions to the banks of the Marne, sketching amateurishly while they plied the professional brush. Yet I had a feeling they were exploiting beauty while I was worshipping it.

For outside of their own job I found them singularly uninteresting. Their beloved work done, all they wanted was to play snooker or go to a silly cinema. As a rule they cared neither for music nor for literature. Outside of painting nothing much mattered. But what a blithe brotherhood! Their technical absorption saved them from that introspection that is the curse of the author. Yet writers are more broadminded. The whole world is their *atelier* and their lives are richer. So, though I would have loved to be either an artist or a musician I think that I would still prefer to be a modest inkslinger.

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But soon I began to weary of my assumed role of a camp follower of art. This came to a head when a man invited me to tea one Sunday. He was a designer of book plates, balanced between literature and art. In his studio were two men—the first small and thin, with a pear-shaped head, a Swinburnian brow, dark eloquent eyes and crinkly black hair. The other was also short, but sturdy, with a round face, sharp eyes peering through glasses, and a virile manner. I was introduced to them: “James Stephens, the Irish poet, and Gellett Burgess, the American humorist.”

I was thrilled—two men I had always admired yet never hoped to meet. Long before I had dreamed of writing I had read Burgess, when to quote his book on Bromides was a *cachet* of cleverness. Stephens I knew through his *Crock of Gold*, and though I never dared to emulate his poetry I feel that he inspired me. And now to have both launched at me casually over the tea cups! . . .

In my velveteen coat and *Lavallière* tie I felt something of a *poseur*, but when Burgess asked me why I was not whooping it up in the Yukon I answered with dignity that I was an art student, experimenting in the life of the Quarter.

Soon the talk turned to poetry. Stephens asked me what I thought was finest in Tennyson and I answered: “*Ulysses*.” When the others seemed to agree I felt rather

bucked. Then both men recited some of their poems and I was asked to give one of mine. This I did with diffidence, for I felt that a chap who recites his own stuff is a bit of an ass. However, I tried my best and Stephens said loftily: "Very good *newspaper* verse." I was so humble at that time I felt flattered at the compliment.

Burgess was the finest swimmer of any writer I have ever known. I am myself a water-dog and like de Maupassant love to float far from shore, enjoying between sea and sky an ineffable remoteness from the world. But Burgess with powerful strokes would cleave the waves till finally he vanished from sight. I would watch anxiously for a long spell, fearing he might have taken cramp. Then suddenly, with that same swishing stroke, he would disengage himself from the horizon and soon his short, sturdy form would emerge from the foam.

In contrast Stephens looked pale and frail, a man of delicate health, due no doubt to the privations of a youth inured to poverty. I saw something of him as at one time we rented his Paris apartment. It was a loft over a machine shop converted into living quarters, and when the various machines got going the place vibrated with a demoniac intensity. In an ear-shattering din we jiggled and joggled. Afflicted as with Saint Vitus' dance I could not steady my hand to shave, and when I went down to the *bistro* for a *bock* I jerked most of my beer on to the table. How could my landlord have written his radiant poetry in such a racket?

But I think most of it was achieved as he strode the streets or in the midst of a crowded café, for he had a most enviable gift of detachment. In the hubbub of some busy *bistro* he could write of linnets and lonely gods. As I saw him stride the grey streets he made me think of a faun and I half expected him to break into a dance to the playing of inaudible pipes of Pan. Or as he huddled in some sordid pub I fancied him squatting with nimble goats on a thymy hill.

Sitting under the leafy foam of the *Closerie des Lilas* he would read me his latest poem written on the back of an old envelope. He sang rather than recited, weaving to and fro in lyric ecstasy and chanting the lovely words with a thick brogue. Like many poets he was an egoist and surveyed the writing fraternity from a Hill of Derision. "There are only two great living authors," he would tell me, "and the other is meself." He would not say who the first was. He spoke rather patronisingly of a new book called *Ulysses* written by one James Joyce. I listened to him reverently. I suspected he scorned me, but I admired his work so much I yielded him homage.

Once he asked me if I had any offspring, and I answered: "No, I'm afraid I have not the paternal temperament." He said: "Neither have I but begorra! I have the childer." He wore an eye-glass, though his collar was attached in some weird way to his singlet, and once when I remarked on the disparity between his attire and his

monocle he snapped: "Ye can look at me clothes and ye can look at me eye-glass and ye can strike an average." . . . His wife was the most charming of women, pretty as a picture. She once said: "The Services are the best tenants I ever had and the only ones who left the apartment as clean as they found it."

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These literary lights of my salad days looked, I fear, with a justifiable disdain on the brash boy from the Yukon, but one who put me severely in my place was the great Edmund Gosse. I was asked to meet him by a friend who was a collector of celebrities and bought an evening-dress suit for the occasion. Gosse was handsome, distinguished, a famous talker. On this occasion he held us enthralled with his stories of Browning, Rosetti, Swinburne. As he did so he gestured with a nice edition of my latest book of verse, but never had the grace to open it. "Rather a pretty binding," he remarked grudgingly, but the author he ignored. He did not address a word to me during the entire evening. I was rather relieved because, if he had never read a line of my work neither had I of his, and between writers that creates an awkward situation. Nevertheless, his supercilious attitude galled me and as the party broke up I observed to Edmund: "We have at least one thing in common—our names are French." As *gosse* is a slang term for "kid" my remark was received in freezing silence.

In those days I took contumely meekly. I regarded myself as a cross between Kipling and G. R. Sims. I was inclined to agree with the dispraise of the mandarins of letters. If people did not buy my books they might purchase others more worthy. I was sorry I was an obstructionist in the fair path of poesy but I did not see what I could do about it. Alas, I write as I feel! I fear I can never do otherwise.

I am shortish by New World standards but average by European ones. However, most of the *literati* I met at this time were "sawn-offs." I have mentioned Burgess and Stephens. Another was blond James Hopper, writer of short stories. He was half French and perhaps that was why he loved to live in France. Like myself he was reticent and self-effacing, so that when we sat together on the terrace of a café conversation languished. No doubt he was hypnotised by the passing throng, or maybe dreaming one of his distinguished stories.

Another short man, a contrast to the brooding Hopper, was dark, loquacious Jeffrey Farnol. He gobbled life with avidity. We had the same publishers and when he offered them *The Broad Highway* they objected that it was too lengthy. Savagely he tore out a chunk from the middle, saying: "That will make it short enough." Even then it was overlong but they accepted it and it was an instantaneous success. In Paris society he wore a huge pair of knee-high boots, but despite them he was gay

and ebullient as if he had on dancing pumps.

By way of a change I met a Big Man in Brentano's. He had a distinguished look and the salesman whispered: "Richard Harding Davis." My old hero! I watched him with admiring respect. He was well groomed and handsome, but he did not look a hale man. As I saw myself the picture of health I did not wish to be in his shoes. I was wise, for shortly after I read of his death.

Meeting those masters of my craft was to turn my mind to writing again. For long the very thought of it had irked me; till I wondered if I would pen another line. Then suddenly the old urge came back. For months it had not mattered; now it seemed to be all that mattered. My fallow period was over; I was desperate to rid myself of the thoughts that seethed in my brain. But what really started me was a chance meeting with a man who was to become my dearest friend.

## Chapter Six

### BOHEMIAN DAYS

I was sitting lonely on the terrace of the Dôme when an oldish man approached me. He made me think of a Skye terrier, for he had a shaggy moustache and friendly blue eyes under a thatch of eyebrow. He addressed me with a Scotch accent that immediately appealed to me.

“Peter McQuattie’s my name. I’m a journalist of sorts and I would like to write an article on you for the *Morning Post*.”

“Let’s have a drink,” said I. I called the waiter and though it was early in the day he ordered a *Pernod*. Then, chain-smoking, he told me of himself.

“I was a school teacher in a wee Scotch toon but I always longed for a larger life. Paris particularly allured me, so when a millionaire offered me a post to tutor his son with a year’s stay in France I accepted it as Fate. For some time we lived in Tours where one of my friends was Hugh Walpole, than a young student with no thought of writing. Hugh wanted to make a pact of life friendship with me, but somehow he wasn’t my sort—didn’t have enough of the devil in him. I liked to smoke and drink and tell salty yarns and I’m not very strong on skirt resistance. Hugh was too respectable for me. I like freedom and variety—so I’ve never married. Are you single?”

“For the moment: but I’d like a wife and a home. Everyone comes to it in the end.”

“I never will. I’m a born bachelor. I’ve a little apartment underneath the tiles and I’m happy as the day is long. I meet my pals, do a bit of writing, make just enough to jog along. I’d rather be like that than be Head in a Scotch school. I came to France for a year and now I’ve been over twenty. At times it’s been hard but I’ve scraped by. Always enough for a crust and a wee dram. And how I’ve loved poetry! I can quote it by the yard.”

“For God’s sake don’t quote mine.”

“I might if I get drunk enough. But, come on, man—ye’ll no refuse to help a fellow Scot. Tell me something about yersel’ for my article.”

The result was a column in the *Morning Post*, for which he was paid ten guineas and went on a big binge. But such successes were not frequent. As Paris correspondent for a Sunday paper he made three pounds a week. Once in a while he sold a short story to a cheap weekly and the quid or two it brought him was reason for a celebration. After a fling he was often hard up but only once did he ask me to help him. When he repaid me I tactlessly remarked: "You're the first of my friends who ever returned to me money they borrowed." He bristled and said: "D'ye think I'd have asked for a loan if I wasn't sure I could pay ye back?" And never again would he accept a penny of aid from me.

But he was incorrigibly lazy. Day after day he would sit on the terrace of the Dôme greeting his friends. I think his failure as a writer was because he was a great talker. He was the garrulous Scot with a talent for detail, that made his conversation realistic and riveting. I loved to get him gabbing and could have listened to him all night. Even stories he had told me before seemed more interesting in the retelling. But his conversational gift was really his curse for it made him too convivial.

However, the dream of his life was to write a book about Paris. It was to be called *Youth and a City*, and was to recapture his first rapture on arriving. He had conceived it twenty years before and each year he had decided to make a beginning. But perhaps laziness intervened; or it may have been that he was dismayed at the job and had secret doubts if he could fulfil it. So always he put it off for another year. Then one day I said to him: "I think I'll write a novel on Paris and the Latin Quarter and youth and rapture," but he gave me what I called his "school master look."

"You haven't been here long enough," he said. "You don't know the City." So I told him: "You've been here too long. You know it over well. You'll never write your book."

I hoped that would goad him; but no, he hesitated to make a start. So I went off to the country and wrote and wrote. I said nothing to him about it, then months later I went to him. "Here's your book," I said, "Only *I* wrote it. I did it in six months, but I kept my nose to the grindstone. It's the only way." He agreed, yet I could see something shrank affrighted in him. I am sure he realised then he would never write his book, and though he spoke of it hopefully to his dying day he never got beyond the title.

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One day Peter sought me eagerly. His eyes bulged with joy as he said: "Who d'ye think's coming to see me, all the way from Clydeside?—my old pal Neil Munro." I, too, was excited, for Neil was at that time our leading Scotch novelist. I had never read any of his books which were what I called "tushery." They were



historical and though he had a pretty style modelled on Stevenson, I was too much a lover of the present to be interested in the past. Yet, to meet a man who writes books, even though one doesn't care to read them, is thrilling enough, and I was happy indeed when that evening in the Napolitan I was introduced to the only Scots author with more than a local reputation.

The "Nap" was the café where the journalists foregathered, and I found them toasting our celebrity. Neil was a slim, fair man, not outwardly striking, yet giving an impression of being fey. He asked me about my work and I assured him I was doing nothing with great enthusiasm. He shook his head sadly: "I'd give a lot to be independent and write only books. But there's the grey grind of a newspaper office, and by the time I get home my imagination just won't work. Yet my heart's in the Highlands, in the good old days when clansmen clashed and claymores flashed. I was born a hundred years too late." "Damned if I feel that way," I told him. "I'd rather be here drinking a bonny dram with you than stinking in the coffin of the great Sir Walter. But I get your point, and here's to Romance."

I liked Neil a lot. We got on fine. Besides being a good writer he was a good fellow, enjoying his liquor and not above listening to a racy yarn. He was my kind, human all through. And that evening we had a great feed in Larue's. There were present Adam of *The Times*, Jerrold and Grey of *The Telegraph*, MacAlpine of the *Daily Mail*, Hill of the *Montreal Star*, Donahoe the Australian journalist, Peter, Neil Munro and myself. What a glorious, uproarious evening! Grand lads they were, with a great thirst and a rollicking wit. How the table rang with their sallies! . . . Yet today, of all that gleeful gang, only I am left alive.

Another celebrity I met at that time was Ibáñez, the Spanish novelist. Fisher Unwin was our mutual publisher, and I acted as interpreter between them. Blasco was as romantic looking as Neil was prosaic. He was brimming over with a vitality that would not let him rest a moment. A big, handsome, dynamic man. . . . Yet, when I met him years later he was walking across the courtyard of the Louvre with a worn and weary air. Gone was his exuberant zest. He was flabby and stooped with dull eyes and a pasty face. He told me he was having trouble with the Spanish Government who had denounced him as a traitor, while even the French authorities regarded him invidiously. Rich, world-famous but broken-hearted, soon after he passed on. I believe his last regret was that he could not die fighting for his country.

These literary contacts kindled in me the spark of inspiration and soon it burst into a blaze. In the meantime I wrote a series of articles on Paris. Into them I put all my enthusiasm and zest for living. From every facet I flashed joy as I wrote of my beloved city. It was easy to write those articles for I was so supremely happy. Again

and again I thanked the Gods for their gift of ecstasy. Little things that others took for granted—my morning *croissant* and coffee on the terrace of a tavern, my reflective pipe, my lonely walk along the Seine, evenings under the trees in the purple twilight—all of these were to me sources of divine content. I was amazed at my former idleness and rattled on my typewriter with exuberant ease. Again I discovered the rich satisfaction of creative effort. How I radiated joy! It did not seem right to be so lyric with gladness. I was so happy it almost hurt.

Now I had resumed work I wanted to do nothing else, and I neglected Peter. I had no time to waste in café loafing. I despised the four-flushers and failures who crowded the Dôme. “A bunch of boozing wasters,” I told him. “Don’t let yourself be one of them.” But after twenty-years of it he was too much of a *flâneur* to reform. Shaking his head sadly he ordered another Pernod, while indignantly I strode away. . . . Always a tremendous walker I indulged in it more violently than ever. No man had ever stancher legs and they carried me all over Paris till I came to know it like my pocket. And the better I knew it the more I loved it. At one moment I do not believe there was another writer of English who knew the City as well as I.

More and more I came to despise the sodden sybarites of the Quarter; then, as the demand came for more articles I realised I must broaden my field, so I went to Barbizon. I was enchanted with the woodland. Dithyrambic with delight I wondered how I could bear to live anywhere else. And truly after sun-baked streets those cool, leafy aisles seemed heavenly. So I walked the forest far and wide, thinking it a fairy land. I embraced trees and caressed boulders for the joy they gave me. Sometimes in the solitude of a green glade I laughed like a lunatic from sheer ecstasy.

But in the evenings I was often intoxicated by more than sun and sky. There were many artists in the forest and after their day of work they were inclined to make merry. The vine bequeathed to us the jewelled joy of its mellowing so that we drank till the night ended in a rich, confused rapture. And it was on one of those occasions I had a curious adventure.

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Oh yes, I was a little drunk as I walked from the tavern to my hotel in Barbizon. The distance was some three kilometres and the way lay through the forest; but I knew the trail and the moon was bright. The walk would serve to sober me. So after a final glass I set out. I sang as I marched, with a step that did not wobble too much. When one is lit up distances don’t seem to matter. The miles pass like magic and soon one tumbles into bed. So I went singing along, ever so pleased with myself and all the rest of the world when—suddenly I saw it—a LION.

Incredulously I rubbed my eyes. It was in a forest glade and the moon was like

silver. At first I thought it was a fantastic boulder, then I took it for a forgotten bit of sculpture, for it was as still as stone, staring at me. Sombrely I reflected: "I'm pickled and I'm just seeing things. Must cut down on the booze. . . . Pythons or pink elephants I could understand. But *lions*—no Sir!" So, bravely I went up to the brute. I would dispel this apparition of my drink-distorted brain. I would . . . When suddenly that lion *sarled*. How it happened I don't know but in two shakes of that big cat's tail I was six feet up the nearest birch and still climbing. But when I looked down again from what I judged was a height discouraging to lions there was nothing there.

"Let this be a lesson to me," I thought gloomily. "From now on the water-wagon has a new passenger. No more fruity old vintage for me." But prudently I stayed up that tree for a full hour and when I descended it was with a precipitation much greater than I intended. Bruised and shaken I returned to my inn and went to bed without saying a word to anyone. I was not going to expose myself to derision and disbelief.

And next morning, with a bit of a hangover, I was dully drinking my morning coffee when Gerrard, the sheep painter, said to me abruptly. "Well, they shot the lion." "Lion!" I exclaimed. "Yes. Is it possible you didn't hear? There was a lion loose in the woods last night. The Pathé people were making a picture over Melun way. It was one of those jungle stories and they built a compound and hired a live lion from the Zoo to give the scene atmosphere. But the palisade wasn't high enough and the brute leapt it and got away. Rather nasty if anyone had encountered it. But an expert rifle-man got it in the early dawn. Lucky shot, for it was a big brute and considered dangerous. . . . You were out late. You didn't happen to trip over a stray lion by any chance?" I shook my head sourly, knowing that if I had said "yes" I would have been the butt of all that ribald gang. Still, I thought—what I vowed about the water-wagon goes—with latitude.

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There are at least five inducements to live in a foreign land—freedom, strangeness, irresponsibility, romance and adventure. It was the hope of a little of this last that finally started me roving again. For the moment I was fed up with Paris, so I bought a push-bike and started off with no definite goal. The first day I did fifty miles with enthusiasm, the second, ten with a sore fanny. From then on I averaged twenty, depending on the distance between pubs. When I found one that was sympathetic I stayed and wrote an article. In that way I pedalled up and down Normandy, then went on to Brittany.

The Breton country charmed me, and I lingered lazily in that Land of Wooden

Shoes. I wrote of the fisher-folk of Finisterre, and its cider-swigging sons of the soil. I did some swigging myself, in oak-panelled taverns or sunny seashore *buvettes*, and the more I saw of Brittany the more it grew on me. From the sky-blue sardine nets of Douarnenez to the grim cairns of Carnac; from the quaint *coiffes* of Concarneau to the brilliant brocades of Landerneau; from the fantastic off-shore rocks to the grey stone cottages with their oak-fringed farms—How I loved it! I called it the Land of Little Fields and wrote articles about it.

Then one day I happened on a village that seemed lovelier than all. In a sea coast famed for its charm its beauty took my breath away. Tiny bays of golden sand were caught between rugged arms of rock with beyond a blaze of gorse and broom. Off shore were fairy isles, then a large one shutting in the bay from the outer ocean. It was an island of fantastic battlements and cliffs of grotesque device, and when the tide went out one could walk to it across miles of green-pooled sand. Clad only in trunks I would go daily to the tidal flats, coming back with lobsters, conger eels and jumbo shrimps. My body became Indian brown and all alone on that waste of reed-strewn pool I felt a nearness to nature I had long missed. As I stalked the sands with spear and shrimping net I was like a primitive savage. When the tide came up I would swim a mile or so, returning lazily to my cove. There I would linger, dreaming on a heather-clad headland and longing to express lyrically my feeling for the loveliness about me.

But somehow my eyes always went to a little red-roofed house that stood on a sea-jutting rock. It was far apart from any other and seemed so lonely. It was flanked by coves of golden sand and backed by a yellow blaze of gorse. Somehow, wherever I gazed, my eyes returned to that little house till at last it seemed to call to me saying: "I am empty and sad. I want to be lived in. Please take pity on me. Buy me. You will love me. You will never, never be sorry. . . ."

So I asked the landlord of my hotel: "What about the little red-roofed house on the point? Is it really for sale?" He answered: "Everything is for sale, Monsieur, if you are willing to pay the price. But this one will be high. It belongs to the *Maire* and is the apple of his eye. He built it himself and really it is a jewel. But he is a hard man and wants too much—twenty-five thousand francs—completely furnished, of course."

"It seems exorbitant," I said. "Would he not come down a bit?" But the landlord said: "Not if you begged him with your *derrière* sticking out of your pants. He is hard as nails. He will never take a franc less."

However, my host had given me an idea and next day I interviewed the *Maire* at his home. He was indeed a gnarled and withered man who looked as hard as

hickory, and behind him was a moustached wife who seemed equally difficult to deal with. I had made myself as miserable as possible, though I had drawn the line at exposing my *derrière*. But I wore stained pants, a ragged shirt, a broken straw hat and disreputable sandals. Even the natives appeared more respectable. "I want to buy your house," I said, "and I offer you seventeen thousand francs."

He looked me up and down. "My poor Monsieur, you mock me," he began. But I checked him. "Wait a moment. I do not know if I will be able to pay you even that sum. All I possess is seven thousand francs. I will have to beg, borrow or steal the other ten. I do not know if I can do so, but I will pay you seven thousand now and try to pay you the balance by noon on Saturday. If I cannot I will forfeit the seven thousand."

With that I took from my ragged shirt seven lovely *milles* and spread them before him. Dubiously he looked at them. Then I overheard his wife whisper: "He's a poor devil. He will never raise the balance. You take a chance, my brave Gustave."

Her eyes were fixed greedily on the notes, so reluctantly he took them. Then he made out a document in duplicate in which he agreed to sell me the entire property in the state it stood for seventeen thousand francs, seven thousand down to be forfeited if three days later the balance of ten thousand was not paid. Then we all signed and I went away.

That night I took the Paris train, withdrew ten thousand francs from the bank and the following day I was back. With the local lawyer I arrived at eleven on the fateful Saturday. On the way we had to ferry over on a small boat and I was worried we might not be able to get there in time. "If this boat upsets I'll swim," I vowed, "but I'll be right there with that dough." However, we reached the *Maire's* house a few minutes before the time had expired and I'll never forget the look of disgust on his face as he saw me. For now I was toggged up in flannels made by a Paris tailor and I overheard Madame whisper, "My poor Gustave, you should never have trusted him. I told you he was a Monsieur." However, they put the best face on it, the papers were signed, the payment made, the place was mine.

It was difficult for the *Maire* to conceal his chagrin. Yet he proved a good sport. "Would you not like to make an inventory?" he asked "You know the house is furnished, even to silver and bed linen. Everything complete."

"Not quite," I grumbled. "You've forgotten a car for the garage. But I know you're honest people and I trust you to leave everything as it is. I do not want to see the interior of the house. I fell in love with the outside and I want the inside to be a pleasure in store."

I returned to Paris that day after a final gloat over my house. DREAM HAVEN I

called it, and I wanted to keep it a dream, something insubstantial and only half conceived. I had a whimsical feeling I did not want to realise it too quickly. So I went back to Peter and the Dôme and Montparnasse. "I have a home, old man," I said. "And now what I want is a *wife*. I am ready for the greatest of all life's adventures—Marriage."

## Chapter Seven

### THE BLESSED STATE

Occasionally I am a man of resolution and, having conceived the idea of wedded bliss, behold me three months later nailed to the Cross of Matrimony.

My approach to marriage was peculiarly Scotch. It may be summed up in a sentence: I wanted a wife who would be willing to black my shoes of a morning. I remembered how my dear mother shone the boots of myself and four brothers before we went to school, spitting on them to make the blacking go further. Scotch girls would do that especially if they were humbly born. They had “siller sense.” I dreaded a wasteful woman. Yes, I wanted a wee Scotch lassie who would respect the bawbees.

Well, if I couldn't have a Scotch mate a French one might do. It was claimed they made the best wives in the world—canny and *sou*-conscious. She must belong to the small *bourgeoisie*; better if she had known poverty, for then she would appreciate all I could give her. A Cinderella marriage—that was the stuff for me. But once I had made my choice I would abide by it. There has never been a divorce in our family. Such a horror would have made my Covenanting ancestors turn in their graves.

At heart I am a prig. I may mock morality and scoff at respectability, but *au fond* I adore them. We are all like that. We may talk of Free Love and Varietism but where our own families are concerned we are Puritans. The licence of the Quarter disgusted me and I wanted none of its loose living. Lights of Love gutter out miserably. But nice girls in our circle were rare and I did not know any. So I put myself in the hands of Fate, hoping for the best.

One day, having posted an article, lunched in a Duval and digested the morning paper I thought I would take my coffee on the Grand Boulevard. So, sauntering care-free as a butterfly, I came to the Place de la Madeleine only to find a milling mob that blocked my way. A parade of soldiers was due to pass, but I was not interested. I was going to take a side street when the idea came to me to push through the crowd and gain the Grand Boulevard. There, standing on the chair of a

café terrace, I could see all that passed.

But the throng was denser than I thought, and soon I found myself in a jam. I was cursing my luck when, like an island in that human sea, I spied a hand-barrow. An enterprising hawker had hauled it there and was demanding a franc for a grandstand view. Instantly I was up, looking with pity on the serried bodies and thinking how one little franc can relieve an awkward situation.

But presently I was conscious that two young girls in the crowd were having a tough time. Perhaps if they had not been pretty I might not have noticed them, but dolled up in dainty finery they made an attractive spot of colour. Now they were very unhappy, struggling to escape that jostling throng. Then I heard a scream as the pressure increased and I had an inspiration. “Do you think,” I said to the proprietor of the *voiture à bras*, “that these two young ladies would accept a polite invitation to join our fortunate franc payers?” He had no doubt at all. He was down in the crowd and before the astounded *demoiselles* knew what had happened he had hoisted them up on that ramp of refuge.

I thanked them for accepting my hospitality, but in spite of their embarrassment they seemed to appreciate their rescue. Then to my surprise the younger of the two spoke to me in English. An invitation to tea was hesitantly made and with more hesitation accepted. They were convent educated and belonged to the small *bourgeoisie*, worthiest of all French society. Though the tea was tepid the cakes were delicious and I enjoyed myself more than I had done since my arrival in Paris—which was saying a good deal.

A second invitation to tea was somewhat dubiously accepted, but I had to go very delicately. My little friends were invincibly *comme il faut*, and when they are respectable the French can be more so than any other people. An invitation to dinner and the theatre was unthinkable; but they wanted me to see the outskirts of Paris as well as its skirts, so a visit to Versailles was arranged. Then another Sunday to St. Cloud. I found myself looking forward to these jaunts all the week, but a trip to Fontainebleau clinched things. I visioned the younger sister in the frame of DREAM HAVEN, and thought I could not do better. I wanted a home, a settled life, respectability, convention. I viewed the Quarter with growing disgust. A bunch of lousy libertines lushing all day long! . . . I had enough of that. I was due to play a new part. Why not a Benedict?

In real life I have always hated sentimentality. How can any man say: “I love you,” to a woman without feeling a silly ass? I may have been precipitate but some instinct told me I was right when I said to the younger sister: “Say, why don’t we take a chance? Columbus took a chance. I’ve only known you a few weeks but I



feel it will work out all right. Let's get hitched. I'm only a poet and as you know poets don't make money, but I guess we can manage to rub along. If you're not scared at the prospect of marrying a poor man let's live in a garret with a loaf of bread and a jug of wine, and we'll sing under the tiles." . . . And to my amazement she accepted.

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Had I been writing the story of another man I might have revelled in details of his domestic life, but as I am telling the history of my own I feel a certain restraint. And I have noticed that the best autobiographers handle themselves with discretion. Read Wells, Kipling, Maugham, and you will find they soft pedal on the family stuff. There are matters too sacred to be revealed even to the most sympathetic reader. Let the biographer chronicle them when one is dead. In the meantime let the writer present a fairly convincing portrait of himself and do not ask for more.

In these pages I will refer as little as possible to the problems of hearth and home, except to say that their joys far exceeded their sorrows. My marriage, so experimentally undertaken, was a huge success and after thirty-three years of self-consideration I still have the same wife. In all that term of matrimony I do not remember receiving a single black eye. Of course, every marriage is a compromise, and to make it successful the female must be a champion compromiser. She must learn to get her own way by letting the man have his. There's an art in handling the male brute and lucky is the wench who has it.

I did not insist on the garret of which I have so often sung, but I compromised on an apartment that came mighty close to it. The Rabbit Hutch, I called it, and it consisted of two rooms barely big enough to swing the proverbial cat, with a cupboard kitchen whose sink was my bathroom. It was on the Boulevard Montparnasse and the rent was three hundred francs a year. I gave the wife a thousand francs to furnish it and she did so with taste and discretion. She was very clever with her needle—cushions, curtains, and so on she made with her own hands. Often she would ask my opinion and I would look wise and say: "Swell!" though half the time I never noticed any difference. Details bored me. As long as I was comfortable I was more than content.

And she certainly strove for my well-being. Under her ministrations I got so fat I scarcely knew myself. She would return from market with huge baskets of provisions—chickens, grapes, rich pastry—all absurdly cheap. She tried to show me her accounts but I brushed them aside. Then once in a while she would timidly ask me for more money. Perhaps I should have taken more interest in her home making but I was too preoccupied, for I had taken the plunge and was deep in A NEW

## NOVEL.

Writing a book is to me an all-time job which excludes other interests. Night and day I brood and bang at my Remington. I go round like a man demented, mumbling to myself with blank unseeing eyes. In such moods I am an impossible person—nervous, inattentive, boorishly silent. It takes a woman nine months to make a baby and it takes me ten to make a book, but my travail is in the first five. Of course, there are calm spells when I enjoy real life again, yet soon I feel the goad and return to that false life I live so intensely. Perhaps artists should never marry: their egotistic antics are so insufferable.

Many authors feel at some time they would like to do a Latin Quarter novel, but with me there was no such compulsion. My whole heart was in it, and I think I should have quit writing if I had not been able to achieve that book. Never the making of one gave me such happiness. I was so full of my subject it brimmed over into my pages, and I poured myself out as never before. When the end came I was flaccid as an empty laundry sack. I finished near midnight and sat for a long time filled with a joy too deep for words. There! A big job off my mind, a bit of my life expressed in glowing words. . . .

Going to the window I looked over the sleeping city. A gentle breeze cooled my brow and kindly stars twinkled. A great peace seemed to reign, and suddenly I remembered it was Christmas Eve. Serene I stood, waiting for something to happen. . . . *Then I heard it for the first time, that strange music I call Harps of Heaven. From beyond the stars it seemed to come, a celestial harmony that filled my heart with joy. It was so ineffably sweet I could scarce bear it. I wanted to weep. It was like an angel choir, more dulcet than any human music ever was. For some minutes I stood there entranced. . . . Then I knew that what I heard was the rapture of my own heart. I myself was the Heavenly Harper and the music was my song of gratitude to the Giver of all goodness and joy. . . .*

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Well, another book was in the bag and once again I could laugh and sing. Sitting on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens I pored over it—polishing, abolishing, striking out adjectives or seeking the *mot juste*. From the first draft I made a second, still correcting and condensing, but it was jolly work for the strain and anxiety had gone out of it. Then I made my final copy and it gave me rare pleasure to read the clean finished type.

I thought it rather a bonny book, so vastly different from my first novel. That is perhaps why it was not a success. If an author gets tabbed for doing a certain type

of work the public won't let him do something different. I discovered this early and my failures have driven it in. Yet my Latin Quarter novel will always be my favourite, perhaps because I was so radiant when I wrote it. And though I romped and rollicked through it it contained passages that record my rapture.

The river leaps at me in a blaze of glory. Under a sky of rosy cloud it is a triumph of jewelled vivacity. Exultantly it mirrors the radiance of the city, and the better to display its jewels it undulates in infinite unrest. Here the play of light is like the fluttering of a thousand argent-winged moths, there a weaving of silver foliage, traversed by wriggling emerald snakes. Near it is a wimpling of purest platinum; afar a billowing of beaten bronze. Bridge beyond bridge is jewel-hung, and coruscates with shifting fires. The little steamers drag their chains of trembling gold, their trains of rippling ruby. Even the black quays seem to be supported on undulant pillars of amber. Yonder the great *Magazins* overspill their radiance. They are like huge honey-combs of light, nearly all window, and each window a square of molten gold. The roaring streets flame in fiery dust, and flakes of gold seem to quiver skyward.

*The City of Light.* Is there another that flaunts so superbly the triumph of man over darkness? From the Mount of Parnassus to the Mount of the Martyrs all is a valley of light. The starry sky is mocked by the starry city, its milky way a river gleaming with gold, shimmering with silver, spangled with green and garnet. The Place de la Concorde is a very lily garden of light: up the jewelled sweep of the Champs Elysées the lights are like sheeny pearls with here and there the exquisite intrusion of a ruby; beneath a tremulous radiance of opals the trees are bathed in milky light, while amid the twinkling groves the night restaurants are sketched in fairy gold. The Grand Boulevards are fiery-walled canyons down which roar tumultuous rivers of light; the Place de l'Opera is a great eddy, flashing and myriad gemmed; the *Magazins* are blazing furnaces erupting light at every point. They are festooned with flame, they are crammed with golden lustre, they blaze their victorious refulgence in signs of light against the sky. And so night after night this city of sovereign splendour hurls in flashing light its gauntlet of defiance to the dark.

All this time I had stuck to my job with dogged tenacity. I had forsaken my usual haunts and while I lived in my imaginary Quarter the real Quarter faded into a vague

background. I never passed the Dôme, though I could see from a discreet distance Peter sitting in his corner. Poor old chap! How lonely he looked! I wanted to hail him but that would have broken the spell. No, my sense of the dramatic never failed me. Let him wait till the moment was ripe.

Then one morning I sprang myself on him. He grew pale with pleasure. “Why, man,” he said, “where have you been all this time?” “Getting married,” I said laconically. He gasped with surprise. “Good God! You’ve been and done it. Is she Scotch?” “No, French.” “Well, that’s next best. Ach! I suppose you were bound to come to it. It takes a stout man to be a bachelor.”

“You must come up to the house and meet the wife. Come tomorrow evening and we’ll fix up a bite of supper. I mind you like to eat well, aye, and drink well. We’ll no’ forget the bottle. But what have you been doing all these months?”

“Oh, just chewing the cud—my novel—*Youth and a City*. It’s getting clear now. You know, the Scotch laddie he falls in love with a wee lassie of the Quarter, and they set up house in a garret and he nurses her. I haven’t decided yet whether she dies or not. I hate unhappy endings but maybe they’re more artistic.” “You must attack it soon,” I said, and he nodded mistily: “Yes, I will. One of these days. But have a drink. . . .”

We sat awhile and he looked so shabby and forlorn I felt sorry for him. Then some of his drouthy cronies drew near, so I rose saying: “Well, don’t forget. Tomorrow night we expect to see you at the Rabbit Hutch. And by the way don’t say anything about me being *solvent*. I’m just a poor devil of a literary hack living in a glorified garret.”

“You’re playing the part of poverty?”

“Well, I’m supposed to be poor and I’m kidding myself that I really am. Don’t want wee wife to get any false ideas of grandeur. She’s so simple and unspoiled I want to keep her like that—for a while anyway.”

“You’ll have to break the news to her some time.”

“I will, but gently. It’s going to be quite a blow. When Prosperity comes in at the door Romance flies out the window.”

When I went home I said to the Missus: “I’m inviting my best friend to dinner tomorrow evening so let’s have a special feed. Don’t be scared. You’ll like him and he’ll like you, especially if you give him a swell feed. Remember the way to a man’s heart is through his tummy.”

Next day the Rabbit Hutch was the scene of huge activity. I was busy binding the manuscript of my new novel and she was preparing the big feast—such comings and goings, parcels and kitchen clutter! Feeling in the way I went to the Luxembourg

Gardens where I smoked some quiet pipes. I was lazy, contented, relaxed. From time to time looked at my manuscript in its cardboard cover. . . . Here was my reward. I had given a rich slice of my life for it but it was well worth while. Gratitude welled up in me. I was the most favoured of mortals and my greatest good luck was that I was able to appreciate good luck.

Serenely I sauntered home. Suddenly I noticed I was no longer hugging my precious manuscript. I must have left it on the park bench! With my heart in my mouth I hurried back. . . . It was gone! Sick with despair I tried to realise my loss. Like a fool I had destroyed my rough draft. I had not even a carbon copy. I never *could* rewrite my book. After a horrid hour, stunned and weak I staggered home.

And as I miserably let myself in, there on the table was my manuscript. I could have kissed it. Faint with relief I sank into the big armchair and stared at it. How had it got there? Then the wife returned with a basket of groceries and I pointed to it. "That?" I gasped.

"Oh that," she said, displaying a nice plump *poulet*. "An old man brought it half an hour ago. Such a fine looking old man with white hair and a Santa Claus beard. He gathers cigarette ends in the garden and he found it. He saw your address in it, so thinking you might be worried he hurried here."

"Did you give him anything?"

"He wouldn't take a *sou*. He drew himself up so proud: 'Madame, we are fellow artists. Behold, I am an *homme de lettres*.' Then he drew from his pocket a bit of paper and read me a poem and I thought it was lovely. In the end I gave him a bottle of *Pinard* and he went away looking so pleased."

"Bless him! I wouldn't have lost that manuscript for ten thousand francs."

"Dear me! Such a lot of money! Will you make that much out of it!"

"Well, I may." As a matter of fact I did make ten thousand—in dollars. But I did not conceal my joy as, holding it high, I danced wildly as far as space permitted. To me it was worth more than any money for it was part of myself. "I'll tell you what we'll do," I cried. "We'll take it to London tomorrow. I'll pay you a holiday trip. Let's call it a belated honeymoon. But don't say anything to my friend about this book. He's doing one on the same lines and I don't want to discourage him. . . ."

I never beheld the Rabbit Hutch so resplendent as it was that evening. I had been too busy to appreciate the way the Missus had fixed it up, but now I saw in a hundred small details her taste and cleverness. I had given her an extra twenty francs to provide the feast and she had made them go a long way. Ah! those were the days. One could have a roasting chicken for seven francs and a bottle of Barsac for five. And that evening, though I was supposed to be a starving scribe, no millionaire could

have fared better.

When Peter arrived I saw with some dismay that he had dressed for the occasion. Instead of his old Harris tweed coat and his grey flannel slacks he had put on a blue serge suit and a bow tie. It's true his suit was creased in spots and smelt of moth balls but it put to shame my old corduroy coat. My wife was looking stunning in a bright red dress she had made herself, sitting up half the night to finish it. Between the two I felt a hobo.

"There she is," I said, "looking like a Scarlet Lady. But don't mistake—we were properly hitched, *Mairie* and Church. I had to promise my progeny would be little Papists. If one has to accept religion I reckon one might as well go the whole hog, and the Catholic brand has its good points. My wife believes she'll go to heaven when she dies and nothing could make her think otherwise. Well, she deserves it for she's a pretty good sort."

Peter thought so too for he insisted on kissing her three times, which I thought quite unnecessary. However, it was a way he had. The two seemed to hit it off from the start and the evening promised to be a big success. It was. . . . We began with *Potage Julienne*, followed by flaky *pâtés* of *vol-au-vent*, then that superb seven franc chicken with bacon trimmings, new potatoes and green peas. Then a bomb of Napolitan ice cream, *Petits fours* and a *corbeille* of pears, grapes and figs. With the food we had a bottle of *Château Lafitte*, and with the dessert a *Veuve Cliquot*. I don't see how the wife managed it all but she did so beautifully. While two gorged males smoked Egyptian cigarettes over the coffee we heard her washing up in the kitchen.

"That's a pretty dress," said Peter, swishing the *cognac* round in his glass. "Yes," I answered proudly. "She makes all her clothes. She has fairy fingers with a needle. I wanted to take her to the *Galleries Lafayette* to buy her a new gown, but she says it's too expensive. Oh dear! It's going to be very hard to break her of her economical habits."

"She reminds me of my mother," said Peter, and to his mind he could not have paid her a prettier compliment. "Well, you've struck it lucky as usual. You almost make me want to follow your example. Only I haven't got the siller you have."

"Two can live as cheaply as one," I said airily. "Give up your *Pernods*, cut down your cigarettes and you'll make it stick." But at the thought of giving up booze and 'baccy his face fell.

"I'll think it over," he said foggily. "But if you're going to London I'll give you a letter to a good friend of mine who is the editor of a big paper. You might tell him casually that old Peter is not going so strong financially and if he could offer me a half

column of space in his Sunday edition it would help a lot. . . . As to wedlock, I'm afraid it might interfere with my work. I must think of my novel. Domestic worries might distract me. I might not be able to finish *Youth and a City*."

## *Chapter Eight*

### DREAM HAVEN

Our London visit was a huge success. Religiously we did the sights, enjoying more feeding the pigeons than St. Paul's that harboured them. And the seagulls were the greatest attraction of the Thames Embankment. With my interest in people and my indifference to historic sights I gravitated slumward. Pubs, not palaces, were what intrigued me; costermongers, not countesses. Where I got my love of low life I do not know, but in every city I seek the ghettos and the gutters, the shadows and the shames.

Carrying my manuscript I introduced myself to Fisher Unwin. I must have brought a breath of the Latin Quarter for he stared at my broad sombrero and my flowing tie. The scene was an Adam room in Adelphi Terrace, and he was a dignified man with a beard and a frock coat. "Dictate to me," he said, and feeling independent I replied: "I will." So we discussed terms till reluctantly he agreed to my demands. Bullying an eminent publisher was a new experience for me, but I was having a vogue just then and several firms had offered to take my new book.

However, we finally settled matters and became the best of friends. The English market was so poor compared with the American I was inclined to despise it. Yet, in the end it was not so negligible for one time the old man sent me a cheque for two thousand pounds, and for three months it lay forgotten in a bureau drawer. Only when I was looking for a fan letter I discovered it. Then I had a letter from a furious publisher demanding why I had not turned it in, and I answered that I was holding it for a better exchange rate. He wrote saying that I was free to gamble at Monte Carlo but not with his cheques. All to show how indifferent I was to money.

One night I looked up my old school chum Jimmie, now Britain's best journalist. For thirty years I had not seen him. We had been in the same semi-slum school in Glasgow where he was the toff of the class because he sported a hanky. We others wiped our noses on the backs of our hands and rubbed them on the seats of our pants. In place of the black haired boy with twinkling eyes I now saw a little man with a big bald head and an air of authority. Yet his eyes still twinkled and his wit was



apt.

That night he had another visitor, Christopher Morley, whose work I admired. I offered to quote his poetry but he recoiled in horror. He need not have protested for all I remembered was the line—*Bless God for Coal* and a blazing fire suggested it. When he met me I could see a look of disappointment on his face but all he said was: “You’re different from what I thought you would be.” It was the old story. He who writes roughneck verse must look like a roughneck. As usual I was *not my type*. Striving to correct his sissified impression I told him I could walk on my hands, which I sometimes did, because the rush of blood to the brain quickened inspiration. He seemed interested and I would have done it right there, but someone produced a bottle of Scotch which we finished in the early hours. A rare writer of unpredictable power, his *Songs for a Little House* was one of the few books in my library the Boche failed to destroy.

I also saw the eminent editor who was Peter’s friend, and he took me to lunch at the Savage. When I told him of Peter’s position he said he would see what he could do, and when I returned to Paris my pal gleefully told me he had been commissioned to do a Sunday article for three guineas a week. . . . Yes, my fortnight in London was a success, for I failed to visit the Tower, Westminster or the National Gallery. Instead, I ate huge quantities of pork pies and Bath buns over the marble topped tables of tea houses and realised that I belonged to the Little People. I might make a pile of money but beyond my needs it meant nothing to me. I was hopelessly plebeian and would never get over it.

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In the meantime I was in a hurry to get back to the Rabbit Hutch. And some hurry too—for were there not a dozen invitations in my mail to do things or go places. People were beginning to discover me. Soon I would be lost in a maze of social engagements. No more freedom to sit in pubs and watch the antics of my fellow men. The moment of escape was at hand. And this has always been my system—I never announce my arrival in a city until the day of my departure, and thus evade all tentacular hospitality.

But in dear Paris of the Latin Quarter I was free as the air, so having no longer work to do I would do nothing with gusto. For a year I would indulge in delectable laziness. Happy me! I sighed in the leafy Luxembourg, for I felt I could loaf serenely with no fear for the future. Then another idler came to share my bench—a young man with a long beard and an ironic smile. He was living in a room that gave on a back court. There with the cats and the ashcans he cultivated his sense of derision. His eyes never lost that satiric gleam, even when he became rich and famous. But I

knew him when he had scarce a *sou*. I never admired his pictures and often wondered if through them he was not mocking the world as he did in the olden days in the leafy garden of the Luxembourg. His name was van Dongen.

How good to get back to the Rabbit Hutch again! On the first evening Peter came to see us, having noticed a light in our window. He brought us each a belated wedding gift. To my wife he gave a Cairngorm brooch, to myself a four volume edition of Stevenson's letters. I believe he spent the first payment for his new articles in its purchase. He could not have pleased me more. Letters have always been my favourite reading. Not being written for publication they are so human and revealing. I do not say that Stevenson's were all that, but of all his works I find them the least pretentious and most charming. After letters, I love diaries. Here again we have the artless expression that is above art. The finest reading is that which was never meant to be read.

But as I basked in the sunny smile of fortune I had one dreadful fear. I was living far below my means. If I went on I would be spending only the interest of my interest. Even a Scotsman would revolt at that. I must do something about it. So I bought the wife a bicycle, polished up my own and we started on a tour of Touraine. After doing the Château country we moved by easy stages into Brittany and at last came to the little fishing village where I had passed such a happy holiday. That evening we sat on the same rabbit hill on which I had spent so many hours of reverie.

There across the golden cove was the house I had bought—DREAM HAVEN. It looked lovelier than ever, but very lonely too. It seemed to reproach me; so I said to the wife: "There's a cute cottage." And she said: "It's beautiful, but so sad. People should be living in it and how happy they would be!" And though we spoke of other things our eyes always returned to the little house with the red roof; so presently I said: "Let's go over and have a look."

Well, we climbed down the rocks, crossed the cove and unlatched the garden gate. My wife protested: "The owner might not like it if we go in. Perhaps they might set a dog on us." But I said bravely: "There's not a soul about." So we approached the front door and I turned the handle. "Why, the door's not even locked. I wonder what it's like inside." Again my wife objected: "We might be taken for burglars. We've already gone too far." But intrepidly I advanced. . . . "We can say we want to buy it," I suggested. "But how can we? We haven't any money," she said trembling. I frowned mysteriously. "There are ways and means. Perhaps the novel will be a success."

So we peeked in timorously. To our surprise there were fresh flowers on the

dining-room table and everything was neat as a new pin. "How well it's kept," said the Missus. "I believe it's occupied after all. We had better knock." Then she gave a scream, for the kitchen door opened and a smiling peasant woman greeted us: "Welcome, Monsieur," she said. "I've been *expecting* you. . . ." There! The jig was up. Turning to my wife I said: "I'm a miserable deceiver. I must make full confession. This house is mine, furnished complete to the car in the garage. It's our future home. And now let me introduce Anastasia, our caretaker, and I hope she'll hold the job for the rest of her life."

"I have prepared supper," said Anastasia, "and aired the beds as Monsieur wrote me to do. If you wish to sleep here this evening all is in readiness." "Grand!" I told her. "We're here at last and here we'll bide and eat the meat the gods provide." So we sat down to as fine a supper as ever I ate—a roast of veal, fresh vegetables from the garden, apples from the orchard and figs from the tree, all washed down by foaming cider. Naturally we were excited, but behind it I had a deep sense of peace and content. Here I had found my anchorage and in this beauty spot I would pass most of my life. And I was not wrong. For twenty-seven years I spent six months of each in Dream Haven. To that blessed sanctuary I owe today my hearty health and my hope of longevity.

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I do not think I will ever again experience such emotions of sheer delight as those with which I took stock of my new possessions. The house was simply furnished but little was lacking. As we opened windows to the sea each was like a shell to which one puts an ear, only from each the murmur seemed different. The house was perched on that rocky promontory between two coves of honey-coloured sand. It seemed part of the rock itself, it was so staunch and time-defying. The cellars were hewn from the live stone, and it was so intimate with the sea that at high tide salt spray bespattered it. That night it was like a ship with the comforts of the land. As I lay in bed and heard the waves splashing on three sides I felt as if I were in mid-ocean with all the safety of the soil.

Oh, it was wonderful, my awakening! With a surge of joy I went from room to room, seeing the sunny ripple dappling the walls just as one sees it in the cabin of a ship. . . . Then buffeted by laughing waves I plunged into the sea, swimming far out and singing as I swam. When wearied a little, I floated gently, gazing at the house that smiled at me from its comforting solidity of grey walls and red roof. Behind it, in a blaze of triumph, was the yellow broom, and beyond it the sleeping village with its sunny spire. As I lay there in the trough of the sea I thought how happy I was. What had I done to deserve all this rapture? No one had a right to be so happy. Then I

thought it was something in myself. Other people took pleasant things for granted but my emotion was special to me. It was a radiance for which I thanked the Gods. Perhaps only poets felt like that, and if feeling meant anything, then maybe I was a bit of a poet after all. So, gazing up into the sky once more I heard it, that magic music—the *Harps of Heaven*.

Yes, I was too happy, and in the halcyon days that followed I often had a strange chill of premonition. It was too good to last; something sinister was in the offing. Well, let us enjoy the moment as it comes and we will squeeze the ultimate happiness out of life. So I grew to love my house more and more till it was strange to think that by virtue of a few flimsy bills it was forever mine. By reason of silly words spilled on paper that tomorrow would be forgotten, this time defying loveliness would be my own to my dying day. I blessed my house and often I pressed my cheek against its granite wall and kissed it like a lover.

The months that followed were one sustained rapture in which we appraised our treasures: the fig tree by the well, the moss-grown wall up which pear and apple trees were trained: the lawn, the summer house, the pine grove where starlings sang at sunset. But it was inexact when I said that there was a car in the garage. It was in that of the village *garagiste* and had been brought from Paris. It was an open two-seater called a Sigma, a patrician of its kind, long and low with graceful lines and finished in brass that gleamed like gold. I have had many cars since, but never one so faithful and so sweet. When I exchanged it for a new one it was like dealing the death blow to an old friend.

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One of my first acquisitions was a watch dog, a Breton spaniel called Coco. I bought him as a puppy and he almost cost me my life. It was this way. . . . I was on one of my walks and he was gambolling in front when a car bore down on us. It was going so fast I had no time to call in my dog. I shouted frantically but there he stood, right in the way of the car. Then, without a thought but to save him from death, I dashed in and grabbed him. I heard a shout as the driver of the car missed me by inches, and took the ditch.

A little dazed I stood there, when I saw a furious Frenchman running towards me from a powerful Panhard stalled down the road. I expected to be flayed with abuse. “You little devil,” I said softly to the frightened puppy. “You nearly cost me my bit of living in our precious world. This bearded Alphonse is coming to excoriate us and we will accept it humbly.”

However, there was no need to beg his pardon for I had not counted on my popularity. We were in front of a wayside hamlet and most of the peasants had seen

what had happened. Now they came running forward, stout Bretons, all friends of mine. Did I not talk and drink with them, support the Church, give thousands of francs to the poor. . . . “No, Monsieur Service was a fine gentleman and could do no wrong. The owner of the car was a pork butcher in Rennes and a *cochon*. Did he not drive past at that furious pace every day to the peril of their children and their chickens? But Monsieur Service always slowed up. He was considerate of us. . . .”

“*Espèce de brute!*” screamed a woman. “*Sale bête!*” shouted a man. Before their menacing fists Alphonse flinched, before their angry advance he fled. Never a word I said, just caressed my pup, but I realised that I had friends all around me and through the years they have continued my friends. As for my dash in the way of the car I take no credit for it. “Died to save his dog,” might have made a pretty headline to a paragraph and some might have thought me a bit of a hero, but it wasn’t at all like that. My act was instinctive with no realisation of danger. Yet . . . well, perhaps I might have done it all the same.

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My second acquisition was a Canadian canoe I called *Daisy*, and if Coco nearly cost me my life *Daisy* was the means of saving another’s. There she was, her graceful form reposing on the sandy beach when screams for aid came from the sea. It was in the height of the season and the long beach was gay with summer visitors. The tide was running in with unusual force. The sands were studded with rocky islets that were covered at high water. On these fishers used to linger to the last moment before scurrying ashore, but this time one had lingered too long.

To be quite frank I was attending a cabinet meeting when I heard the cries of alarm, and scarce stopping to button up I ran out. It was as I suspected—a small boy was on one of those islets and the sea had already surrounded it. As he stood on the peak of the rock the water came to his knees. Below, it must have been four feet deep. In a few minutes it would be up to his neck and he would *drown*. There was no boat. I could hear agonized cries from the hundreds on the beach. Nothing could be done to save him for the distance was too great to reach him in time. How horrible to see someone drown before one’s eyes, and to all these people it looked as if he were doomed.

But they had forgotten little *Daisy* in her hidden cove. Swift as an arrow she shot to the rescue. She must have been a bonny sight, for the water was blue and the sunshine was golden. There was a moment of suspense. Would she reach the boy in time? Over the milk-smooth water she flashed and gained him just as the water swirled round his shoulders. He grabbed the canoe, nearly upsetting it, and I yanked him on board. Then he started to howl and pointed to his boots that were floating on

the tide. Anti-climax. It took me more time to rescue those damned boots than it had the boy. How I cursed him as I shot ashore. The crowd cheered, but with a sour face I dumped the brat on the sands, swung round and returned *Daisy* to her cove.

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Peter came down for a holiday and had the time of his life. He fell for *Daisy* right away. He had never navigated a canoe before, but the old Clyde yachtsman came out in him and he ventured where I feared to go. Opposite us was a big island shaped like a whale, with its blunt head brunting the ocean. This high blue cliff was always wildly wave swept, and as if in further defiance of the surging seas it shot out fantastic fangs like sharks' teeth where in and out the foam snarled evilly. A sinister spot, shunned by fishermen. But one day we voyaged round the island, keeping well out from its dark bastion. Suddenly we noticed that the swell was sweeping us in among those jagged snags of rock where the evil foam was like a witches' cauldron. The canoe was so frail a toy and the rip tide was roaring down on us. I was anxious, but Peter was serene. "She's a sound little craft," he grinned, "There's no danger."

I thought otherwise. A wind sprang up, chilly and damp, and with it a mist that soon enshrouded us. Though we paddled strongly, at one moment the headland loomed right over us and I could see dark depths of secret sea. Here, however, it was free of those granite fangs, and though the powerful swell swept us towards the iron face of the bluff we managed to clear it. But we had a nasty moment, during which Peter never ceased to laugh. He swore he'd enjoyed the whole thing and I felt he was a better man than I.

He seemed to grow ten years younger the month he was with us. He swam a steady breast stroke and his pudgy body hardened. He potted around in the garden, loving flowers and all green growth. I can scarcely tell one flower from another. Peter could give plants their scientific names, which to me spoiled them. I was impressed, but I remembered he had once been a school master and had lectured botany. He took a great interest in my place, planning a pergola, a sundial and herbaceous borders. I had never seen him so happy. We drove through old Breton villages, picnicked in the ruins of mediaeval castles. He had a grand time and it did him a lot of good. Often afterwards he spoke of it and never ceased to envy me what he called my Shrimping Shack. But the old Adam was strong in him, and though we had both wine and cider for lunch, towards dinner he would make an excuse to go to the village. Then I would find him installed in an *estaminet* drinking his favourite *Picon citron*, surrounded by admiring natives for whom he bought cups of cider. He loved those rustic taverns and was immensely popular with the peasants. I think they would have liked to elect him *Maire*.

When at last he decided it was time to return to Paris I said to him: "Why not come down in winter and make the place your own? You would be so quiet and you could write *Youth and a City*." He shook his head. "I love it here for a change but Montparnasse is my home and I'll never leave it."

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When I look back on that first summer in Dream Haven it seems to me incredibly sweet. I marvel how so much joy could be compassed in a single season. I did no work, but read until the early morning hours with the waves plashing under my window. I went a three-hour walk over the sands, clad only in bathing trunks; or if the tide was high I tramped the land far and wide. I became notorious as a solitary walker, hailed by farm and fisher folk alike. And as I walked I dreamed. I planned new books, I savoured the success of old. I was at the zenith of life, enjoying it as never before. Again and again I said: "It's too wonderful. It cannot last. Something sinister is beneath it all." Then one afternoon I knew. . . .

We were walking across the fields when I heard the village *cloches* begin to peal. Then all over the country from spire to spire the church bells took it up. The TOCSIN. Suddenly a neighbour woman came running down the path and she was weeping. "War," she cried. "Our men will have to go. My husband . . ."

She fled in a state bordering on panic. And now I could see the peasants leaving their fields, throwing down their hoes, unharnessing their horses. No more tilling the soil that day. They were hurrying to the village square to hear the dread news. We went too. In that serene and peaceful scene it was hard to realise the calamity that had befallen us. We saw fear in every face. Women were sobbing, men looked stunned.

In the village square the *Garde Champêtre* read the mobilisation announcement, tears streaming down his grizzled cheeks. Then he finished up: "*Vive la France!*" After that everyone went to their homes, the men to prepare to join up, the women to aid them to pack. When that wild Tocsin ceased the calm that followed was like the hush of doom.

As I walked home I knew that the shadow of evil had fallen over the land and that things would never be the same again. Never again would we see that eager, careless world; never exult in the golden present, thinking that the future would be equally serene. Never, never again. . . .

## Chapter Nine

### AMBULANCE DRIVER

Although I was over military age when war broke out I felt keen to join up. I fancied the Seaforth Highlanders, so I went to the recruiting office and offered myself. To my surprise a varicose vein in my leg disqualified me. "You can't wear puttees with that thing," snapped a medical officer. As I had understated my age and darkened my hair I went wearily away. When he yelled after me: "Shut the door!" I did so with a bang. But it was just as well, for that battalion of the Seaforths was practically wiped out on the Somme. Had it not been for an innocent bulge in my left calf I would probably now be lying near my brother in a grave in Flanders Field. Sometimes a blemish is a blessing.

Then I took counsel of my good friend John Buchan, a man whose brilliance dazzled me. Had he not gone to my old University, gained a scholarship for Balliol, written a dozen books, become a Member of Parliament? He was also partner in a big publishing firm and head of a famous news agency. So young, with so many irons in the fire. Yet I do not think he dreamed of the high honours that would ultimately be his. At that moment he was a ranking Colonel and writing a history of the War.

I met him in the lounge of the Hotel Scribe. He had a slim figure and a sensitive face under a bulging brow. When I told him I wanted to join the ranks he shook his head. "Join the Officers' Training Corps and get a commission. We want men like you." I disagreed, for I knew myself better than that. Though I can obey ardently I cannot command. Always that inferiority complex. I am incapable of handling men, while responsibility unnerves me. All of which I tried to explain to John but left him unconvinced.

So we went to a Burns Banquet where he made the speech of the evening. As I sat by his side he told me his health was so delicate sometimes he had to go to bed for a month. On these occasions he would write a book. He had just finished *Greenmantle*, which had sold twenty thousand copies in advance. I marvelled at his facility and his success. He commented on the absence of a haggis, saying: "A Burns Banquet without the haggis is like *Hamlet* without the Prince." For so fine a scholar



he had a rich sense of humour, and it was a grievous pity a man of such grace and distinction should meet with an untimely death.

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Having been thwarted in my effort to get into the War on the ground floor, I thought of my Balkan experiences and wondered if I could not be a correspondent. Accordingly I offered myself to my old syndicate and was accredited on the same conditions. So I went round hospitals and training centres, doing my best to grab colourful stuff. One of my articles described the arrival of a train of wounded at Rennes; but it was hard getting such gory material, so I went to Calais.

In those days war correspondents were anathema to the High Command, and to be caught near the firing line was a dire offense. The best one could do was to snoop as closely as possible. At the Station Hotel of Calais were a brilliant band of journalists, but they depended on leave men and Blighty victims for their stories. I was not very successful. The regular newspaper men got tips that left me an outsider. I did not get much help from them; but one and all said: "If you value your skin don't go near Dunkirk."

I reflected: "If I'm the man for my job I *must* get to Dunkirk. . . ." But how? The train was running, yet I should be arrested at the station. Well, why go to the station? There was a village a few miles out of town where the train stopped. I would get off and walk the rest of the way. So I slipped on to the train which was full of soldiers and country people. I thought they looked at me queerly, but suspected no evil.

Hopping off at the little station I made my way to a café where the *patron* hailed me with some surprise. He spoke to me in a lingo I first thought was German so I hastened to disavow any knowledge of that language. He explained, however, that it was Flemish, and served me with beer. As I drank I was conscious of that atmosphere of suspicion. The other drinkers hushed their talk and eyed me distrustfully, till feeling a little uncomfortable I rose and went my way. As I did so I saw the landlord rush to the telephone.

I did not take the direct road to Dunkirk. If I did so I might be stopped, as I would have been at the station. So I found a by-way and entered the town by the suburbs. Soon I was in its centre, where in a big café I ordered tea, bread and butter. As I sat there I felt serenely happy. I had been smart. I had evaded the authorities. I was on the track of something that might be worth while.

And indeed the town was full of interest for a news-starved scribe. I saw numbers of Indian troops looking strangely out of place in the mud and rain. I spoke to weary *poilus* fresh from the Front. I could hear the cannonading and it gave me a thrill of delight. I beheld my first string of German prisoners in grey-green coats,

marching methodically. Troops were being landed in the Port and supply columns congested the narrow streets. All day I dodged from one vantage point to another, seeing a hundred things I was not supposed to see. And I was innocently happy thinking how I was getting ahead of the boys back in Calais.

That evening I was arrested. I was watching ambulances load the wounded on a train when suddenly a *gendarme* pounced on me. He was dark and truculent. His bushy eyebrows met over his hawk-like nose and his eyes were angry. He demanded my papers; then instead of telling me they were in order he curtly ordered me to follow him. He took me to an office where sat a Major with a good humoured face that grew stern as soon as he looked at my passport. I could not blame him. That passport was a record of my travels over much of Europe. It had all kinds of outlandish visas, including German ones. It was really a sinister document. After examining it he turned me over to the *gendarme* whom he called Gaspard. The eyes of Gaspard gleamed with triumph. It was he who had made this arrest. As he told me gloatingly, the whole police force had been combing the town for me since morning. Only he with his superior acumen had calculated that sooner or later I would seek the station, and for hours he had lain in wait.

Now he had nabbed a dangerous spy—for it seemed that was how I was regarded. My surreptitious entry into the town, my innocent evasion of the police, my equivocal passport, all went to convince Gaspard that I was an *espion de premier ordre*. This he told me, fiercely, pointing a big revolver with my navel for its bull's eye. As he accused me a crowd collected—menacing, murmuring, glaring, so that now Gaspard became my bulwark barring me from their wrath. For at that moment Dunkirk was having a wave of spy fever, and they were shooting suspects at sight. I wondered if I, too, might not be a victim; though I did not take the matter too seriously. Yet I was marched through the streets with a big pistol jabbing at my spine, for Gaspard was taking no chances. He dared me to make a break for liberty, when he would have shot me like a dog.

Then followed what I will always consider to be a doleful experience. First I was interviewed by a General. He was severe, but when he looked over my passport he became grim. He kept all my papers, congratulated Gaspard, then had me conducted to a guard room where I was locked in. It had whitewashed walls, a small barred window and was unfurnished but for two chairs. I sat on one of these and, putting my feet on the other, I tried to make myself comfortable. But I did not like the look of things. I had a feeling they might shoot first and inquire after.

That was a nasty night, I did not sleep for worrying over what the dawn would bring forth. It brought forth Gaspard. He grinned ruefully and told me he had

instructions to take me before the English Captain of the Port. My hopes rose. Now I would have a chance to square myself. So again I was marched through streets and streets accompanied by a vindictive mob who hissed "*Espion!*" I was painfully glad when I was shown into the presence of the Port Captain. He sat behind a big desk while in a far corner, behind a small desk, sat a naval cadet. Gaspard handed him my various credentials which he examined grimly, giving me a piercing look from time to time. Finally he turned to Gaspard. "These papers seem to be in order. Why have you arrested this man?"

I heard Gaspard explain that I had entered Dunkirk by a back way and all day had evaded arrest. As he did so I saw the cadet start and gaze at me as if petrified. More than anything else that made me grasp the gravity of my situation. I was in serious danger. Then for the first time in my life I realised *I had a heart*. I was conscious of a steady pounding going on inside my chest. "You're in a tough spot, laddie," I thought.

The Captain, too, seemed amazed at my audacity. "What have you to say for yourself?" he snapped. "It's quite correct," I said. "I did come into Dunkirk by the back door; but in Calais the boys told me it was the only way to make it, so I took a chance. Risk is my job. I had to get a story for my paper and I did not think I was doing anything really wrong. Some of the other chaps did it."

He grinned wryly. "But you are aware you have no right to be here, and the faster you get out the better. As for this spy business, let me tell you you've had a narrow escape. There's a big scare on and they seem to have lost their heads. Only this morning they shot half a dozen poor devils off hand. I am sure some of them were innocent. If I had not been here to intervene you might have been one of them. Now take your papers and GET OUT!"

Then rising, he shook hands with me, saying to the flabbergasted Gaspard: "This man is innocent. You may release him." I thanked the Captain fervently. As I went into the street Gaspard was there. He said: "In spite of all, I believe you're a spy." I wanted to thumb my nose at him but I only gave him a look of contempt. So with a sense of escape I strode to the station where I took the train for Calais. When I got to the hotel I told the boys of my adventure and they roared with laughter. To be shot as a spy seemed a "helluva joke."

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This escapade disgusted me with the correspondent game. "If I could only get a break," I reflected, "I could put it over these newspaper guys. The only one doing decent stuff is an amateur called Philip Gibbs and the others call his work 'sob stories.' What they do is just common reporting, without distinction or

imagination. . . .” Yet despite my defeat I felt I must make another try to get a ringside seat at the Big Show.

Back in Paris I got two good stories. One evening in the Place Clichy I saw a crowd milling round a drunk Tommy. He was an elderly man, small and wiry, covered with mud and wearing a woollen nightcap. I rescued him from a mob of women who were affectionately mauling him, and bought him a bottle of wine. “We got it pretty ‘ot, Sir,” he told me. “I’m the only one left of our lot. Them Youlans would have speared me like a hog if I ‘adn’t shammed dead, lying under a gun carriage. . . . But oh, the time we ‘ad on the way to Mons! The men cheered us, the women kissed us and they gave us so much wine we was urinating red. But the coming back was bloody. How I felt ashamed to face them same people! But they gave me this tam o’ shanter because I lost me ‘elmet.”

He hung on to his rifle, however, and still was full of fight. “I want to go back to Mons,” he kept saying, “and ‘ave another go at ‘em.” But the Army thought otherwise. They gave the old chap a Victoria Cross and kept him at home as a training sergeant.

Then one night I saw crowds lining one of the Montmartre streets. They were mostly women, some of whom would break away to kiss one of the soldiers who were passing in a column. Many of these soldiers were black. Their teeth flashed ferociously as they grinned at us. All were in full fighting kit yet their spirits seemed high, for they were going forward to the Battle of the Marne. I stood there all night long and in the dim light I saw the Foreign Legion file past. Then regiment after regiment of colonial troops. Then what seemed to be every taxi in Paris crammed with cheering *poilus*. It was an inspiring sight and only in the dim dawn did I go home too tired to write my story.

The next few days were heavy with anxiety. We knew nothing, heard nothing as we gazed anxiously in the direction where one of the greatest battles of history was being fought. But we thought that Paris was doomed, and the following week would see the *Boche* marching under the *Arc de Triomphe*. Though most of my friends scrambled, I decided I would stick it. The weather had been brooding and sinister, but the Sunday dawned bright and clear and somehow we all sensed that a miracle had happened. Apprehensively we had been waiting to hear the guns of the enemy; now all was silent. Only later did we know that one of the most glorious pages in history had just been written.

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I was eating my heart out to think I could not get into the thick of things, when I saw in the paper that an American Ambulance Unit was being formed and that

drivers were needed. I applied for further information and received a letter from one of the leaders asking me to meet him at the Hotel Meurice. "It's like this," he told me, "a bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Ritz Bar when someone suggested that we form an Ambulance Corps. We all had cars and were willing to turn them into ambulances and drive them ourselves, so we decided to offer our services to the French Government. They accepted. Now we are attached to the army of Foch. But we need young men who are not afraid to rough it and have a taste for adventure. If you join us we will send you to the Front, only you must promise not to write a word on anything you see."

Of course I promised, though that was the very thing I meant to do. But that was for the future to realise. In the meantime I went to London, bought a uniform and felt rather a fool in it. Being what they called a "gentleman driver" I had an officer's standing. This embarrassed me. I was not a fighting man, yet *pukka* soldiers were saluting me. I got so that when I saw a Tommy coming I would dodge round a block. I did not wear my Red Cross arm-band, for I was ashamed I was not a combatant. Though I did not want to kill I was willing to take a chance of being killed. If I only could get some *gore* on my uniform I might feel better. Anyway, I was no longer a nosy newspaper slacker. . . .

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A week later I was driving an ambulance under fire. It was on a long stretch of Flanders road, and I had five wounded in my car. This road was raked by a German battery as I hurried over it. Suddenly I heard a shell burst. I saw a cloud of black smoke, while gravel and stones spattered the car. I hesitated to dash on or to stop; but my orders had been to do the latter, so I put on the brakes. A good job too, for ahead there was another explosion with a mushroom of evil black smoke. I had three walking wounded and two stretcher cases, so with the aid of the first, I got the stretchers into the ditch and there we waited till dusk. I had felt no fear, only a thrill that had something of pleasure in it. I had been under fire. I could go back to Chelsea now and take a salute.

Our headquarters were in a *château* where we slept on the floor and had food provided by the French army. But we all contributed for extras so that our fare compared favourably with the best officers' mess. Dinner every evening was a scene of hilarity. Wine flowed freely and everyone was in high spirits. Perhaps there was something feverish in our gaiety, for we were keyed up by the events of the day. We joked, laughed, sang, told stories, anything to make us forget the roar of the cannon that sometimes seemed to rock the ground about us. It may seem a dreadful thing to say, but we were actually *enjoying* the war.

Taxi jobs took up our days and by work well done we earned our evening gaiety. When not on duty I would go for long walks through fields where crops were rich with promise. It was a peaceful scene, though in the distance I could hear the guns, like the flapping of a gigantic blanket, and sometimes clouds of smoke would stain the horizon. Often I gained a knoll from which I could see spires of villages that were in enemy hands, and I would wonder wistfully what was happening there. Overhead at all times were Hun planes, dodging between silver puffs of shell-burst. I watched them, hoping to see one brought down, but they seemed to enjoy a miraculous safety. In these fields of Picardy the contrast between peace and war was brought home to me, with the peasants ploughing peacefully under the very guns. I was happy, for I was in uniform and proving myself worthy to wear it. Somehow I did not think of writing any more. All I wanted was to be a good soldier, even if I were a phoney one.

Despite the usefulness of my work I began to long for something more exciting, so volunteered for outpost duty. We had several posts close to the First Aid Stations, and kept cars there day and night. There were two of us to a car and we were relieved every ten days. The life was rough, for we had to sleep in our clothes on the floor of a ruined cottage, or in a tent or dugout. We were exposed to shell-fire, at least to a direct hit, so that as we slept we felt we were in the hands of Providence. Usually we resigned ourselves on a bad night of bombing, thinking that if a shell did get us we would never be any the wiser. Soon the cannonading ceased to keep us awake; it was the rats that really annoyed us. A rat running across one's chest can feel as heavy as a sheep, and one of my best laughs was to see a big grey one chewing the beard of an old *poilu* by my side.

The night driving was the worst. We could not show the faintest light and the roads were pitted with shell holes. It was nerve-racking, crawling on low speed, with a badly wounded man along those coal-black devastated roads. Once I had a soldier die in my car—but I prefer to forget that. There is so much I want to forget. Those who went through the horror of war never want to talk about it. But if there was slaughter, there was also laughter. We would laugh a lot, mostly about nothing, and we became very callous, grumbling if brains or guts soiled the car. We were sorry for the poor devils but saw so many they were like shadows.

I always begged to go forward with the stretcher men to fetch the wounded from the front line. There were two men to a stretcher and they were glad of a third to spell them off. I loved those trips to the firing trench, or even into No Man's Land. We made them during the day when we had cover, but when we were exposed we took the wounded after dark. The danger enhanced the heartening feeling of saving

life. All of us were keen on those hazards for they gave us a pride in our job. We felt a certain shame that we were not fighting men. However, most of us were of middle age, while the younger ones were American citizens and that country had not yet come in. Grand fellows all—I never expect to work with finer.

In the early stages of the war I felt no fear. I used to prowl close to the front line, and once or twice got myself into trouble. In some cases the German trenches were only a few yards away, so I got a thrill out of the nearness. To think that I was exposed to fire bolstered my self respect, and sometimes I would leap out of a trench in full sight of the enemy lines. I was a show-off and a fool. That I did not get a bullet in my hide was no fault of mine, for I loved the twang of them. But towards the end I got jumpy, hating the near-by crash of a shell and its concussion. War does not improve on acquaintance. It resolves itself into filth, confusion, boredom. Though I tried to avoid the latter by courting danger in the end I came to realise I had a yellow streak a yard wide.

After a month or so at the various advance posts it was grand to get back to the peace of the *château*. I had a wonderful feeling of relaxation and a sense of duty done. Oh, the goodness of the golden garden!—loafing, dreaming, forgetting that so few miles away men were murdering each other. How beautiful this world could be! Yet we must make it hell. Strolling in the radiant sweetness of those sunny alleys I thought: Why cannot it be always like this? . . . And once again it seemed to me I heard my *Harps of Heaven*.

Of course it was not always so serene. We had times of battle, big and small, which were strenuous enough. Often for nights there would be no sleep as the stream of wounded kept us on the run. As a rule the bigger the battle the smaller the danger; for then things were organised so that we took up our loads less close to the fighting zone. But there was always the same long, straight road lined with walking wounded who threw away their rifle cartridges as they trudged to the rear; always the same metallic atmosphere, the din, the concussion, the apathy of the soldiers, the excitability of the officers; then to the rear the sweating surgeons, their bare arms gay with gore; the hospitals where one helped to carry severed limbs, unexpectedly heavy, and dump them in a ditch.

Night brought no respite. With star shells brilliant about us we scurried back and forth, clearing hundreds of cases between dark and dawn. The difficulty was to keep awake. Often we dozed over the wheel till a jolt would tell us we were running into a ditch. To fall asleep was deadly, and only when we were empty did we flirt with death. But the weariness was overwhelming and there was no rest. I remember one night in a furious electric storm; it was far from the Front but it seemed as if the

thunder and lightning were trying to mimic it. How I laughed at that paltry imitation. The thunder might crash, the lightning flash, it was as nothing compared to the roar of the guns and the blast of the shells. I who had always hated thunderstorms now jeered at the puny efforts of the heavens. Man could so easily out-horror nature I would never be afraid of storms again.

But so grateful was the lull after battle we would soon forget it in happy comradeship. We would utterly ignore the War, being more interested in eating and drinking. In fact liquid refreshment played a big part in our lives. I was very proud of the Corps in these days, and felt privileged to be a member. It really did a memorable job both in the Champagne and the Verdun show. Later I was asked to be its historian and write a book about it. However, I had not the time at the moment for my real war book was in the matrix.

I was happy with the Ambulance Corps. With our gallant lads and ramshackle cars we did worthy work. We had many distinguished visitors, among them Granville Barker. I offered to take him to a danger point, but he said he would only accompany me if I would write his obituary. In our mess we did not talk shop and I never heard a word of smut. The standard of duty and devotion was high, while above all our Chief commanded our affection. Oh, it was a grand life! I would have gone on with it until the end had not a queer sickness befallen me.



## *Chapter Ten*

### WAR CORRESPONDENT

One morning I noticed on my leg a tiny black speck that was sore to the touch. I thought it was an insect bite, but next day it tumefied and was distinctly painful. Then it swelled to such an extent I showed it to our Chief. "A boil," he said. "You've been working too hard. Lay off and rest a bit. You're badly run down." And indeed I felt so slack and stale I was glad of the respite. So I went back to the Rabbit Hutch for a while.

I thought when my boil would be cured that would be the end; but immediately it healed another began. To make a long story short I was afflicted with a plague of boils that would have taxed the patience of Job himself. In the course of eight months I had ninety-nine of the devilish things. I was only sorry I had not one more for I have a preference for round figures. Sometimes I had three all at once, sometimes just a super-one. I felt impotent to prevent them and lived in a state of nervous tension, wondering where the next would break out. I was tired and weak and often sick at the stomach. Quite unfit for my war work, this worried me more than all my other miseries.

I went down to Dream Haven and there, with sea bathing and rest, I became more cheerful. But the boils continued, so I consulted the most famous doctor in the country, showing him a hole in my leg like an open sore. "It's a bad one," he said, "but I can do nothing for you. I've just had a series of over fifty. How can I cure you if I could not cure myself?" However, I was encouraged by the fact that if he had got over them I would too. So I lived chiefly on fruit, and spent much time wallowing in the warm sea. . . . Then, just as suddenly as they had come, my boils disappeared. The last of them healed and I waited in vain for its successor. It was really incredible that there should be no more, for I had the habit of them and life seemed lonely without them. It was then the Chief wrote, telling me they had need of me at the Front. But alas! something else had happened and I was obliged to disappoint him. . . .

It was a resplendent morning. Joy reigned everywhere, but I brooded fitfully on

a rock by the shore. As I thought of the boys out there doing their bit I felt so futile. Then suddenly the idea came to me to write about it all. I had not kept a diary, and I had not made a note, but those long months at the Front were terribly vivid in my mind and I could put my memories into words. . . . Why not into verse? At the idea I felt strangely lyrical. I was due again to do a book of rhyme and here was my material hot to hand. As I had grabbed my stuff from the Yukon now I would make the War my meat.

All at once I felt excited, even exhilarated. I forgot my misery and in a mood of exultation I sought my typewriter. Ideas for story poems came surging at me—the man with no legs, the man with no arms, the blind man, the faceless man—all seemed capable of treatment in verse. I made a list of themes, adding to them from time to time. I was so eager to begin I could not sleep that night, and next morning with a heart of joy I began to write. I took the first item from my list and stared at the blank sheet in my typewriter. Inspiration was not long in coming. By night I had written the first poem.

But though it was not all so easy as that, it was marvellous how my impulse kept up. I was in rare fettle and rhymes came readily to heel. If they did not I left them blank. Or sometimes I would find the rhyme and leave the line blank. Afterwards, milling it over on the beach, everything would come right. But quite often the smoothness of my inspiration surprised me, because, I suppose, my material was so compelling. So in orderly sequence I took each of my themes and converted them into a finished set of verses. It was just a job like any other. On an average I wrote three poems a week and in five months I had over sixty.

There! My book was finished. It could not be very good for it had cost me scarcely an effort. Sitting before my typewriter I had just emptied myself out. Sustained by coffee so strong it made my heart throb I had worked far into the night, with the waves pounding under my window. Now I made a clean copy and sent it to Fisher Unwin, hoping it would please him. I remember posting my neat parcel with such a blissful feeling of relief and freedom. Again I was ecstatically happy and as I sat at peace and watched the sunset glow I seemed to hear once more my music so ineffably sweet—the *Harps of Heaven*. . . .

I need not have worried about my book. My publisher wrote predicting its success. And it was—beyond my dreams. The American publishers were enthusiastic. I seemed to have hit the market and for nine months I headed the list of best sellers in *The Bookman*. For a bit I felt as if I were sitting on the top of the world.

And now the time had come to go back to the Ambulance and I wrote to the

Chief, but he answered that it was too late. Alas! The Corps was being disbanded. America had entered the war and the army had taken over. All those young Americans who talked with an Oxford accent and wore handkerchiefs in their sleeves had joined the regulars. Our Chief refused to take a minor position and died soon afterwards. I think his heart was broken to see his beloved work disregarded, but he will always be remembered with affection by those who served him.

Having now disposed of my book and my boils I felt free to listen to the voice of conscience which again adjured me to join the army. But at that moment we in Paris were right in the firing line, for the Big Bertha was bombarding us daily. At regular intervals we heard the boom as another shell crashed on the city. As I sat on a bench on the Boul' Miche' one fell nearby. A bearded Frenchman sitting alongside me went on reading his paper calmly, but I felt very jumpy. The streets were strangely empty. I went up to the Rabbit Hutch to reassure my family.

Suddenly there was a blast in the area across the way and a shell fragment smashed our window. I was holding my little daughter who began to howl. Then another crash behind us which destroyed the entire basement of a neighbouring house. We were due for the next, because they were bracketing the fire. However, there was nothing I could do about it: with Big Bertha one was helpless. So, holding my bawling infant in my arms, I tried to soothe her, and with a sense of fate we waited for the next shell-burst that we were sure would destroy us. Bertha was regular in her visitations and we counted the minutes as we watched the clock. How slowly the time passed! Now she was due. . . . Now she was dubious. . . . Could it be she had knocked off for lunch? Breathless we waited, but the minutes passed and no doom dropped from the skies. Satisfied with her triumph—a church and two hundred victims—she was through for the day.

After that, I got my family away to the peace and safety of Dream Haven, and a good job too, for the very day we left the Zeps came over and gave us a proper pasting. We would have spent all night in the cellar, which was getting to be a regular thing now. When we took the train in the serenity of the summer evening I realised that soon hell would be breaking loose and I conceived a horror of this sinister city under the bombs. As we drew away from it I breathed relief with every mile. And oh, how I welcomed the blessed tranquillity of my home, the windmill girt horizon, my scoop of yellow sand with the sky an azure dream. . . .

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Yet I was troubled, for I felt I should surrender my liberty once again. So I cast about for some way of getting back into the Show and one day I received a letter from the Canadian Government offering me a war assignment. It was one of those

things a writer dreams of, a commission to tour the country, reporting the activities of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. I was to have a Cadillac, a chauffeur, an officer guide and freedom to choose and plan my itinerary. So, buying a new uniform, I fastened on it the green band of "Intelligence" and very proud I was of it. "Intelligence" sounded armyish and implied a modicum of mentality. But one of the official war correspondents sneered. On his shoulder straps he had a nickel badge with the letters "W.C." "Why don't you get one of these," he said, "instead of that green abomination?" "I would, only I don't want to pass myself off as a fighting man," I answered. As he was of military age he gave me a nasty look.

To supply their Front the Canadian Army had many activities in the rear, and one of the most important was the production of lumber. They had camps all over France where trees were cut and sawn into boards. I visited many of these, some in the beech woods of the Channel area, some in the gummy pine groves of the Landes, some in the forest aisles of the Bosges. In this way I covered much of the country, so that apart from my work it was an educative experience.

At the same time I came to know many splendid fellows, and in their messes ate, drank and played poker. I made notes, took down names and documented myself for future articles. I inspected air fields, hospitals, bakeries and ordnance depots, having rather a glorious time for the guides looked on the trip as a holiday. I even visited sections of the Front and one day ate lunch in a crumbled cottage with a Canadian General. As he chewed his pork chops a stream of wounded were passing and he watched it serenely. "No, I do not think I lost too many men in our last battle," he remarked with an aloofness I envied.

But my most interesting experiences were to come. From the Foresters I was transferred to the Engineers, and that took me over the entire Front. For the Engineers were building light railways and linking up with the light railways of the Germans. We went along these last very cautiously in electric motors trying to discover mines. The way we discovered them was by getting blown up, which was not so interesting. As we zig-zagged through ruined villages, in old battlefields and by battered, shell-shocked towns I felt quite uncomfortable. I got to know the Ypres salient and saw the grave of my brother who was killed there.

I also visited many of the camps of the Labour Battalions, one of which was commanded by my old friend James Cornwall. "Athabaska Jim" greeted me genially and that night some members of his staff celebrated my visit into the small hours of the morning. They only needed that excuse to pour the wassail, while Jim pored over his reports. It was somewhere in Belgium, for attempts at definite geography were discouraged just then. The Germans were beginning their final retreat and on the

roads we could see streams of them filing to the rear, prodded by the bayonets of avenging Belgians.

Jim routed me out early next morning, even though I suffered from a hangover. I think he was determined to put one over on me by taking me to the hottest spots of the battle ground. I fancy him saying: "If this guy wants gore I'll see he has the guts to take it." I had not. Gone was my insouciance of the early days. I was a craven now, and the shattering of a shell-burst made me cower and cringe. As a preliminary he took me over one of those narrow gauge railways left by the Boche and supposed to be mined. They were primed to go up as we passed, and he gleefully showed me several places where they had done just that.

Soon we arrived at a small village that had been evacuated by the enemy. It was deserted and the open homes were pictures of destruction. Dead Germans sprawled amid the ruins. From the corpse of an officer I took a Luger pistol and lugged it round in triumph. Then, as I ferreted for further souvenirs, three Germans came out of an empty house with their hands up, and gravely and bravely I marched them to the nearest Tommy. Life seemed to have no value just then: if I had potted the poor devils no one would have objected but themselves. Thus I realised the primitive irresponsibility of the battle-field, where the only law was that of survival.

Around us shells were dropping and as I stood in the middle of the village square one made a direct hit on the *Mairie*. In dust and smother of debris I saw it vanish. A moment before it had been there—plain, placid, peaceful. Now it was a heap of smoking rubble. I quaked to my very gizzard as other shells began to drop unpleasantly near. Right there in the centre of the Square I felt painfully exposed. Some Tommies were running for shelter and I wanted to beat them to it, but my legs were butter and my heart was in my boots. I gritted my teeth. "Think of the uniform you're wearing," I said. "You must be calm, show an example. Somewhere Jim Cornwall is grinning derisively as he watches you. Don't let him see you're in a funk."

So deliberately I lit a cigarette; then, wishing I had a monocle to adjust, I strolled with a display of languid indifference to that crowded shelter. It was as solid as an Egyptian tomb, I thought gratefully, though the word "tomb" seemed unhappy just then. Another shell-burst and a buffet of concussion! How I wanted to bolt, but I would not give Cornwall that satisfaction. No, as if I was enjoying the strafing I strolled to the shelter, and there in the heart of it, snugly installed, was "Athabaska Jim."

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These were hectic times for the war was drawing to a climax and the scene was

one vast battle ground. Every day I poked around, appalled at the plentitude of rich, gory copy. I ceased to take notes and my diary was unwritten. I have no record of this period but my memories are too many to put on paper. . . . Le Cateau, with its reek of mustard gas and its streets strewn with civilian corpses. One stepped over them, taking little notice. One peered through the open doors of houses, empty but for the dead. In a dim room I saw five wax-like women lying on their beds as if sleeping peacefully. In a kitchen were a Tommy and a German who had fought it out with bayonets. The Tommy had spitted the Hun and was poised over his still defiant foe. Again, in an open space a Belgian machine gunner lay sprawled over his *mitrailleuse* while round him were seven dead Germans. Everywhere were macabre scenes like the chamber of horrors of some super Madam Tussaud.

With the smoke of battle hanging over them, burial parties were busy in the high grass of the fields. The Padre would hastily mutter a prayer over a body and pass on. Many of the dead had been robbed and in some cases even their boots had been taken. Rifling the slain was almost invariable. But some seemed sacred even to the callous looter. I will always remember one British boy who had fallen in a charge. He was very beautiful with his waxen face and long dark hair. He looked so pitifully young. He still clutched his rifle with his bayonet pointed at the foe, but his face was poignantly serene.

Heaps of bodies littered the ground. Some were headless, others mere torsos, like butcher-meat fresh from the slaughter house. Dead, dead everywhere—so many of them. One hoped they would be buried before they had time to putrefy. But the burial parties were working night and day. . . . It was so terribly tragic, this last of the battle-fields. In one village street every door was open and the interior a scene of wanton destruction. The floor was usually a mass of feathers from ripped bed-covers. Stuffed chairs and sofas were slashed open, inlaid cabinets smashed to matchwood, pictures scored with knives—everything of beauty destroyed by a beaten and bitter Hun. Except one. Under a heap of debris I found an ivory figure of Christ on the Cross. Even the vandals had held that inviolate.

It was so strange to see those hamlets, once happy homes, now charred shells and horror-haunted infernos. The air was heavy with gas, the streets staked with mines and full of sinister emptiness. Some villages were just huge rubble heaps with a sign: HERE WAS . . . then the former name. Barbed wire and stacks of empty brass shells everywhere; grave-yards with skulls grinning from shell-torn tombs; packets of high explosive strewn carelessly; and on the roads streams of guns with their gunners now gallant and gay, hot on the heels of the flying foe. It was a wonderful time, a revival of hope, an almost incredulous realisation of victory. Despite death and

desolation hearts were high and everyone seemed keyed up for the grand climax.

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For me that came one day when I ventured further forward than ever before. I took my car as near to the battle front as I dared. Through gutted and abandoned villages I threaded my way till I came to a point where my chauffeur told me he was unwilling to venture any further. Not only was it dangerous, but we were in the line of the actual advance. Not so very far away the Germans were flying as if they were being swept forward by a giant besom. The dust of the battle broom masked the horizon in furious smoke-cloud and the rumble of gun-fire was continuous. My companion, a gallant Canadian Major, was doubtful if we should go on.

Consulting our maps we saw we were in the coal mining area around Denain, further than any British troops had yet penetrated. We knew this for from wayside cottages and tiny hamlets villagers emerged and greeted us with cries of joy. We were the advance guard of the liberators, the first allied uniforms they had seen. We had already far exceeded our limit of advance, but I felt that nothing could hold me back and the Major said he would stick by me, even at the risk of a court martial. We did not know where we were going, or what would happen to us, but we did know that at the end of that dusty road was the big city of Lille, and Lille was supposed to be occupied by the enemy.

But the way seemed ridiculously clear. No sign of the Germans, while by the side of the road, from cottages that a little way back had been gutted and abandoned, people were cautiously emerging. They seemed amazed at the sight of us, yet their joy knew no bounds. They were either women, children or old men, and they wept and cheered at the same time. Miserably thin and ill nourished, at that moment they seemed the happiest people on earth. They kept telling us that the Boches were running away, that we could go forward, for we would meet no Germans of the rear-guard. We were doubtful, but we decided to take a chance.

So we marched merrily on the road to Lille. We must have gone forward for about two hours when we saw a band of girls coming towards us, their arms full of flowers. They were simple garden blossoms, but there was a pathetic appeal in them that touched the heart. And there was pathos, too, in the haggard faces of these girls, now so radiant with joy. They hung garlands round the Major's neck till he seemed buried in them, only his honest face coyly emerging. Then they filled his arms with bouquets and banked him with blossom. He was a delicate minded man who did not like to refuse floral tributes; but I got off more easily, for I commandeered some children and put most of my posies in their charge. And so we marched forward—two men in khaki in a band of jubilant maidens, and festooned with flowers.

Now it was I who wanted to turn back, but the Major's blood was up. Court martial or not he was going through with this. He was a man of great sex appeal—unlike myself, who am singularly lacking in that enviable quality. Already some women had made efforts to kiss him, which he had feebly sought to evade. I don't think he minded the girls so much, but when an ancient gaffer tottered from a doorway and saluted him on both cheeks he seemed rather taken aback. He was a brave man, however, and even that did not daunt him.

And now the crowd about us grew denser. Two pretty girls had the Major by the arms and were urging him forward. "Lille!" they cried, pointing to the grim walls down the dusty road. And Lille it was. Exultant citizens came running to meet us, crying: "They're gone! The Boches have cleared out. You can enter Lille." To me it seemed incredible, and I told the Major it would be just too bad to be taken prisoner at this stage of the game. But maddened by maiden kisses the man was reckless. "We're going to be the first of the allied army to enter Lille," he cried.

AND WE WERE. We entered it by the Cambrai gate just as the Germans were leaving by the gate on the other side of the city. "Are you sure they are all gone?" I kept asking, for I expected a trap. But they were so certain we were safe I allowed myself to be borne on what was now a surging throng. I never saw people more mad with joy. They pressed bottles of wine and cigarettes on us and it was difficult to refuse. In front of the gate was a gigantic crater, down which we had to climb; but on the other side the women of Lille awaited us in a serried mass. As we scrambled up the crater they clutched us hysterically and swept us through the massive portals of the city.

Now we were in a maelstrom of mad women, all of them making desperate efforts to get at us. Hundreds there were, fighting to embrace us. They flung their arms around us and pressed their lips to our cheeks. Some were homely, of course, but by no means all. And so we were tossed in a tempest of osculatory enthusiasm, in which the Major with his superior sex appeal was the chief victim. I could see him struggling in that welter of womanhood, for now they were begging for souvenirs and tearing away his buttons. I feared he would soon be reduced to a state of near nudity, so I shouted: "We'd better beat a retreat!" He agreed, and after he had sawn off a few more chunks of osculation, gallantly defending his few remaining buttons, he fought his way to the edge of the crater.

There on the other side we were safe, and standing on the rim of that vast pit I made a speech to the mob that blacked the entrance to the town. I told them of our latest war triumphs and that their own troops were on the way. How the crowd cheered! I might have been a Marshal announcing a great victory. Then a bearded



man appeared who told us he was the *Maire* and invited us to the *Hotel de Ville* for a civic reception. But suddenly we saw a staff car approaching with what we thought was Haig, Currie and a few more Generals, so we decided it was time to fold up. . . .

The fact remains, however, we were the leaders of the allied army to enter Lille after the Germans fled. We trod on the very heels of the Hun. We were the first to be acclaimed by the crowd and welcomed by the *Maire* himself. I fear the triumphal arrival of the staff was an anti-climax. So at least we thought as we sped homeward in a blaze of glory. When we met the gang at supper that evening and they asked us how we had spent the day we casually remarked: "Just strolling round Lille and giving the girls a treat." Only no one would believe us. "Oh no," they said. "Poor boobs, you're all wet! You've made a mistake. You've been in Denain or Douai. But LILLE—*never!*" So we were laughed at; but when the big news came through that evening our triumph was complete. They listened with wonder and envy. All were planning to go next day when an order came through putting the city out of bounds.

After this I felt that anything I could do would be an anti-climax, so I returned to the Rabbit Hutch and proceeded to write up my experiences. The family were at Dream Haven and there in my quiet apartment I hammered away at my Remington till my brain was muzzy. I saw none of my friends and spoke to no one. All I wanted was to do the job in front of me. And I would not let it be a dull job. Even hack-work may be radiated by joyful memories. I wrote with immense gusto, for I was so very happy. Article after article I turned out. I described saw-mills, hospitals, bakeries, ordnance camps—all the organisation that makes fighting possible. I gave the names of hundreds of those "who also serve," and said something interesting about each. As I went on I saw a book in the making. *War Winners* I would call it, and it would deal with the efforts of those who worked without glory to win glory for others. I never wrote better. Graphically I covered all France with its pictorial background. I became more and more enthusiastic, then. . . .

One morning about eleven as I plugged away I heard bells begin to ring. Then more bells took up the clangor. Then all the bells of the city began to peal. I went downstairs and the old *conciierge* greeted me. Tears were rolling down his cheeks but this time they were tears of joy. "THE ARMISTICE, Monsieur!" he cried. "The war is over. This is the victory. *Vive la France!*"

"*Vive la France!*" I yelled, and ran down the street. Already every building was a rash of bunting. Flags flamed and pennants streamed. Everywhere was colour, joy, triumph, and above the mad cheering was the madder tumult of the bells. Never again would there be such a frenzy of joy. The people were heading for the Grand

Boulevards, crazy to celebrate the victory. Down the Boul' Miche' I hurried in the midst of a riotous throng, across the flag festooned Tuileries, up the Rue de la Paix to the Opera which was a mass of bunting. There a prima-donna was singing the Marseillaise and everyone joined in. Dancing, cheering, singing, hugging, kissing—for two days and nights the boulevards were given up to a saturnalia of romping rowdyism.

For a while I remained in the midst of it, carried away by the extravagances of a mirth-mad mob; then I tired of it all. I thought of those out there who had given their lives for this, and for whom no one in all that cheering multitude had a single tear. So back to the Rabbit Hutch I crawled with sorrow in my heart. There on my desk were the articles I had written with such enthusiasm—excellent work, a month of effort. With sudden loathing I looked at them. I need not go on. Taking up my manuscript I tore it in tatters. "That ends it," I said. "No more war. Not in my lifetime. Curse the memory of it. Now I will rest and forget. Now I will enjoy the peace and sweetness of Dream Haven."

## Chapter Eleven

### I WEAR A MONOCLE

When I returned to Paris it was evident that the Rabbit Hutch was no longer big enough for me. Living largely by the sea had given me spacious ideas that needed fuller expression. From an apartment where we were jammed like sardines I took one in which I felt lost. I had a hard job getting it, too. So many refugees had crowded to the city that, where formerly TO LET signs could be seen a dozen to a block, now you could search the whole Quarter and not find one. I wanted to be near the Luxembourg Gardens, and that vicinity was the most coveted of all. There was a little house I fell in love with but it was occupied by Gertrude Stein. I did not know her in those days, though I often wondered who was the mannish woman who defied feminine conventions in dress.

The only way to get an apartment was to make love to a *concierger*. This I did successfully, with a *billet doux* of a thousand franc bill, and soon found myself installed in a magnificent residence on the Place du Pantheon. It had at least ten times the space of the Rabbit Hutch, with five bedrooms instead of one. There were two floors, the upper one a huge studio giving on a terrace that overlooked the roof of the Pantheon. Such a superb place made me swell with importance, and I felt I had to live up to it. I did—for ten years. I made the studio into a library, lined it with a thousand books and indulged in an orgy of furnishing that only the *bourgeois* discretion of my Missus restrained. “Spend, spend!” I said. “I’m rolling in money.” But even with this incitement she bought with judgment. Nevertheless it was a grand time we had, going from one big store to another, picking out the best. To furnish a palatial apartment in the Paris of those days was a housewife’s dream, and I shared it; putting my veto on this, okaying that, till at last the place assumed the look of a setting for a plutocratic poet.

Yet apart from my studio it was *bourgeois* in its gaudy splendour, and I thought of how Peter would have sneered at it. For this was the Paris of the Boul’ Miche’ and the Sorbonne. The painters were now students and the models *grisettes*. From an atmosphere of Art I shuttled to one of Culture. As I stood on my terrace I could

look over the pigeon-mottled roof of the Pantheon to the dark grey tiles of the University. How I loved my view! Notre Dame, the Sainte Chapelle, Sacré Coeur. There in my spacious solitude I realised how dear Paris was to me. *Youth and a City*—I wondered how Peter was getting along.

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I had not heard from him, for in those days I refused to write to anyone; but I missed him from his corner in the Dôme. It seemed haunted by his shabby grey figure, with his cloth cap pulled down to his bushy eyebrows, his old grey flannel suit, his cigarettes and his *Picon citron*. Poor Peter! One of the characters of the Quarter—what had become of him? Then one day in the Place de l'Opera I was hailed by a well-known voice. It was my old pal; but I'll swear I did not know him, he was so spruce, so dapper, so prosperous looking.

Sitting on the terrace of the Café de Paris he told me about it. A friend of his who was manager of a Paris News Agency had enlisted and recommended Peter to fill his place. Reluctantly he had taken the job, for he hated servitude, but at that moment he hadn't a *sou*. Then suddenly he found himself. A sense of responsibility gave him self-respect and with it authority. It was the school-master coming out in him. He not only entered into his new duties with enthusiasm but fulfilled them with such ability that soon the Agency began to take an importance it had never known before. His superiors in London complimented him, raised his salary, gave him two assistants. No doubt it was because of the War that his agency flourished; anyway Peter happened to be at the helm and got the credit. The lad whose job he took was perhaps killed but Peter rose to heights of prosperity.

He seemed to appreciate his change of fortune. I looked at him with wonder, even admiration, for he was better dressed than I. His blue serge suit was well pressed, his trousers creased; he wore a neat bow tie and an impeccable fedora. Only the chain of *caporal* and the *Picon citron* reminded me of the old Peter.

"I'm going to get spliced," he told me, trying to make it casual. "A Scotch lassie, a girl sweetheart." Then he added dreamily: "Her mother's a widow with scads of money. She's a mean old bitch but one of these days it will come to us." I congratulated him heartily. I was glad to see him fall in with the conventions, for I myself was inclining that way. But I saw little of him from then. He got married, took a rich apartment in Neuilly, bought a car. The Peace Conference was on, and he became more and more important. He talked of his pal Lloyd George and his *ami* Clemenceau. In short he grew so pompous I let myself lose him for a while.

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James Stephens I saw often, a brave wee man stepping stoutly with the valour of

a big fellow. But as he stalked the Boul' Miche' I did not butt in on him, for I feared he might be in the throes of poetic parturition—as indeed I was myself. So we pounded along, parallel to each other, a poet and a rhymster, each in his fashion lambasting his soul for the glory of his Maker. If he were French, I thought, he probably would crash the Pantheon, carried in under a panoply of wreaths. For myself, I did not even walk in, though I saw thousands of tourists storm its portals. It was too available to be visited. If it had been at the other end of Paris no doubt I would have paid homage at the shrine of its Great. But here across the street—well, I could drop in any old time. . . . And I never did. To the devil with that gloomy pile. Give me the enskied cemetery above Mentone and a flat tombstone beside that of Aubrey Beardsley, with engraved on it: *Shadows we are and shadows we pursue*. But no hurry even for that. Better a live louse than a dead lion.

It was Peter who first incited me to wear a monocle. I emulated him by getting my suits at Poole's, but that was not enough. The monocle might give me an edge on him. So I bought one in a pawnbroker's. It was not gold rimmed but might pass for that when the brass was burnished. It cost me ten francs and with that cheap eye-glass I bluffed my way for ten years. People in Paris accepted it without derision and I made an effort to live up to it. Behind it I concealed my inferiority complex. Screwing it in my eye I looked superciliously at the world. The first time I jammed it in place and stared at Peter I could see he was impressed, for he immediately got one, though his black ribband was broader than mine. So I persisted in monocled arrogance. After all, did not Stephens and Conrad wear them, though I'll be darned if I know why.

So with my eye-glass adding to my sartorial splendour I rejoiced in my princely apartment, and my arrogance grew and grew. One reason for this was my increasing affluence. For years I had ceased to be currency conscious. The money *motif* had never entered into my work. As long as I had enough to live lavishly and knew there was more where it was coming from, I never worried about my financial standing. Still, it was nice to know I had fifty thousand or so to squander if I chose to be so foolish. It was not the money that gave me pleasure; it was the knowledge I had it to spend if ever I wanted it.

For some time I had been vaguely conscious that some sort of financial boom was going on, but I had not paid much attention. Then one day as I stood on my terrace watching the pigeons on the roof of the Pantheon I happened to glance at the financial page of *The Times*. It was mostly Greek to me, till my eyes lighted on the section devoted to bank stock and I thought of the thousand or so shares I possessed. How were they standing? What was this? Bank of Montreal quoted over

a hundred dollars higher than the price at which I had bought it. There must be some mistake. . . . No, I looked at another bank—a hundred dollar raise. And the remaining two banks in which I held stock told the same story.

I made a rapid calculation. Here was I a hundred thousand dollars richer than I had thought myself to be a moment before, and I had done nothing to deserve it. What was the use of working if one could get wealth like that? I had always conceived a vague idea that interest was theft, and felt a little ashamed that I profited by it; yet here was a vast loot pitched into my lap. It was fantastic. I could turn it into gold, houses, gardens, gems and silken pyjamas—any of the reckless ways one gets rid of wealth or makes it a material possession. I flirted with the idea of buying a beautiful estate below Grasse. A signature on a cheque and all that exquisite loveliness would be mine forever. . . .

Then I thought it was rather a bore. Property was a bit of a burden. It would worry me, weigh on me. Better cash in the bank. Perhaps I could sell my stock. . . . Well, there was no hurry. No doubt it would continue to rise. Anyway, it would never fall. That was unthinkable. Let me put off taking any action, for procrastination often pays. So I did nothing and the stock continued to rise and I watched it with a sort of fascination.

But one day I realised I was in danger of becoming a millionaire, a fate I would not have wished on my worst enemy. By a liberal calculation I found I was already two-thirds of the way. It was very distressing. No doubt if I had been a business man I would have grabbed off that million, but I loathed business. I should have realised the profits on my stock but it seemed such a complicated affair, with brokers and transfers and all that. I went down to the *Bourse*, gazed at the excited mob that surged around it and that crazy money market nauseated me. I went back to my terrace across from the Pantheon and to my dreaming. It didn't seem fair to take all that money I had done nothing to earn. It wasn't playing the game. I wouldn't do a damn thing about it. So I did not . . . and my stock went up and up.

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But another reason I did not care to bother with money matters was that I had begun to write another book of verse. I had long been conceiving it, and now I went full steam ahead. It dealt with the Latin Quarter, the War, Brittany, and because it was the most autobiographical, of all my verse books I dislike it least. In it I tried the device of linking up the poems with patches of prose, making a connected story of the whole. I liked the prose better than the verse and still think a few words of commentary on a poem enhances its interest. But most people don't feel that way, and when I came to publish this volume it was the least successful of all my work.

However, I now pressed forward to its production and as usual nothing else counted. Night and day I was engrossed in it. It was a labour of love that nothing must retard. So passed a year of happy concentration, first by the Pantheon, then in Dream Haven. It was there I finished my manuscript, working alone far into the winter and coupling up my final rhymes as I stalked the rain soaked fields. With a supreme effort I finished it for Christmas, getting home, weary but happy for the usual family reunion. How we made that house ring with cheer! We played hide-and-seek in its ten rooms and tears ran down the cheeks of my fat Mother-in-law, she laughed so much. These were the days of rich food and famous wine, and all so cheap. And in the midst of the gaiety I put away my precious manuscript in the bottom of a trunk.

And there it remained for over a year—neglected, forgotten. Yes, after all my enthusiasm, fever of inspiration, moody distraction and rowelling travail I felt I did not care for my work a tinker's dam. It might be good or bad—it did not matter. The making of it had taken so much out of me I hated it. I could not bear to re-read the manuscript. I was sick of the literary game. Poetry was a disease. I had broken out into a rash of it and now all I asked was to be cured.

I chanced to find a grey goose quill;  
I picked it up, I have it still,  
And that is why this page I fill  
With word on word.  
While others dance and know delight  
I scribble, scribble day and night,  
A poor, perverse ink-slinging wight . . .  
*Oh cursed bird!*

So now I forgot I had ever clinked two rhymes together and plunged into the life of Paris. There was something very exhilarating in the atmosphere at that time. Literary movements were being born. In the Quarter small magazines were being produced, each with its mission of modernity. Blocking the doorway of Sylvia Beach's Bookshop one could see the portly form of Ford Madox Ford, accompanied by the vivacious Violet Hunt. In the shop with its Shakespearean sign one would run into James Joyce peering short-sightedly at the shelves, or Antheil the composer, buzzing with enthusiasm. In the Quarter were many who afterwards became famous—Giants in Gestation.

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One day I was walking down a leafy road when I met a youth with a maid. She

was admiring the chestnut trees in bloom, so I handed the lad my cane and told him to reach down one of the flowers for her. Soon we got into conversation which turned to books. For a stripling he spoke with some authority, turning into ridicule the pretentious scribes of the Quarter and their freak magazines. "There's only one of them," he said, "that I can see getting anywhere, and he may go pretty far. Keep your eyes on a man called Hemingway." He spoke of Joyce and made the following pronouncement: "I believe everything that can be thought can be said, and everything that can be said can be written." Then he told me his name was Henry Miller.

He was a slim youth of medium height, and at that time I do not think he had published any of his notorious books. His name meant nothing to me and I did not see him again. But something of destiny seemed to brood in his eyes and I never forgot him. So when someone handed me a copy of *Tropic of Capricorn* the author's name struck a chord of memory. Of course the book shocked me but I could not deny a strange flicker of genius in its wildest flights. Though I have read many pornographic books from Cleland to Frank Harris, Miller outvies them all. You can purge most authors but if you expurgated *Tropic of Cancer* there would be little left. His books are prohibited and probably you will never see a copy, but if you do you will realise that freedom of expression has its limits and even hatred of hypocrisy cannot condone the frankness of the tenderloin.

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I lived lustily in my Pantheon days but one day I had a nasty jar. Somehow I had become vaguely aware of unusual doings in the financial field. In the shops people seemed to be buying feverishly, putting their money into material possessions. Prices were jumping. What was it all about I wondered? Then someone said: "Haven't you heard? The boom's burst. The market's crashed. We're in for a depression." So with some anxiety I looked up the prices. Sure enough they had nose-dived. My brave bank stock had gone from three hundred and fifty dollars to two hundred and was still dropping. I was quite vexed. To win may be swell; to lose is hell.

I might have sold out when the going was good but now it was too late. Ruefully I saw my gains vanish to be replaced by losses. Well, I would make the best of it. If the worst came to the worst I would still have enough to live on. So I did one of the wisest things I have ever done—sold all my bank stock and bought Life Annuity. From four of the biggest insurance companies I took out enough to keep me in solid comfort to the end of my days. Now I could thumb my nose at misfortune. For all time I was free from financial worry. Best of all was the incentive to longevity. I must guard my health more jealously than ever. In short, I must live so long I could get ahead of the goddam Companies.



Then with this thought in mind I had a brain wave. I said to the family: "Buy a big steamer trunk and pack it. I've just been paid five thousand dollars for the picture rights of one of my books. Come on! We'll blow in that dough. We'll go to Hollywood."

## *Chapter Twelve*

### HOLLYWOOD HOLIDAY

To leap from the Boul' Miche' to Hollywood Boulevard was characteristic of my passion for violent contrasts. Only by such capricious flights can one realise the magic carpet of money. My signature on a cheque and the gigantic jump was assured. But between was wear and tear. Our boat was filled to capacity, so we slept in a dark cabin three decks down, hot as hell and crawling with cockroaches. There were four sittings for meals, while the decks were too jammed for exercise. It was just bad luck: there was nothing to be done about it.

Then New York and a hotel suite in the nineties. The hugeness of the city stultified my family, so that they spent most of their time in the Park or at the Zoo. I soon realised that I would have to adjust myself to new conditions, and began by discarding my monocle. No respect for class here. I was reprovved for saying: "The chap who carried my luggage." "You mean—the gentleman who assisted you with your baggage." A policeman ignored me when I asked for a direction, and a car conductor shouted angrily because I did not climb on quickly enough. "This is democracy," I told my family. "Even the meanest person is our equal. Instead of being arrogant and regarding the working people as beneath us let us regard them as superiors, because they earn money while we merely spend it." This readjustment made, we found everyone friendly and helpful. By de-Britishing myself I fitted into my new frame.

Though we had a drawing-room on the train, that, too, taught us democracy: for other passengers would use our toilet, elderly women would "visit" with us and call my wife "honey," while my small daughter fell in love with the genial negro who changed our ice water. It was old stuff to me but strange to them and they loved it. . . . Then there was the heat of the desert and the magic transition to orange groves as California spread her arms in smiling welcome. How I loved it! How I will always love it! But in twenty years Los Angeles had changed beyond recognition. The old frame building where I had bunked at two bits a night had been ousted by a stately skyscraper, and the orange groves where I had picked for a dollar a day

were now the sites of hives of commerce. Bewildered I had but one thought—to discover my magic Land of Make Believe—Hollywood. It had not existed in my day; now it was world-famed, and the very name brought light to tired eyes.

I found it after a tram ride through miles of low frame houses, market centres and corner drug stores. It was the small town infinitely extended, a hundred prairie villages imposed one on another, the American way of living perpetuated all the way to the sea. But I did not go to Santa Monica for at a point where I saw a sign—HOLLYWOOD HOTEL—I got off. So this long, low building embowered in greenery was the famed Inn of the Stars. I looked to see Elinor Glyn descending with stately step from its terrace or Douglas Fairbanks bounding over the balustrade.

A little way off I saw a crowd gathered. They were making a movie. A fat man with a distressed expression was repeating over and over: “I did not do a single thing,” and every now and then a big man with a small bottle would anoint his eyes with glycerine tears. The director would shout, the camera turn, the scene be repeated as the fat man would again protest. I recognised John Bunny. Somewhere in the crowd was Flora Finch, while in the background, leaning against a post, was a Keystone cop. It was the real thing.

Then I had a further thrill for, strolling along the boulevard, I saw people pause in front of a restaurant window. “Who is it?” I asked. “Charlie Chaplin and Lila Lee.” Charlie looked younger than he does today, and was less expensively dressed. Lila was brushing what might have been dandruff from his coat collar. Then as I stared, stolidly British, Charlie turned on me a blazing regard and I wilted. He was on the first rungs of the ladder of fame or he would not have exposed himself to the vulgar gaze. Yet he need not have grudged me the thrill he gave me.

What a wonderful day! I soared on wings of joy. I took a bungalow for six months and fetched the family. It was on the hillside, just high enough to raise us tip-toe above the town. The thought that it was to be ours after so much travelling filled us with gladness. We went down to the grocery at the corner and purchased a plentiful supply of provisions, amazed to find we could buy almost anything there. Fascinated, too, for the articles were so strange to us. Laden with packets we mounted to the bungalow which already seemed to welcome us like a friend. We made such a jolly supper, laughed over it and were very happy. Then while my wife washed the dishes I sat at the piano and sang *The End of a Perfect Day*, which was most appropriate, for the bungalow belonged to Carrie Jacobs Bond. She became my friend and still calls me Buddy.

That was the beginning of an ecstatic existence. I never tired of watching them make movies, for in those days studios were small and most of the shooting was

done outdoors. There were few mornings on which one could not see companies working on Hollywood Boulevard. But my experiences of movie making were by no means confined to the streets. I visited all the studios, of which Fox and Universal were the most imposing. I also interviewed old Selig in his zoo, and Louie Mayer on his lot. He was dapper and affable and spent an hour with me. I still have a picture of us arm in arm, but today he is as unapproachable as Royalty itself.

Looking over faded photos of that time I see myself standing between Marie Prevost and Priscilla Dean. In another I am holding a lion cub in my arms, and the fact that I am allergic to lions in my lap probably accounts for my peevish expression. Again, I am with William Russell, that robust rival of Wallie Reid. Underneath it I have pencilled: Big Bill and Wee Willie, for being photographed with these stalwart stars accentuates one's deficiencies. But in all these pictures I remark one thing—my increasing adiposity. No movie magnate could have looked more important than I. After the war a lot of us slacked and ran to fat, but *this* was inadmissible. It looked like the portliness of middle age and I was not yet fifty.

Then one evening I realised how I had succumbed to sleekness. I was going to a Wampus Ball, so I dug out my evening rig which I had not worn for many moons. To my discomfiture the waistcoat would not begin to meet. About six inches separated the buttons from their holes; and as for my trousers, the flies were so indecently distant I despaired of ever making them contact. Only one thing to do. Ruefully I slit both pants and vest up the back, so that from a frontal view no one would have suspected the wreck I was behind.

The friend who took me to the ball was an aspiring movie actor. So far he had only played two parts which nobody else seemed to want. One was a drunk, the other a Graustarkian king. He told me: "To break into the game you have to pretend you're only doing it for a joke. Oh, they're great jokers round the studios. They did not intend to let me play the king but thought they would take a rise out of me. So they piled all kinds of royal robes on me, and stuck a big crown on my head. 'Now,' they told me, 'the part depends on your running capacity. You must sprint round the studio block for all you're worth. The last man we tried fell short by a half a minute of the time required. You must make that up.'"

"So I started out with all the steam I'd got and arrived panting, sweating, exhausted, where about twenty of them waited with timing watches in their hands. 'Too slow,' they said sadly. 'You must do better than that.' So, after a short rest, I made a desperate attempt to better my own time. I nearly strained my heart and burst my lungs, sweating under that ermine robe and holding on to my heavy crown. You can imagine what a figure I cut. Then, when I arrived at the post no one was

there. So I realised they had been spoofing me. However, I pretended to take it as a jolly good joke, and they were so surprised I wasn't sore they let me play the part. Now they have another in view for me; this time they want to know my capacity for *falling*. I told them about two inches but they suggest six feet. I'm not a stunt man so I'll have to refuse the part."

He had a Cadillac and used to take me round the studios. One day Robert Hughes had me to lunch, for he was at that time a producer with Colleen Moore for a star. Another time I ate with Big Bill Russell and Noah Beery who were making a Northern. They were to do a big scrap in the afternoon, and Noah kept begging Bill to pull his punches. My friend was anxious about his next job. He tried to get the leading role in a Nazimova production of *The Doll's House*, but she said: "Too fat." It was true he had a chubby visage that did not go with heroic roles.

Then one day I found him very gloomy. "I'm fasting," he told me; "trying to get this mug of mine emaciated." But he did not succeed. His body took the punishment, while his face reflected no resentment. The more he starved the chubbier his cheeks became. His melancholy was so profound I realised the effort he was making. He must have knocked twenty pounds off his weight when he fell from grace. A Christmas party did the trick. "The jig's up," he told me. "I've gained five pounds over the week-end. I've got to become a comedian."

But even that was denied him, for one day he told me: "I've sold my car." That to a cinema actor is the last straw. Without his car he's as helpless as a blind man without his dog. I realised my poor friend couldn't make the grade and soon after he disappeared.

However, another interest was to divert me from Movieland. I had invited my mother to stay with us and she duly arrived from Canada on the Oregon Express. I had not seen her for over ten years, so as we waited in the crowd I was not sure if I would recognise her. Twice I accosted an elderly lady with a "howdy Ma!" when she sailed serenely into the scene. She looked so calm and casual she put us at our ease. She had rosy cheeks, blue eyes and a look of determination to make the best of being seventy. I was favourably impressed as I introduced her to my family, who were a little awed by her dignity and poise. After that, our home life took on a more pleasant pattern than ever. The old lady fell in love with Hollywood; she had preserved her youthfulness of spirit and was thrilled by all she saw. No more jolly household could be imagined.

We ate lunch in the Sunset Cafeteria on the Boulevard—in my case usually Hamburger and apple pie—but we had supper at home by a roaring fire. To feed this we would bring empty boxes from a vacant lot, where they were dumped by the

store-keepers. How we laughed as we grabbed an armful of wood and sped up the hill. Then in two minutes a big blaze would be lighted in the living room. I remember returning one evening and looking through the window. My wife and mother sat on either side of the brick fire-place with a fire alight. My daughter squatted on a rug playing with a doll, while in the background sparkled a Christmas tree. I thought it was one of the nicest domestic pictures I had ever seen. A nice picture, too, if I could have looked in later and seen myself stretched on a *chaise-longue* under a reading lamp, with a movie mag in one hand and a butter-cream in the other. For I loved those rich chocolates and ate them between cigarettes, regardless of my plump posterior.

One evening as I lounged in my Morris chair I had a bright idea. Mother and the Missus seemed so pally, playing double solitaire. Shrieks of laughter came from them, while my daughter prattled on the floor with her dolls. We were an ideal household; but surely, I thought, they would not miss me if I left them for a while. For I felt the call of adventure, while beside me lay a copy of *White Shadows in the South Seas*. I had always dreamed of going there, and in my youth I had been inspired by Louis Stevenson and Louis Beck to follow in their steps.

This was perhaps an opportune moment, so I said: "Look here, you folks seem to hit it off pretty well. Do you think you would tear each other's hair if I quit you for a while?" There was a pause in the solitaire, so I went on: "It's the duty of every novelist to write a romance of the South Seas. I don't want to lag behind de Vere Stacpoole, so if you can spare me a couple of months to get my dope I'll go there. How about it?" . . . . It was the old lady who broke the silence. "By all means go, Willie, and write your book. Oh, these men! They give me a pain in the neck—they think they're so darned indispensable."

So there and then it was decided, and three days later I caught the *Raratonga* bound for Tahiti. I will not dwell on the voyage though it was notable enough. We had on board a Duke, a Duchess and a French Count. There were also a girl and an old man who died at sea. I remember how the boat stopped in the early dawn and the poor girl was lowered into her ocean grave. I was the only one who saw, for the death was kept quiet not to disturb the other passengers.

On the way over I devoted myself to South Sea books. I read O'Brian, Hall and Nordhoff, Stevenson, Stoddart and Somerset Maugham. So with my head seething with *White Shadows*, *Faery Lands* and *The Moon and Sixpence* I felt well primed to meet the real thing. It may seem presumptuous to attempt a novel with two months knowledge of its locale, but I knew the value of first impressions. I would make notes of all I saw, so that when I came to write everything would come back

to me vividly. And after all, is not the story the thing, the setting secondary? In any case my novel, when I came to publish it, was a best seller and was made into a picture. This, however, was a future development. When I went to Tahiti it was really with a spirit of adventure and romance.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### BEACHCOMBER DE LUXE

Tahiti, Isle of Love and Languor—with what joy I saw it loom greyly against the sky. It lightened to green, valleys deepened, groves grew radiant. We nosed through the coral gateway, and in the crystalline lagoon a zinc-grey shadow moved with marvellous grace—a shark. Ashore were beach bungalows with white figures hurrying to the harbour. Was this all? I wondered. But I was soon to know better. The town was so deeply drowned in verdure one could get no idea of it from the sea. A big village, embosomed in flowers, and canopied by sun-splashed palms—Papeete.

As we stepped on the wharf all the population seemed there to greet us. Natives mostly—women in Mother Hubbards, men in white duck. The air was acrid with the odour of copra, the heat oven-like. Languidly I drifted along a white road bordered with verdure. Banana plants waved translucent banners, coco-nut palms shot slim grey stems ending in frivolous fronds; bread-fruit trees dangled globes of green. Over tiny houses the bougainvillia wove purple tapestries and flamboyants flung their scarlet against the sky. Yellow, crimson, mauve gleamed the hibiscus blossoms, while the tiare—white and pure—loaded the air with perfume. . . .

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I rented a tiny bungalow with a trellised balcony. It had a zinc-lined shower, and the water, soft and sweet, pelted me deliciously. As I lolled in my hammock the wind was like a caress, the evening brilliant with stars, the air musical with the cry of crickets. Lamps of little cottages made golden pools amid the voluptuous verdure. In the rich darkness those patches of lustrous leafage had a fairy-like effect, but other verandas were plunged in gloom, and from them came amorous sighs and the glow of cigarette tips. After the crickets ceased there was perfect stillness in the perfumed air.

I took dinner at either of the two hotels—one night the Diadem, the next the Tiare. In both I got the same tough chicken and about the same number of ants in the soup. But it was a pleasant meal on the veranda, with a cool breeze creeping through the foliage and the stars scintillating in a sky of velvet. Huge cockroaches scuttled



across the floor as a kitten teased them, tapping with a playful claw. Indignant cockroaches!

After dinner I would light my pipe and stroll along the water-front. On the coral parapet natives would be fishing. With their scarlet and gold pareus the men looked like statues of copper. In their palm-leaf baskets tiny fishes glistened, while great brown cockroaches ran swiftly over the hot stone. The up-pointed cannons were burning to the hand. The little schooners moored to them rocked in the moonlight, while from their mystery of shadow, mingled with the splash of little waves, came the sensuous thrum of mandolin and guitar.

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Filled with a sense of romance I would return to my bungalow. But I would have no peace. First it was a cockroach that flew in at the window and ran up and down the floor. I gazed at it till it stopped and seemed to go into a trance. Now was my time. I approached it from behind, determined to end its career. Alas! it evaded my foot and scurried across the boards. Once again I made the attempt. It cracked crisply under my slipper, a horny envelope containing no juice. To make sure it was dead I stamped on it a second time, but a few minutes later it was gone. An amazing instance of vitality! Then I beheld it moving to a crevice in the woodwork. It was being dragged by a small army of ants that had appeared as if from nowhere. Nature worked with ferocious swiftness and the drama of life and death was speeded up to the limit.

Then I gave a start and gazed at the wall. Motionless and as if it were painted was a yellow lizard. I could see the five toes of each foot as they gripped the smooth surface. In its saffron head its eyes like black gems seemed to regard me, and its citron-coloured body quivered delicately—a *gekko*. For a while I watched it darting here and there after moths and mosquitoes, but suddenly there appeared on the curtain of my bed a spider as big as a saucer. With incredible rapidity it evaded my slipper; then I remembered someone telling me—"Spiders are your best friends." As I was thinking how nice it would be to have a spider eating out of my hand a minatory chill crept through the open window—the rain. There was a patter on the bread-fruit trees, a leaden drumming, a thunderous roar. In its relentless fury it was like buckshot volleyed on the corrugated iron roof. Down each groove of metal ran a steady stream, and in front of the porch they were like crystal bars enclosing me as in a prison. Then as suddenly as it had come the rain ceased.

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One day I visited the Valley of the Living Dead—a dream valley, full of peace and innocent joy. Grassy hills girdled it, a crystal stream rippled through it; along its

banks were dainty huts of bamboo. But as I approached the valley awakened. Curtains of tappa were lifted, screens of fibre pushed away. Faces peered forth—what faces! Never had human imagination conceived such horror. They were not faces even, they were *masks*. . . . And now from doorways forms were slinking, like lost souls roused from dreadful dreams. They were coming into the sunshine to blink and gibber and paw. The little huts spewed them forth to the merciless light, revealing them in all their hideousness. Ringing me round in ever increasing numbers I saw emaciated men with fingerless hands and arms, women with faces monstrous as gargoyles. All about me were masks of horror and despair. The grotesque and livid faces grew denser; the maimed, distorted forms hemmed me in; the stillness was like a wire drawn to breaking point.

Then all at once a thin-edged voice fretted the silence. A tall man, meagre as a skeleton, was gazing down on me. He leaned on a crutch and one leg below the knee ended in a silvered stump. His livid face was twisted fantastically awry as he fumbled at something in his rags. With trembling hand he jammed it into a scabrous eye slit—a *monocle*. Then he spoke in English: “Hello, old chap, you seem to have lost your way. Keep right down the valley and you will find the path that leads to the road. On either side are our rival churches which we patronise without sectarian prejudice, since religion is our sole distraction.”

He screwed his monocle more tightly in the swollen socket of his only eye and looked at me quizzically. “Don’t forget the Living Dead. Wars and revolutions mean nothing to us here, but a case of milk or a box of jam is an event of importance.”

“Who are you?” I asked, and he answered: “One who has already dug his own grave and waits to fill it. Who *was* I? That doesn’t matter. In Piccadilly many knew me once. Fair ladies, God bless ‘em, have loved me, but of the man I was this is all that remains. . . .” He took the glittering glass from his eye and dangled it foppishly. “Nothing left but a monocle.”

“Can I do nothing for you?” I faltered. “Your friends . . .” But he shook his head and there was something bitterly brilliant in his smile. Tapping the breast of his tunic with the glittering object he drawled; “Nothing, old chap. I’m dead. Officially dead. Good-bye.” He finished in the same mocking voice, and his grey form melted into the lush scenery.

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Another day I was tramping along a bush trail when a voice hailed me: “Hey, bo’, where ye headin’ for?” He looked like a low type native, with armless singlet and chopped off overalls. His legs were covered with *yaws*. After I had given him a cigarette he told me: “I gotta hut out there on the point. Rented a bit of land and

hoped to make a grub-stake when this *fay-fay* got me. Both legs swelled, so I laid up and a *vahini* brought me my eats. It went away but I'm scared it'll come back. Guess I'll have to get out. I hate to do that, for this country's cured me of lung trouble. Tough, ain't it? You go to a hot country because you're a lunger and you gotta go back to a cold to be cured of *fay-fay*. Life's a picnic on this island. But *fay-fay*! . . . Oh hell! Guess I'll pull out."

*White Shadows!* Yes, I was getting the feel of the South Seas. I watched the women. Their bosoms were opulent and they regarded men with soft, lascivious eyes. Even the humblest walked with dignity. Their feet were planted on the soil with certitude, and each separate toe fulfilled its function. Their breasts were out-thrust, their heads thrown back. They almost seemed to sail past, there was such rhythm in their movements. Men clad only in *pareus* stalked majestically amid the palms, their amber-brown torsos magnificently developed. They had sloe-black hair, teeth white as the curd of the coco-nut and smiling eyes. On the veranda of each cottage squatted the family, the great golden legs of the women bare, their white Mother Hubbards tucked between their thighs. Stark babies sprawled on the mats and nude children stared at me.

Three proud palms stencilled themselves against the opal of the evening sky. Their slim stems were inky black, black too their tufted tops. Every frond of their feathery leaves was needle clear. These leaves moved softly like feelers of insects with a voluptuous motion. Birds flew into their hearts, twittered a little and were silent. The pearly light passed out of the sky and the palms dimmed themselves against the freshly awakened stars. . . .

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Soon my conscience revolted against such a torpid life. It was delightful to lounge in hammocks but physically humiliating. With every day I was putting on fat. My picture in white ducks was an impeachment of over-easy living. I must snap out of all that. So I decided to walk around Tahiti. The Stevensons did it barefoot but I would wear sneakers. I would take no pack and as far as possible go native. So I started out on a morn that was spacious and resplendent. The market was a riot of chaffering over bronze bunches of feis and silver strings of fish. At the bare table of a Chinaman I breakfasted on fresh bread and scalding coffee.

At the mouth of the Fatua Valley I halted to admire the Diadem. The hills rose in velvety undulations, till in a green wedge they gripped the Mountain. Austere and virgin it stood against the sky, superb in isolation. A wisp of silver mist wreathed its front so that it was like a god crowned with hibiscus blossoms. . . . Then suddenly my eyes were refreshed by the sight of the open sea. It was churning on a curve of

black sand and a band of natives were pulling in their net. Laughing, singing, garlanded with flowers, soon they would feast on the fish. Here was communal living and very happy it seemed.

The way grew wilder and the beaches looped and curved. The line of reef was like an ivory bow, the lagoon a pavement of coruscating gems, the palms a plateau of green jade. The hills creased in orange and emerald and the mountains soared to heights of violet. Standing there I had a feeling of escape. My exultation knew no bounds. Again I had a sense of adventure, alone on an untried trail at the mercy of Providence.

There was no barrier reef now. The full force of the sea crashed on barren rocks. It burst through blow-holes with deafening reports and clouds of spume. The rocks streamed whitely, and over them long-legged crabs raced like giant spiders. The coral road ran along the front of precipitous bluffs, then down to the shadow of overhanging precipices. By the path grew masses of the sensitive plant that crinkled up at my approach. The way was truly wild and desolate. Great ferns covered the face of the cliff and water dripped and trickled. No more palms, only the ironwood with its rusty trunk and fringe-like leaves. No more natives, only dreary tern-haunted solitude.

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Then the scene changed and I was in a land of streams. Every hundred yards I had to wade, sometimes waist deep. There were pools with an opal tint like soapy water and in the depths giant black shrimps. The rocks were covered with russet-coloured lizards; mosquitoes rose in clouds. Painfully stumbling over boulders, splashing through pools, to my joy I came to a tiny village.

How I was hungry! Hurrah! A Chinese store. But the old Chinaman at the door did not raise his eyes from the Confucius or something he was reading. Had he bread? He waved a hand to his shelves and resumed his literature. The shelves were not encouraging—cans of sardines and salmon, corned beef, Carnation milk, bolts of calico, piles of *pareus*, but of bread or biscuit never a trace. Despairingly I pointed to a sack of flour, then he looked up in a pained way. He pointed down the road, nodding vigorously. This seemed to mean that in the establishment of his hated rival I would find what I wanted. Alas, no sign of hated rival. A wily Celestial ruse to get rid of me. So on I went hoping against hope.

No more native huts, no banana groves, not even a spreading mango tree. There was a bread-fruit one, though. How ironical to seek bread and find only bread-fruit! I managed to dislodge one of the green globes and dissect it, but the interior was like a fungus. Curse the fool who told me I could live on the country. In my extremity I

called on the gods, and behold one stepped from the wildwood to my aid. He was a very stalwart and comely god, a smiling kindly god with a golden skin and a wreath of flowers around his head. His only clothing was a scarlet *pareu*. He held out his hand and spoke in French. "I saw you coming a long way off and I have been preparing to welcome you. Lunch is waiting. Do me the honour to be my guest."

Nothing could have been more gracious than his hospitality, so joyfully I followed him. There in a green glade we sat down to eat. Our table was the ground, broad banana leaves the table cloth. I drank the clear nectar of a green coco-nut while he served me with steaming bread-fruit, *feis* and *poi*. Then from a pot he pulled a young lobster, split it in two with his machete and set it smoking before me. What a feast! Luckily I did not hint at payment. Recognising him as one of Nature's gentlemen I shook his hand and went my way.

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I was happy now for the trail wound through palm groves and I could pad merrily along. Soon I came on a settlement. I saw a shingly point with nets hanging on poles and canoes dipping down. The lagoon shimmered in all the colours of the rainbow. The reef was a rampart of foam with a sonorous roar, but at my feet the wavelets rippled playfully. Hibiscus boughs dipped in the water, and the fallen blossoms floated like fairy boats. A girl in a sark glided from the palm grove, launched a canoe and vanished tranquilly round the point.

As I stood in the hot brightness two tiny girls came towards me. One had brass ear-rings and was eating an unripe mango. They looked at me in a laughing way. Then a shoal of little fishes flip-flapped on the beach, and gleefully they pursued them. Off they ran with their silvery trove and again the waves made melody. From afar the surf supplied a deep bass. A fleet of honey-hued blossoms turned the water to flame while tiny fishes leaped at the fairy boats. Placidly the palms gazed at their reflections, sweeping in a clear curve of tree and inverted tree to etch themselves against the sky. Then two men in crimson and gold *pareus* came loafing down and rested on their canoes with the careless grace of gods.

What an idyllic scene! I thought of the slums of London and the people who slave out their lives in sordid cities. Here was eternal beauty, freedom from want, leisure to dream and worship the loveliness of Nature. I could have made my home here, far from the world of war and worry among these innocent people. On a fallen tree a boy was whittling, and the shadow of the leaves made a pattern on his bare brown back. There on a grassy point, shaded by palms, was the village. . . .

By tiny huts of thatch and bamboo were heaps of unhusked nuts. In sheds hung bunches of amber *feis*, and through a hedge of crimson catspaw I saw a golden

baby, eating a golden mango. He stared at me with big black eyes, his fat face obscured by the yellow globe. Then suddenly he howled with a mouth full of mango, but the whittling boy went to comfort him. He brought two magnificent mangoes and with a bow presented them to me. It was done with the grace of a Spanish grandee. What a lovable people and how happy they were! What a shame to educate them! The white man was their enemy, but while his knife was at their throat they smiled. Ah! the pathos of that smile. . . .

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Reluctantly I left my bit of Paradise. I crossed tiny streams, in one of which I surprised two girls bathing. I noted the suave lines of their golden bodies, but when they spied me they ducked in the sweet water, so that all I could see was their sleek black heads and their bright, curious eyes. The heat throbbed down, the lagoon shimmered like a sheet of beaten silver, but in the grove was green coolness. Crash! It was only the fall of a coco-nut yet it startled me in that cloistral calm. The ground was littered with fallen nuts. In the groves they were rusty brown, but on the beach they were bleached grey. For many kilometres I walked, seeing no other sign of life. By the roadside were patches of mud crimson with soldier crabs. I passed a pig on whose back was a mina bird. In the glassy water were the black silhouettes of fishermen. What a parching land! Oh, for a lime squash with ice clinking in the glass!

Then in a clearing I came on a bird-cage of a hut. In front sprawled some naked children, and the smell of pig saluted me. In answer to my call a woman came. Her face and body were emaciated but her legs were elephantine. Through the doorway I saw a man lying on the floor wrapped in a blanket. She pointed to him, then indicated her own swollen legs. I made her understand I was thirsty, so she fetched a long pole and knocked down two green coco-nuts. Holding a nut firmly on the ground with a single blow of a machete she cut off the top. As I looked through the hole in the thick rind I saw the interior white as porcelain and filled with crystalline liquor. Tilting it up I drank till I had finished it. Then I thanked the woman, who beamed with pleasure and gave me the impression that it was she who was grateful.

Refreshed and rested I struck out hopefully. Every little while the hills opened in winding valleys of bosky green and rivers brawled from violet mountains. There seemed no end to the streams. Every hundred yards or so I had to wade one. I sloshed from river to river with the water squirting from my sneakers. My feet had a parboiled look and my ankles swelled visibly. Incipient *fay-fay*, I thought. I loved that word. Such a frivolous way to describe a repellent disease. If I ever catch it, I thought, me for Iceland.

I also thought I had finished with rivers when I came to the biggest of all. It was

a broad and brimming stream and dubiously I looked at it. Here surely was a case of having to swim. Then, as I was hesitating, a pirogue shot out from the opposite bank. It was propelled by a smiling boy who bade me embark, and paddled me across to a tiny board shack raised on coral pillars. On the balcony a man was strumming a guitar. He wore a loin-cloth and his head was wreathed with flowers. Awkwardly he arose, then I saw that though the rest of his body was almost a skeleton his legs were monstrously swollen.

He gave me a fan and spoke to the boy, who brought me bananas, oranges and green coco-nuts. As I ate he regarded me with smiling eyes with no trace of sickness in their clear gaze. He was all courtesy, a natural gentleman, and to have offered him payment would have marred the graciousness of his gesture. For the joy of giving seems precious to these people, and if kindness be—as I think it—the greatest of the virtues, they atone by it for their laxity in other ways.

His hut was on the edge of a settlement, for I saw trees of alligator pear, little green limes, dark bushes of wild coffee and big green bread-fruit. Then in a fairy glade, luminous with the green banners of the banana plant, I came on a chicken-coop of a hut. At its door a native was grating coco-nut into a black calabash. He wore only a *pareu* but on his head he had a French army helmet. "From where you come?" he asked in French. And when I told him, he said: "Long way. How many days you take?" And when I answered, he said: "My God! All that in one day! Fifty kilometres! How you must be hungry. Wait, I fetch you eat."

He brought some fish which had been pickled in the juice of the lime and some roasted bread-fruit. I was not really hungry, though I ate to please him. I wondered where I would sleep that night, but for the moment I stretched on some mats in the shade. In a deep doze I was aroused by a voice in English. A little meagre man stood in the doorway slapping his thigh with the blade of a big butcher knife. He had a sallow skin and snapping black eyes. He touched his breast with the point of the knife.

"Hello! You English? Me English too. Maori boy. I serve in war. Get gassed. Government give me pension. Every month go Papeete, draw pension, get drunk. After money all gone stop here till next pension. Get drunk again. Everyone know me, Auckland Bill. My friend Tommy here, he in war too. He love get drunk too. . . . Say, you come. I kill baby pig. Tonight we eat roast pig and have big yarn."

Auckland Bill went off to cut up the pig, while Tommy made preparations for the feast. And feast it was. With palm leaf for rafter and banana leaf for table cloth I ate young pig as sweet as chicken. Then Tommy produced bush beer which made up in vivacity what it lacked in authority. A rare supper, seasoned by the anecdotes of

Auckland Bill. I slept on a mat on the balcony but was awakened by the glamour of the moon. What a night of white fire and witchery! In that petrified grove not a living thing stirred. The broad leaves of the banana plants were like green windows. Above them the varnished fronds of the coco-nut palms gleamed with a poignant brightness. The night had a crystalline quality of suspense. In that weird white fire it was trance-like, as if all things were unreal, as if I myself was unreal. Ah! how the palms loved the moon! They brandished blades like claymores to the sky. The moon fluted them with fairy fire and crowned them with solemn beauty. Yet, beside me, my two companions, blind to the splendour of the night, vied with each other in sonorous snoring.



## Chapter Fourteen

### TRAMPING ROUND TAHITI

Gladly the sun smiled up the sky, burnishing with beauty the Tahitian morn. A jocund wind trumpeted in the palms while between their fawn-grey stems shimmered the silver of the lagoon. Resplendent were leaf and blade, melodious the groves. And in this glory of light jauntily I marched.

Soon I became thirsty again, so meeting a native boy I pointed to a coco-nut tree. He needed no second bidding. He simply walked up it, bracing himself outward with his arms and gripping with the flat of his feet. Thump! Thump! Two coco-nuts thudded at my feet. Then with a machete he chopped at the green rind. The white chips flew beneath the swinging blade as with a dexterous twist of the point he handed me a goblet of emerald and ivory. In its enamelled depths was liquor clear as crystal, which I drank with eager thirst. So on I went, my stomach going *glug! glug!* till I felt like an ambulant coco-nut.

And now I was in a land of abundance. Between beach and mountain were endless groves of coco-nuts. By the roadside were bread-fruit and mango trees. There were little houses with naked children and *pareu* clad women. There were taro patches and groves of bananas. The road was lined with hedges of hibiscus—pink, scarlet and white—that mingled with the gold and crimson of croton vines. On the porch of a *himine* house a score of girls were scrubbing, their cotton dresses were tucked between their thighs, their shapely legs bare. Merrily they pointed to each other. “*Vahine*,” they cried and laughed like wanton children.

I was received by the chief of the village. He had a bungalow built on coral pillars with a veranda all round. Its most imposing feature was a guest room with a four-post bed, the crimson canopy of which was amazingly silvered with dead moths. This bed was his joy and pride. Authors had honoured it and statesmen endowed it with virtue. The chief and his family slept on the floor.

It was to occupy this bed that the chief received me with open arms. I wanted to push on, for the day was young, but to turn him down was to make him lose face. He pleaded with me to stay. What did a day or two matter? He would kill a pig for

me, give me all he had. I believe he would even have given me his fat wife had I felt so inclined. But I told him I would stay on condition he did not kill that pig. I had a loathing for pork at that moment so I pretended that I was a Jew and that my religion did not allow me to partake of it. He looked at me with pity. What a religion! He spent that evening at the church, of which he was the pillar and prop, returning home full of rum and religion.

So, resigning myself to fate, I sat on the veranda. The lawn dipped to the beach but it was a mangy lawn, honey-combed with the holes of land crabs. They seemed to poison it, devouring first the vegetation, then each other. From a hundred holes they peered with beady eyes that stood out on pins. Their nippers were large and snapped ferociously. Even their colour was a muddy yellow, suggestive of slime and decay. They were uncannily watchful. If I approached they scuttled off in a twinkling and all I saw was a black hole where two gleaming jet beads followed my movements. The very ground seemed to seethe with them and the air had a putrid odour.

Beside me squatted the wife of the chief. She had the wise eyes of a reformed but impenitent pirate, and on her massive breast glimmered a pendant of pearl blister. That evening I had supper with her and her daughter. The daughter combed her hair as she ate. In curious contrast with her brown skin she had yellow tresses. She made me think of chocolate and honey. A year previous to her birth a blond Swede had lingered in the vicinity and certain conclusions had been drawn. However, it made no difference to the chief. He was proud of her and referred to her as "my little Swede." It's a way they have in Tahiti. They love children and though they have a dozen they are willing to adopt a dozen more.

In the village was a woman who had seventeen. She kept the village school and supplied the bulk of the pupils. There they were all around her, about a dozen of them, from a baby in arms to a boy of twelve, and not enough clothes among them to cover a decent scarecrow. One little chap stood looking at her, erect and fearless. She bent down and kissed him tenderly. She loved the lot and was still young enough to have a dozen more. Why not? She need not worry about their bread and butter, their shoes and stockings. In this favoured clime they need never know hunger. In this gentle climate they need never feel cold. For shelter a grass hut, for clothing a scrap of *tappa*. Food, shelter, raiment for the taking, and for these men toil and fret and wear themselves into an early grave.

Having time to kill I loafed like everyone else. On the verandas were golden brown figures, picturesquely poised; men magnificently muscled, women suckling babies; girls in white sarks, boys in nothing at all. And they were mostly doing

nothing at all. How small were the hands of the women, and how gracefully they used them! But their legs from the knees down were large and powerful, the skin coarse and covered with scars. Their ankles were thick, their feet large and flat; yet take them from the knee to the neck they were round, full, velvety, soft.

In places the flame trees formed a scarlet canopy above, a scarlet carpet below. The air between seemed scarlet with their glow. The shore line curved in coco-nut groves and the crushed sapphire of the lagoon was framed by the ivory foam of the reef. There were singing rivers, valleys luring and lovely. But the swimming hole of the village drew me. A pool under the bridge was riotous with children. They would jump from the rail trying who could make the biggest splash. The girls bathed in their wearing frocks, their black hair lank on their brown shoulders; sheer joy laughed from their eyes. The boys wore *pareus* that persisted in coming off.

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That night I went to a *himine*. On the porch of the house about a hundred natives were squatted, the women in front, the men behind. In the moonlight I could see scores of humped shoulders in white dresses, brown faces under fine straw hats. In the exotic night they waited eagerly. . . . Suddenly a woman's voice soared up very high and sweet. It thrilled and trembled for a moment, then as if to support its frail melody another joined in a lower tone. The two throbbed to a music full of wistful yearning. Then the melody quickened, took on strength, while to its barbaric beat a third woman joined, then a fourth. They were each singing their parts, but all blended in harmony.

And now the men took it up. They, too, had four parts and their voices in mellow assonance supported those of the women. The song was in full swing, the singers inspired. They attacked with fire and energy, accompanied by the measured thrum of stringed instruments and the soft throb of a native drum. The time was perfect, while at moments a poignant treble seemed to soar like a clarinet, rousing the others to a passionate rage of song. Then at the greatest moment of lyrical frenzy it died away in a long drone of crystal melancholy in which the voices of the women blended in one clear note. . . . Such the singing I heard in a leafy grove under a tropic moon.

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I did not sleep well for there were rents in my mosquito netting. As the chief's daughter showed me to my bed she tried to mend them with hair pins; then after asking if there was "nothing else I wanted" she went away, leaving me to slumber under that canopy covered with dead moths. I was aroused early by the feet of the chief flapping on the balcony. Their soles were horny, their upper reaches red and

scarred. He was evidently suffering from a hangover. He blinked at the rising sun, at the glamorous lagoon, at the roaring reef. He descended to the lawn clad only in a *pareu*. His mental obfuscation did not impair his dignity, as in a stately way he moved from crab-hole to crab-hole, pushing with his enormous feet the surface soil into the mouth of each. Beyond making life more interesting for the crabs it was hard to see what his object was.

After a breakfast of fruit with the blond daughter of the chief, who still combed her hair, I started out again. I was looking pretty tough by now for I had not shaved for three days. My sneakers, cotton singlet and dirty ducks completed the suggestion that I was going native. Yet I rather rejoiced in my disreputable look. Perhaps one reason was that I had lost pounds of weight. I had sweated away my fat and now felt fighting fit. But a shower of rain dampened my spirits. Without warning the torrent descended. It beat the broad leaves of the giant taro with savage violence, it streamed down the green panels of the plantains and blurred a *purea* only a few feet away. The ground became gluey, the air smelled of rotting leaves, the slippery soil was coated with decayed vegetation.

Yet soon it was over and the air grew hot and clammy. Sweat streamed down my face, pricking plants clutched at me, webs of spiders brushed my face. The humidity was overwhelming, but all at once I heard the music of a cataract. I climbed towards it. On the surface the brush had an iridescent gleam, but below was moisture and rot. Branches broke off damply, and when I clutched at a low bush it came away in my hand. In that poisonous underbrush I toiled upward till at last I gained the cataract. At last I was standing under the sweet water, letting it wash me clean.

I found bananas and oranges which I ate eagerly, and when I took up the trail again I was feeling strong. Presently I came out on a high point overlooking a gulf of verdure. Below was a vast bowl of velvety vegetation, above a ridge of mountains incredibly eccentric. Against the sky were gorgeous rags and jags of rock, fantastic shreds and splinters, shapes like mediaeval castles, turrets, bastions, purple precipices threaded with cascades of silver. The contrast was violent between the vehement peaks that stabbed the sky and the cushy vale that undulated to the sea. The reef swept in overlapping curves and shielded from the relentless ocean the lagoon dreamed peacefully. Beauty, grandeur, tenderness, and I alone to glory in it.

Again I made a meal of oranges and bananas under a *mapé* tree. Its glossy leaves screened me from the fierce sun. The roots, running along the surface of the ground, rose in extraordinary planes. Rope-like creepers clung to it, and the trunk radiated in the same knife-like planes. All afternoon I pushed on by a green tunnel

through which sunshine faltered. Below, in a deep gully, I heard the murmur of a brook and felt extravagantly happy because I was treading ground no human foot had ever trod. That night I slept in the fern of the free forest, choosing a huge *mapé* to camp under. The long roots rose partition-like from the surface, and by covering one of these sections with branches and the leaves of the giant taro I made a little bower. There, despite the mosquitoes, I slept peacefully till daybreak.

Next day I descended to the coast and took up the worn trail. It led through miles of coco-nut palms till I felt I never wanted to see another as long as I lived. Then I met a bearded man on horseback who regarded me with contempt, so I realised I must look like a beachcomber. Only the natives received me with unction. Time I was back in civilisation. That night I made the House of Mau, spruced up a bit and next day I walked into Papeete. I was glad to get back to my bungalow, for it seemed like home. I dressed in spotless white duck and going down to the bar of the Bougainville I had several rum punches. Then I ate a dinner of clear soup, lobster, chicken and ice-cream.

So far I had seen nothing of these literary stalwarts Nordhoff and Hall. They had not yet come into fame with the *Bounty* books, but I already knew Nordhoff as a writer of talent, while Hall I regarded as a literary artist. I had read their recent book *Fairy Tales of the South Seas*, in which I detected a flavour of Lamb, Stevenson and Conrad, but I hesitated to approach the authors. Then one evening in the dining room of the Tiare Hotel I met Nordhoff. He was a handsome young fellow, blond and brimming with vitality. He begged me to see Hall who was in hospital. I went there next day. Hall—long, lean, dark was of the Stevensonian type and would have made a grand Scotsman. He was ill, but received me with smiling charm. A rare personality and a writer born, he has a power of evoking atmosphere and a grace of style that should give his work more than a passing value.

After the strenuous week I had passed it was pleasant to settle down for a spell. Again I ate bacon and eggs for breakfast and dined at the Tiare. I loafed, read, wrote up my notes, lived the way I loved to live. And once more fat gripped me in its fell folds. That is the worst of being disgustingly healthy; only by strenuous exercise could I keep fit. So when a friend offered me the hospitality of his house on Moorea I joyfully accepted.

I hired an old pirate of a fisherman to sail me over. He insisted on leaving at sunset so as to take advantage of a favourable wind. He was a big, hulking Raratongan and only half-sober. He sailed with one foot gripping the tiller and his eyes fixed on the stars. One eye, that is, for the other was of glass, the original having been gouged out by a Solomon Islander. . . . The moon rose after a bit and

merrily we bowled along. A bonny night: in the moonlight the sail was a silver sheet, silver the sea that swept suavely past. Even the scuttling cockroaches were silver. The one-eyed captain stood with his huge foot on the tiller, his huge hand on the hauling rope of the mainsail.

The hours went past. The mountains of Tahiti dimmed, the hills of Moorea loomed up more blackly against the sky. Already I could see their outline, and in this fantastic night we seemed to be slipping through a fairy sea to an isle of mystery. . . . Another hour passed. Now I could distinguish the shore, hear the boom of the surf. The captain's face grew grim. With gathering speed the breeze was blowing us on to that barrier of perilous foam. In the moonlight the reef was showing its teeth like an angry beast. From under a bushy brow the seeing eye of the captain gleamed anxiously. "You know your way?" I demanded.

"Me not sure. Him plenty close. Maybe better stand off some more." So we tacked and skirted the reef, seeking a break in the moonlight foam. Then suddenly the captain made for a gap of low water. The roar was deafening. We were lifted on the swell of great combers that crashed on the coral. "You see the gap?" I shouted. The Raratongan's teeth gritted. "Maybe make mistake. Maybe wave take us over."

In the clear moonlight I could discern a space where the great rollers smothered the reef in a welter of foam. It was too late to draw back, just a chance we could scrape through. The sailors had put out sweeps and frantically backwatered. The captain looked over his shoulder at the combers. Each seemed as big as a house. Here was a huge one . . . now for it. . . . The little boat seemed to rise on that long ridge of black water and poise for a moment. In that pause I could see streaming below me the shelf of the coral, then down we plunged in a cataract of roaring foam. Would we get through? There was a crash that flung me off my feet, a hideous grinding, then smooth serenity. We had made it. We were safe.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### MOOREAN IDYLL

Joyfully the dawn brightened the Moorean sky. It would have brightened just as joyfully our corpses floating on the briny sea. However, my shipmates did not seem to share my sense of escape. The Raratongan produced a bottle and soberly proceeded to get drunk, relinquishing the helm to his second, who was eating roast pig. He signed to me to join him, but somehow roast pig in those little choppy waves did not appeal to me. So I contented myself with a chicken sandwich, which was daring enough; for my happy mood was soon succeeded by one of divine discontent, and there I lay on the hatch, watching the masthead swing crazily round the sun. Would this wretched little boat never cease its jiggling? As I leaned over the side, disgorging fragments of chicken, I had not the heart to reflect that even this was preferable to feeding the sharks with my carcase.

However, when we got to the lee of the island all that changed. The boat glided along and the sea assumed a vitreous blue. Never had I seen water of such marvellous indigo. A glassful of it would, I imagined, be like a sapphire. . . . And now the dolphins came to greet us, swimming so close I could almost touch them. A jolly band they sheered along, enjoying themselves hugely. I could see their brown, gleaming bodies, their pig-like heads, as with powerful tail-sweep they propelled themselves like torpedoes. Such a happy family, so sleek, so friendly! For a while they kept up their playful antics, then having duly and officially welcomed us, abruptly they vanished. But they were succeeded by flying fish, great solitary ones that flashed gemlike from the sea. Silver-bodied, amber-winged, they volplaned down the wind.

We were now holding a course closer to the shore. The lagoon changed from cerulean to willow green. Like lines of white-maned cavalry the breakers charged the reef. I saw the smoke and spume of the onset, and the rearing wave, glass clear, before the shock. Above the palm ridge rose velvety hills whose fantastic outline held my gaze. They were like mediaeval ruins, here a cathedral spire, there a Norman keep, yonder the ramparts of a citadel; and the verdure covered them with

a semblance of ivy that completed the illusion. But dominating all was the Mountain of the Eye. It had the outline of a woman with uplifted face and streaming hair, and set on the face, just where the eye should be, was a tunnel-like hole. Legend has it that it was a gigantic goddess turned to stone, and that in ancient days they used to propitiate her with maiden sacrifices.

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Then rounding a curve in the lagoon suddenly I saw—the HOUSE. It was half hidden in a tangle of greenery, yet it was built on the edge of the lagoon. The bay swept in a vast curve, and the reef was so remote that the water was still as a lake. It was this stillness, this infinite peace that overwhelmed me. It was so absolutely dream-like. Never had I felt such a sense of rest as when I looked at that house. Such lonely loveliness, such wistful beseeching charm. My heart seemed to melt with joy and gratitude. I'd like to live here always, I thought. . . .

A pier shot out on piles, and as we tied up a bare-footed girl approached. She wore a dress of white calico. Her hair was parted in two braids, her teeth white as sea-foam. Her skin was amber brown with golden lights. She moved with lissom grace, while her loose frock showed the shape of her little pointed breasts. Introducing herself as Mara, the daughter of the housekeeper, she showed me the path to the house. A broad flight of steps led to a noble veranda. Indeed with the exception of a small central space the entire floor was devoted to the veranda; while everywhere, inviting to laziness, were deck chairs, divans and hammocks.

"Here you are," cried a resonant voice, and a bronze figure bounded up the steps. It was my host, Major Brandish. He wore only a *pareu* and a wrist watch. His body was golden brown, his face richly tanned. When I saw him last he had been in evening dress at a banquet in Papeete; now he carried himself with the proud poise of a native. "I've been looking forward to your visit," he went on, "and that's not politeness. It's Moorean hospitality. Come, I'll show you the guest chamber."

It seemed to be the only furnished room. So I said: "I fear, Major, I'm taking yours." But he quickly broke in: "It would be a great privilege to give you my room but really I have none. Sleeping here is a primitive affair. One has no need of covering and a mat is preferable to a mattress. Repose is casual. One stretches out when one is weary and rises when one is rested. I get up with the sun. Not having to dress makes it easy. Life is beautifully uncomplicated."

"Sounds charming," I said. "Now I understand something of this disease men call South Seaitis. But please tell me—you are a man of the world—how does it come that you are what I might call an escapist?"

His face lit up. "I came here first because of my health. Gassed in the war. Well,



I'm perfectly sound again. I had a limited income, so I bought a bit of land, built this house. On this, my spot of earth, I am King. I bother no one and no one bothers me. For me the sophisticated world has ceased to exist. War, plagues, famines, don't matter to me any more. Civilisation may crash in ruin, my sun will shine serenely, my bananas ripen. My world is here on this happy isle. Infinite leisure, infinite liberty are mine, and here I will enjoy them to the end. But there's a writing Johnny coming to dinner this evening, name of Bean. One of the Boston Beans, I believe. You can ask him the same question."

Bean arrived in a pirogue paddled by a Jap. He wore the white evening dress of the tropics with a silk soft-bosomed shirt and a black tie. His face glowed with health. The table was set in a corner of the veranda. A lattice covered with bougainvillia surrounded us on two sides. Through it glimmered the lagoon. On the other side was dewy underwood breathing a soft balm of tiare blossoms. The gold-shaded lamp flooded the table with a mellow radiance. There was a crystal bowl of roses. The napery was snowy, the silver of exquisite design, the wine glasses like gleaming bubbles.

Mara and her mother served the meal, while downstairs her father and brother helped with the cooking. The dinner was a *mélange* of civilised and native food. Dainties from California vied with delicacies from Tasmania. There was alligator pear, *homard à l'Américaine*, breast of chicken cooked with bamboo shoots, golden *poi* served with milk from the grated rind of the coco-nut. . . . "It's wonderful," I said. "One might as well be in the St. Francis or the Ritz." My host shrugged his shoulders. "Dinner is really our one meal. Naturally we save ourselves for it. During the heat of the day all one cares to eat is a little fruit. In these indolent climates one has to be abstemious. Speaking for myself, never did I have such good health. Energy too. Talk about languor of the tropics, I want to be everlastingly up and doing."

Then as I looked from his cheerful face to that of Bean I noted something. They were strangely alike. It was not only that they vibrated well being; it was something more profound, something I had never seen in the faces of those who lived in civilisation. It was deep serenity, a harmony with the world about them. Their eyes were clear, candid, joyful. They laughed with a whole heart. They seemed to take things easily, as if nothing could be greatly worth striving for and life could be wholly charming. As we smoked over our coffee I remarked: "You people seem to have found the answer."

Brandish looked at me thoughtfully. "I believe I have. And you, Bean?" Bean nodded. "I, too. I have escaped from the world of grasp and grind. The moment I

set foot on this island care slipped from my shoulders. Once I worked on a Chicago newspaper and there I saw men old in their thirties. So I made up my mind I'd Gauguin it. I've gone back to a more primitive state of existence and I'm happy."

"Dear me," I sighed. "There's nothing so complex as simplicity. But may not even beauty pall? I wonder if I come here twenty years hence whether I'll find you carrying on. Perhaps you, Major, will be living in a Tudor manor in Sussex and you, Bean, will write a best seller and hike to Carmel."

"Well," said the Major, "what does it matter so long as we're happy? But to my obtuse military view this conversation is too highbrow. . . . Have you ever seen the *hula-hula* danced? Mara does it beautifully. You'll dance for us, won't you, Mara? If you do I'll buy you a silver crucifix next time I go to town."

The girl was clearing the table. She hung her head timidly and a blush darkened her cheeks. But she went away for a few minutes and returned with her glossy hair brushed over her shoulders. Her snowy dress came to a little below the knee, and her beautifully formed arms were bare. Her skin was golden, her breasts in the bud. But it was her freedom of movement that held my eye. She had the lithe grace of a young leopard. She moved like a melody.

The Major put the right record on the gramophone and Mara danced for us. The *hula* is a lascivious dance, but Mara put poetry into it. With her hands outstretched in a gesture of beauty to the exotic throb of the music, her bare feet glided over the floor. Her body swayed and undulated, and when at last she dropped to her knees with arms extended the effect was strangely seductive.

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After the party broke up I descended to the beach. As I stretched on the warm boards of the pier a shadow drew close—Pepé, the little brother of Mara. Still as a statue he stood, a four-pronged spear poised in his hand. His dark eyes were fixed on the darker water as he watched, waited. There he hung, so patient, so tense, and I longed to see that slim spear hurled into the depths. As I, too, gazed into that black gulf all I could discern was an occasional flicker of phosphorus; but Pepé saw a secret world teeming with life. The boy would thrive where I would starve. In this land he was my master.

From the raven-black water I looked to the house nestling in its green covert. Its lamp was like a star, sending across the lagoon a copper glow. The veranda was a diffused harmony of orange light. Throwing off my clothes I plunged into the water and in its languid peace I floated a while. I felt a strange sense of detachment—as if cities did not exist, had never existed. I was one with mountain, sea, sky. Drifting in the starlit lagoon I felt akin to the world about me and indifferent to that where men

spend their lives pursuing shadows. So at last, tired, tranquil, I sought my hammock.

But I did not sleep. I was wooed to wakefulness by a proud, impartial moon, painting scenes of unearthly splendour. And there was that perfect stillness that goes with perfect moonlight. It was so full of penetrating peace, of softness and unreality. The groves of coco-nut were sombre, but through their bar-like stems glimmered the lagoon. The moon silver faintly undulated on the water. It wimpled in till it grew tense like the wire of a guitar, then broke melodiously. Afar, the reef was a welter of foam, and as each comber reared like a wall of jade the moon pierced it with a silver rapier.

I rose with the sun and saw the fronds of the palms like cutlass blades slashing in the hilarious wind. Once more I sought the lagoon, where from the pier I could watch the garden of coral. Amid its groves darted rainbow fishes that mimicked its colouring. Now in silvery arbours they lurked like shadows, now launched in pursuit of weaker brothers. There was a flashing in and out, an ecstasy of movement. A silver shoal floated around the golden bowl of a hibiscus blossom, trying to pull it under. Amid those grottos harlequin-hued fishes sported and chased: fishes of cornflower blue, of glittering silver, of gleaming copper; zebra striped fishes, leopard spotted fishes. Looking through the crystal lens of the waters I watched the wonders of that teeming world.

There were only two rooms in this open air house, my bedroom and the library. The latter was lined with books, damaged by water and nibbled by mice. Here the family slept, shutting themselves in and keeping a light smoking all night to ward off evil spirits. My bedroom was insectivorously interesting. There were flying cockroaches and a great motionless spider hugging a huge bag full of eggs. I sincerely hoped they were due to hatch out after my departure. Then there was a black hornet that buzzed resentfully. She was building a nest like a thimble of clay attached to the wall. Every now and then she flew in with fresh clay and moulded it round the rim. Soon she would enter, leave her eggs inside and fly insouciantly away.

Brandish interested me. He had the best vanilla plantation on the island and one morning he took me over it. If I were a poet and had to toil I would be a vanilla planter. How idyllic spending one's days in green corridors tending vanilla vines! Between walls of emerald I would have a feeling of solitude soothing to the spirit. They were so tender, these beautiful plants, so grateful for human solicitude. The leaves were long, waxy, exquisite, the beans in clusters of such elegant form and colour one hesitated to touch them. Surely a very patrician of plants, with blossoms so sensitive they opened only to close with the pang of fecundation.

For the fertilising is done by hand. As soon as a blossom opens a worker with a

twig of orange scrapes off a little of the outer pollen and transfers it to the interior. This is called, "Marrying the vanilla." At first sign of ripening the beans are plucked and put in a sweat-box, then wrapped in woollen blankets and laid out in the sun. This goes on till they are cured. It takes four pounds of the plucked beans to make a pound of the cured ones, and nine months are needed to prepare them for the market. . . . But please forgive this attempt to convey information, which after all may be inexact.

As I strolled with the Major a fat pony came along and we fed it with bananas. Then Mara climbed a tree and dropped ripe guavas, into my hat. When we got back to the house we found that Pepé had caught two carp-like fishes of vivid green, just like fishes of porcelain, so we ate them for lunch.

One day we were invited to a feast given by the local chief, a charming old fellow with a smile that would have been engaging if it had not been for his decayed teeth. His wife was a very vast woman. They had two daughters, the elder a true to type Tahitian, pure and (I hope) undefiled. She had blue-black hair, coal-black eyes under coarse black eyebrows, a pomegranate-hued skin and lips as if a bee had stung them. Her large limbs were superbly formed, her movements beautiful in their grace and freedom. She was unmarried but had no children.

The second daughter had the legendary qualities of the South Sea siren, a gentle creature with a great capacity for loving—and giving. Up to now I was told she had had six natural children; and how many more she might have heaven only knew, for she was still in her twenties. Owing to Mother Hubbard wrappers her last maternal effort came as a surprise to everyone. Well, the more the merrier; no one held anything against her. Perhaps it is more wrong to marry and not to have children than to have them without marrying.

We assembled on a grassy mound overlooking the beach. The younger daughter crowned us with flowers. On my unworthy brow she placed wreaths of petals, snow-white and blood-red. I wondered if my wreath was on straight and if it matched my complexion. To tell the truth it made me feel like a silly ass, but a third rum punch reconciled me to it.

So behold us garlanded for the feast and the feast awaiting us. It was spread under a pavilion of woven palm leaves. The posts were wound with banana fronds, while from the eaves hung tasselled fringes of silky fibre. On the ground banana leaves were laid. Scarlet flowers twined amid them and gleaming blossoms were heaped down the centre. We squatted Turkish fashion. Two stalwart natives lowered Mrs. Chief to a sitting position. In front of me a portion of food was heaped, each separate dish neatly arranged on a large leaf. A coco-nut bowl contained white

sauce.

“You must eat everything with your fingers,” said the Chiefess, “dipping it in the sauce. Begin with the shrimps.”

I selected a gargantuan shrimp and proceeded to disrobe it. Fain would I have seasoned it with pepper and salt, but relentless tradition compelled me to sop it in that milky fluid. Gingerly I immersed it and ate it with distaste. Then I transferred my attention to the lobster. Oh, for some *mayonnaise*! Again I had to dip it in that sickly sauce. I was thirsty but the liquor in my green coco-nut was warm and sweet. Oh, for some ice water! What about sucking pig? A little heap awaited me on a broad leaf and I messed into it with my fingers. If only I had a plate, a knife, a fork, how I would enjoy that baby pig! But to dip it in that same sweet sauce and to eat *feis* or bread-fruit with it discouraged me. The bread-fruit looked like a chunk of fungus, and tasted like it; so hopefully I turned to the *feis*. They were emasculated bananas and I could not have imagined anything so elaborately tasteless. However, the bread-fruit with its faint suggestion of benzine was preferable to the appalling insipidity of the *feis*. What a merry business it was! I was furiously hungry and there remained the *poi*. I would fill up on *poi*.

Two glutinous slabs were before me, one silver, one gold. I pried off a piece of the silvery stuff—it tasted like mucilage. I tried the golden—it tasted like more mucilage. However, the *poi* had a staying power. One morsel kept me chewing for the rest of the meal and allowed me to politely refuse other offers of food. “No,” I said firmly, “I’m so crazy about this *poi* I simply can’t eat anything else.” So I watched the others plough pluckily through their portions. The Major was toying valiantly with the thigh of a sucking porker and under crowns of flowers the faces about me were greasy with pig fat. The Tahitian is a musical creature, but never more so than when he eats. The music varies with the dish, while a whole table sounds like an orchestra.

Sitting there I felt a young faun. All I needed was a nymph to carry to the groves. And nymphs were not lacking; nor would, I imagine, their resistance have been too desperate. Ah, those golden girls! Their hair spun out like clouds of night starred with flowers, their velvety eyes voluptuously shining, their brown breasts like ripe pomegranates . . . Oh boy! I thought, it’s time for you to hike back to the domestic hearth.

Thank heaven, the feast was over. The stalwarts hoisted the Chiefess to her feet. My legs were full of pins and needles and my back ached. So I stole off to the beach and munched at a bit of hard tack. “Heigh-ho!” I mused, “how strange it all is! Who am I sitting on a coral beach under the stars? What am I? Why am I? Did I ever in

some past life sit on a coral beach under the stars? Did some starry-eyed maiden come from behind and clasp me in her velvet arms?" (Apprehensively I looked over my shoulder—no luck!) How fantastically unreal the rest of the world seemed! Even Hollywood and my little family in the bungalow of Carrie Jacobs Bond; even more so Dream Haven and the Place du Pantheon. Decidedly a dangerous place, this Moorea, vamping one from the world.

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Yet during the time I spent there I got to know it alcoholically well. I walked round it in a leisurely way, with Pepé, the fat pony and two sacks of beer. The beer was for the chiefs who welcomed and fêted me but for me life was compounded of rum punch and roast pig. My arrival was the little needed excuse for a fiesta and my progress was almost triumphal. Nevertheless, I never rode the fat pony. Pepé did that. I love my legs too well so I padded along behind the pair of them, singing most of the way.

At last I bade good-bye to my lotus eaters and left them to their exquisite exile. Moorea was all beauty and its people were like children but it was cloying. Perhaps I could have fitted to that frame; I doubt it. The others ultimately deserted the island. Brandish came into a title and went back to England; Bean wrote a Tahitian novel that was a best seller and went to live in Laguna. It is hard for leopards to change their spots. . . .

Yet I regretted leaving Moorea. "Garden of Desire," I often said, "I will go back to you. I will yield to your spell. I will become the greatest lotus eater of them all. There, in my tower of tranquillity I will cultivate the curse of content." Then: "Bah! you dampfool dreamer, you know you never will. You must live in the heart of things—strive, struggle, fight on to the very end."

## Chapter Sixteen

### OBSCENE SCENE

To Hollywood I returned disgustfully curve conscious. Family mirth! So I pitched them a yarn about living with natives and being fed up for a cannibal feast. "So nice you escaped," said Mother. "Now you'll be able to write a book of poems about it. Of course I never read your poetry, but a new volume from you solves the Christmas present problem." "Sorry," said I, "there ain't gonna be no new volume. The stuff I got just won't jell. Too scenic and virtuous. I should have gone to French Guiana. Misery is my meat."

"Physically you're meaty all right," said the Old Lady. "You remind me of your poor dear father." This horrified me. Papa was corpulence personified. So, going down to the drug store I stepped on the wobbly platform of the weighing machine. A malicious machine, with a wish to humiliate me. It did . . . a hundred and fifty, my old weight, but *still going strong*. . . . Confound it! Won't it stop? . . . One hundred and sixty. . . . Heavens! Going up, but slower now. . . . One hundred and seventy. . . . No, I can't believe my eyes. The machine's lying. . . . Inexorably it pushes on. There! It seems to be satisfied, but I daren't read the figures. Then I nerve myself. . . . *A hundred and seventy-five pounds*. . . . Blast and damn! I am twenty-five pounds over weight.

Crushed by the shame of suet I join the family at the Sunshine Cafeteria where they are cheerfully toying with meat-balls and spaghetti. "Spinach and toast," I say grimly. "You folks can have all the *pie à la mode* you want, but include me out. This, too, too solid flesh is going to melt pretty quick if there's any will in little Willie."

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But diet was not enough, so I went on a five day fast. Now fasting is a fiendish affair I would not wish on my worst foe. To sit and see my family devouring delicious dainties made me realise what a social occasion a meal is. I was bored hollow, and my emptiness was not of the tummy alone but of my whole existence. On the third day I allowed myself some cups of weak tea which sluiced through me like water. I moped around like a lost soul, while my thoughts turned to the gorgeous eats I would have when this hell was over. Yet there were rewards. My sleep was infantile

and my dreams were sweet. Also there was the great moment when I weighed in and saw the Result. Mostly it was disheartening. In five days I lost only six pounds. Famishing in the midst of fried chicken is heroic and I thought I deserved better than that.

However, it was a beginning, and with the joy of moral victory I embarked on a diet. My first meal was a bowl of clear soup, and wonderful it seemed to sip that liquid comfort. It was worth while to have starved to get such a kick out of a cup of *consommé*. But I had to go easy. I always weighed in the morning and when I joined my family at the Sunset Cafeteria they knew by my mug whether I had lost or gained. If the latter savagely I ordered spinach; if the former, how I beamed over a baked potato. Ah, that fight! These victories and defeats! But on the whole I gained—that is to say, I lost. Steadily down came my weight to a hundred and fifty-five pounds and there it stuck.

Unfortunately I had lapses. There were days when a craving for candy assailed me and I would buy a quarter-pound of butter creams or walnut caramels. Then after devouring them I would be stricken with remorse. But such moments of surrender only strengthened my resolution and gradually I gained in grace and lost in grease. My clothes fitted me where they touched, and my cheeks were planes instead of curves. My waistcoat no longer advanced, my neck ceased to bulge over my collar. I seemed younger, too; more bright of eye and erect of carriage. As I realised the change I was very happy. In three months I had lost twenty pounds, and as I looked at my obese friends I felt a little arrogant—for was not I a conqueror?

So ends the story of my fight with fat, and if you who read this are afflicted with superfluous flesh you, too, may win. For as I type this, my weight is just a hundred and fifty. It has been down to a hundred and thirty-five, but that is another story. Suffice it, I was slim again and it was worth a struggle for it was like freedom from prison. But the actual reduction was only one reward. The strength of will I had gained went to develop me in other ways. It was the beginning of a new life of zest and energy, a veritable regeneration.

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But our stay in Hollywood was nearly over and we were obliged to return home. With regret we watched the Old Lady leave for the north. She glided from the scene like a Duchess. With her black silk dresses, her gold chain and her cameo brooch she took with her an atmosphere almost Victorian. She only wanted a lace cap and mittens to complete the picture, but when I suggested them she said: "Nonsense, Willie, you want to make your Mother an old woman." She certainly rebelled against age, loving society and the company of young people. Her diversions were cards



and crime; the first in the form of solitaire, the second in detective fiction. She was always after me to write the kind of books she liked and I promised I would try. That was what started me on my career as a thriller-monger. I could not do detective books because the cold logic of them bored me, but I could make up stories that leaped from one lurid situation to another. My imagination was flamboyant, so that when I came to tackle that type of book it came easy to my pen.

Thus ended the Hollywood episode in which Mother played her sweet, old-fashioned part. She had pink cheeks and blue eyes and she was always laughing. She liked gangster films, dime novels and banana ice-cream. A grand sport, God bless her!

So the Hollywoodites returned to the old homestead and were mighty glad to get there. From the terrace of my studio I looked with approval on the gloomy pile of the Pantheon. Then my enraptured gaze went to the raking roofs of the Sorbonne, the sparkle of the Seine and the serried heights of Montmartre. Ah, that divine vista! Standing by my dizzy balustrade the spirit of the city seized me so that I seemed a part of it. Who could live here, I thought, and not know invincible gaiety of heart? Above the voice of the city, under the stars, once more I heard that music of divine content I called the *Harps of Heaven*.

But best of all was to be home again. I don't care where home is, it is always the dearest spot on earth, for it enshrines the treasures chosen so lovingly through the years. How I caressed my books, fondled my furniture and dwelt with grateful eyes on my pictures! This princely apartment, I thought was a frame of which I was unworthy, more suitable for a Proust or an Anatole France. For French literature was much in my mind and my library was full of its master-pieces, while just at my door was the golden Garden of the Luxembourg.

It was across the garden every morning I used to trudge, holding the hand of my small daughter. How eager she was to get to school so that she could play till the bell rang. She would drag me forward, prattling till we reached the gates, and there her little playmates would welcome her with joyful cries. As she rushed to join them she never looked back, for she plunged into another world in which I had no part. With the release of her hand I lost her till the moment I waited at the gate again; then, school over, she trotted by my side telling me of her day's doing. And for seven years I did this, seeing her grow in grace and charm. Ah, the childhood of our children—will anything in life ever be so precious?

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It was pleasant to take up old ties. Once more my legs were busy and my eyes were curious. Each day was one of exploration in which I discovered new interests.

I blessed that magic vision in which I saw wonder in the common place and romance in the ordinary. Of course, my predilection of slums asserted itself, so I came to know the lower depths of Paris as I imagine no other writer of English knew them. It was on these scourings of the obscene that I recalled my Mother's challenge to write the kind of books she liked to read. Well, the *apache* was a good substitute for the gangster, so why not give him a show? And there at my door was the juiciest slum in all the city.

The rue Mouffetard is a steep, unsavoury street that seethes with sordid humanity. The houses are mouldering with age, the doors dark tunnels burrowing into decrepitude. In an evil half-light sinister shadows haunt it. Every second entry is a bar and in its dim depths men with faces entirely evil foregather. Near it is the rue St. Medard, frequented by the garbage rakers and close by is the Flea Market, where they sell their finds. Round the Place Maubert radiate poisonous alleys and close by is the Café des Clochards, refuge of those homeless outcasts who sleep under the bridges of the Seine.

In this furtive region, by day and by night, I prowled, wearing a turtle-necked grey sweater, a cloth cap and old flannel trousers. Thus disguised it was quite a trick to get away from my swank apartment without shocking the other tenants; but I was aided by my concierge, an ex-policeman, who understood my motive. He entered into my slumming activities, so that I slipped off my raincoat and slunk out without anyone recognising the tough-looking bum as the monocled individual who stared arrogantly at them in the elevator.

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One night I plunged into my purlieu of poverty and crime and headed for the *Café des Clochards*. In the rue Dante a big rat emerged from a grating, ran along the gutter and disappeared into the entrance of a sewer. It reminded me of the human rats that shuffled past me. There was one who went from café to café, picking up cigarette stubs with a pin stuck on the end of a stick. I followed him into the *Café des Clochards* which was gorged with putrid humanity. Every seat was occupied and everywhere dropped weary heads. At one table I counted five—blond and hoary, old and young, but all alike in the lice that prowled in the jungle of their hair.

Around the tables with their human compost surged the sleepless misery that could find no place to rest. If I could only get a seat I would take a chance on the vermin, but room there was none. So I looked across the street where I saw the grim light of another café even lower on the scale. But here, too, there was no place vacant. In this eddy in which swirled the scum of the Quarter nearly everybody slept.

Beside their trowsled heads stood empty bottles of *pinard*, mumbled crusts and the refuse of food gathered from the gutter. The air was acrid with the smell of sweat and filth.

I watched a party of five at a table near the door. They did not seem at all sleepy—indeed they were slightly hilarious. A youth with a face all nose—chin and forehead retreating as if afraid of that formidable proboscis—stood singing and swaying, glass in hand. His protruding eyes were ecstatic, and the song he sung was *Plaisir d'Amour*. As he developed its theme the tears ran down his cheeks. Beside him, looking at him admiringly, was a girl of about sixteen, who seemed half idiot. Opposite was an old man so thin his mud corroded clothes hung on him like a rack. His face had the glazed look of putridity and his eyes seemed to swim in blood. The remaining two of the company were old also, a man and a woman. Their blotched faces were close together as they cuddled amorously.

The weeping youth sang with eyes fixed, putting more and more expression into his voice. With tongue half out the old man leered at the singer, then began to laugh. “Stop your crying!” he jeered. “Give us something lively, some hot stuff. Here, I’ll give you one.” Then, in a harsh voice he began a tuneless, scurvy ditty in which the word *vache* figured largely. But the youth would have none of it.

“I’ll cry all I like,” he protested brokenly. “He who does not know how to cry does not possess a heart.” And this sentiment he repeated several times, while the satyr persisted in reiterating the charm of his *vache*. Then the two began to wrangle. The idiot girl caught the hand of the youth and fondled it with fervour. The crapulous couple of grey-heads wrapped in each other’s arms were pressing their bloated faces together and kissing with the gusto of young lovers. Suddenly the old man paused in his singing and delivered a stinging slap to the young man. There was a moment of consternation. Heads were raised angrily, fuddled eyes stared stupidly. But it was the barman who was roused to action. As all turned to him I realised that a blow in this place of sodden derelicts was an outrage against its code. Expectantly they looked at him while the man who struck the blow seemed stunned.

As the bar-tender rose I saw he was fair and young, with the frame of a Hercules. Calm, resolute he came from behind the bar with the air of one who is going to chastise a naughty child. The old man had gone down on his knees and was begging for mercy; but the barman was like a retributive god. He struck the kneeling *clochard* again and again on either side of his face. Then, gathering him up, he carried him at arm’s length to the door. There he dropped his burden and kicked it several times. “Go away,” he said in a soft gentle voice. “Don’t come back for a week. Bad boy, you are banished.” And as he returned there was approval on the

faces of the *clochards*. Honour had been satisfied, justice meted out. But the man who had been kicked stood sadly peering into the window of his lost paradise.

Seeing no chance of sitting down I left the place and wandered on. I was now in a dark by-street in the shadow of the Hotel Colbert. About midway the dim light of a curtained café attracted me. There was something discreet about it, so I opened the door and entered. But at sight of its interior I halted in dismay. For this café was a mere cellar and pervaded by a cellar-like gloom. Near the door was a circular bar in which a fat man was penned. Between his zinc-lined counter and his battery of bottles he dozed contentedly, his belly rising and falling under his greasy apron.

To the right of the door was a small space packed tightly with tables at which a score of men were sitting. They all slept, looking like so many bundles of shapeless rags. Some were hunched forward, some had their heads tilted back. Some were twisted sideways, their cheeks resting on the chair backs. One man had fastened a newspaper under his cap to shade his eyes. In contorted positions, but with the indifference of habit, they slept. The light from the solitary lamp was low and dim and there was no sound save their grating snores.

But it was something else that made me stare; for beyond the bar was a long, narrow corridor, a mere passage, but down it ran a table. On each side of it were benches, and sitting closely, packed tight between the table and the wall, were a good three score of the usual types of human *débris*. What impressed me was that the long double line of heads lay so flat, so deathly still. Twin rows of heads, all alike in dishevelment and dirt, nailed to the board by weariness and woe. You could have swept a sword a foot above the table and hurt no one. They slumped forward like dead people. They gave the illusion that they were praying. One could only wonder what hideous human masks lay under these trowsled heads. Occasionally a man would raise himself and wriggle within his clothes, then sink again to profound slumber. Or a woman would reach under the table to claw frantically at her skirt. But in the gloom all one could see of their faces was a livid smudge.

I ordered a bock, sipping it gingerly. The thought that some of these bits of ordure might have touched the glass daunted me. I was wondering what I should do next when a man entered. To my surprise I saw that he was the gatherer of cigarette stubs. He ordered a glass of white wine. Seen through a tangle of greyish hair his eyes were dark and wild. He muttered to himself, then suddenly putting his hand under his shirt he began to scratch. I could hear the rasping of his nails on his hide.

“Your family are lively tonight, *mon vieux*,” said the *patron*. The old man scowled at him. “Yes, I nourish them well. I’m not like your pigs of capitalists who live on the sweat of labour. They are the real parasites.” He continued to scratch.

“Ah yes, I look after my *pensionnaires*. They are happy, I think. Why not? They are warm and well fed. They know neither fear nor pain. How many of those who labour can say as much? And I do not kill my little friends because I do not believe in taking life. Are they not God’s creatures, perhaps as wonderful in their structure as any of us? Who am I that I should destroy them? Are we not little else than lice crawling on the body of the world?”

“You’re quite a philosopher,” I said.

“One has to be, or go mad. Here in the Cavern of the Dead only wine and a little wisdom keeps me from jumping into the Seine.” . . . The Cavern of the Dead. As I looked around I thought he had named it well. Then the *patron* said to him: “You want a seat, brother?” And when the old man nodded he went to the top of that long row and gave a grey-haired woman a dig in the shoulder. “Shove along, Mother. Make room for a little one.” She raised a tumid, bestial face. “*Merde!*” she snarled, but gave way grudgingly. Then her head dropped again.

The old man was dozing, the landlord was nodding, the silence weighed on me like oil. I, too, felt drowsy and dreamed a little. . . .

*Between Moorea and the mainland is a glow of daffodil. The sea is like a lake of yellow wine. In its lustrous peace poise two canoes, black silhouettes pasted on the background of golden alabaster. Each canoe is clear-cut as a knife, the fisherman a tiny figure carved in jade. As if he realises the harmony of the picture he drifts in silence on a sea of dreams. . . .*

I roused myself with a shudder of aversion. Here in the heart of the most beautiful and sophisticated city in the world I felt as if an army of vermin were crawling over me. So, in my sneakers and slouched cap, I stole up to my princely apartment, had a hot bath and knew the joy of a soft and friendly bed. . . .

## Chapter Seventeen

### THE LOWER DEPTHS

With great gusto I resumed my studies of Slumland, and while by night I poked into the pest-holes of the Marais by day I explored the Zone.

What the *marquis* is to the Corsican bandit, the Zone is to the Parisian *apache*. Once he slips into its mazes the police may search for him in vain. For it consists of that girdle of No Man's Land that separates the city wall from the suburbs. . . . Originally kept bare as a defensive area, with the passing years a singularly vicious race had come to inhabit it. Nomads from the surrounding country had halted their caravans there, finding it a rich harvest ground. Vagrants and vagabonds had squatted, living like vermin on a dung heap. The outcast of the city had sought refuge in its muddle of misery. It was so easy to put up a hut of clap-boards and tar paper, and be lord of one's castle, with the wealth of Paris to prey on.

As time went on the lawless character of the Zone was accentuated until it became a very by-word for cynical depravity. To be born in it was to be born to a life of crime, and children abounded there. From their cradles they were doomed—those who survived. The boys became pimps, the girls harlots. So, besides being a sanctuary for criminals it became a spawning ground for crime. For in it there was no law save that of the underworld. In winter the spaces between the huts were quagmires, in summer middens. The natives were as savage as the dogs they kept to play the part of scavengers. The swarming half-naked children were tainted with disease and doomed to early extinction. There were no forces of regeneration, so that vice grew unchecked. At the gates of the proud city a crust of appalling misery, a belt of festering humanity, an outlaw region of iniquity—the Zone.

So if by night I braved the *bistros* of the Marais, by day I risked the hazards of the Zone. For even in daylight one had to be ill dressed and carry a stout stick to beat off the mongrel curs that snapped at one's heels. It was while doing this I took refuge in the Café de Rome, a large shed composed of hoardings and patches of tar paper. Yet amid the sodden shacks that packed it in, it was like a *château*. It belonged to an Italian who had acquired most of the cabins in the neighbourhood,

and lived on rents that yielded him a hundred per cent. So that even in this region of free land the capitalist asserted himself.

The Café de Rome was the haunt of a gang of honest cut-throats exploited in contract labour by its owner. He was a rat-faced, desiccated man with a maternal mountain of a wife and two effulgent daughters. Many knife duels had been fought over these girls but they were destined in marriage to merchants of the city. Like all who succeed in the underworld the father had *bourgeois* ideals.

Over a bottle of cheap wine I took stock of the place. A dozen Italians, who looked like desperados, but were probably day labourers, were playing some counting game with their fists and fingers. The proprietor and three others were thumbing a greasy pack of cards of mediaeval design. From time to time he raised his eyes to watch me. To him I was either a crook in hiding or a detective after one. He shot a warning look at his daughter. While acting as a receiver for stolen property he was also an informer for the police.

The girl behind the bar had a black eye which she persistently informed newcomers she had acquired by falling against the coal scuttle—information received with polite but incredulous sympathy, as it was known that the two sisters fought like welter-weights. Now she came over to me and explained the nature of her accident. She did not want, she explained, a stranger to get a false impression of her. Then she whispered: “You are a *flic Américain*, are you not?” Thinking of my concierge I said: “Well, I’m not unconnected with the police.”

She looked at me with evident admiration. “I see the *Cinéma Américain*,” she said. “You are after a gangster from Chicago.” Her approval was so obvious I had not the heart to disillusion her, so I said cautiously: “Well, I’m not uninterested in Chicago gangsters,” and I tried to look resolute like a laddie of the F.B.I. Under her gaze that held an awe almost amounting to reverence, I assumed a grimness Hoover himself might have envied. “Can you tell me who you are trailing?” she asked. “I am very discreet. I might be able to help you.” So I determined to take her into my confidence. “Not one, but two,” I said. “But you wouldn’t know them. One is called Baby-Faced Nelson, the other Pretty Boy Floyd. And I want to take them single-handed if I can. I don’t want any help.”

She nodded. “I understand. You F.B.I. men are so splendid. Well, I wish you all success. But I do not think you will find them in the Zone.” Then as I left she came after me and whispered: “Why not try the *rue Lappe*?”

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The *rue Lappe* is a narrow street near the Bastille, famous for its *Bals Musettes*. There are more dance halls in its short length than in all the rest of the city. From

every second door come strains of guitar and accordion while beyond the bars are glimpses of dim interiors. The garish lights flood the street which is little more than a lane, and every type of the low life of Paris is to be seen in its jostling throng. There are rake-hell youths and raffish girls; swaggering bullies and slinking sneak thieves; the quiet contemptuous bandit, the street walker no longer predatory but seeking only to enjoy. It is the underworld at play.

I was proud to be taken for a daring detective and for a moment tried to imagine myself in that role. But it wasn't much good. Player of parts, that was one that was beyond me. I hadn't the guts to be a good cop, and it was with quaking timidity I sampled the dance halls. They were of all sizes and grades, from the gaudy gilt *salle* where a trap drummer supplemented the guitar and accordion, to the low ceilinged *bouge* where the *patron* sawed a fiddle and jangled a collar of bells attached to his ankle. . . .

Here was one of the *élite* order, aflame with amber light, and the bar as gaily decorated as that of a boulevard café. The women wore hats, the men coats. Even starched collars and bowlers were to be seen; but for the most part the males had gaudy scarves and caps of a loud check. The men smoked all the time, the women not at all. Everyone drank abstemiously, and often of gaily coloured syrups. Most of the girls seemed to have their own men, though a few were unattached. Among these was a negress, dressed entirely in flaming scarlet. The music was full of fire and each dance was divided into two parts, during which interval men with satchels collected the money.

From this place I passed to a den under whose low ceiling sweaty couples swung dizzily. The only music was provided by a brutal looking ruffian throned on a tiny platform above the heads of the crowd. Yet he played the accordion divinely. He delighted in florid excursions into the treble and fascinating effects in the minor. Here the naked light shone on the greasy hair of the women and the mottled faces of the men who exploited them. In that narrow space they were a huddle of close-linked bodies, wriggling in an acrid odour of sweat and cheap perfume.

Then, as I went from place to place, I realised that each had its special character. In one there was an undue proportion of women. I was struck by the number of girls dancing with other girls. If on rare occasions they accepted a man for a partner it was with an air of distaste. The same couple always danced together with evident enjoyment and even affection. Usually one of them was strong featured and dressed after the manner of a male, while the other was clinging and supple.

Then in a hall near the end of the street, I found the most curious scene of all. It was not large but densely packed. The strange thing was that though there were half



a hundred men there were not half a dozen women. And the men were decidedly queer. Their cheeks and lips were painted, their hair oiled and curled. Their waists were drawn in, their hips prominent. The hands they flicked about with finicky gestures had rosy finger-tips. They spoke in tones so high their voices were inclined to crack. Usually their figures were slim and supple and they had the mincing manner of affected school girls. Just as in the last dance hall I had seen women who mimicked men, so I now saw men who aped women.

But it was their conduct that amazed me. As they flipped at each other with rosy finger-tips I saw that they wore rings set with turquoise or opal. They pinched each other playfully and called themselves by feminine names. One would ask for a dance and the other accept with the coyness of a maiden. They danced with a mincing daintiness, a coquettish head twisting. Often their eyes were glassy with cocaine. Some wore their hair long and puffed, so that I took them for girls in masquerade—pretty girls, too. At first I thought I was beholding a travesty, then I saw the seriousness of it. As some of the dancers were eyeing me coyly I backed to the door. Outside were two *sergents de ville* who marked my bewildered face. “Ah, monsieur,” said one with a laugh, “it is only the *Taverne des Tapettes*.”

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Despairing of finding either Baby-Face or Pretty Boy in the *rue Lappe* I took a narrow alley and arrived at a slum of the worst description. It was unlighted save at one end where, from a murky *bistro*, I heard the sound of an accordion. Its curtained door made a crimson splash on the pavement and above it was the sign: *Bal du Petit Balcon*. I had been warned against this place as notorious for its danger and depravity. As I entered the blood red lights switched to a ghastly green, making the face of each dancer a livid smudge. The men here were typically *apache*, with caps of violent check; the girls the aproned *gigolettes* of many combs and crude colours. As the lights changed I might have been looking at a stage drama of the underworld.

I ordered a grenadine, aware that many eyes were on me. Presently a man detached himself from a group and sat beside me. He had sloe-black eyes with a face pale as lard. “American?” he queried, and I nodded: “A wonderful land,” he went on. “It is my misfortune not to know it. But I thought that all Americans who came to Europe were rich?” “I am not rich, it is evident,” I said. “Pardon, but it is strange to meet an American in this place. You are the first I have ever seen here. It is not safe for them. But I understand. You wish for a moment to remain inconspicuous as far as your compatriots are concerned. Again forgive my indiscretion. You are not by any chance that famous New York gangster, Legs

Diamond? We read in the papers that he is here at this moment.”

I assured him that though I admired Legs I did not know him personally, but I could see he was unconvinced. So, ordering a glass of white wine, he said: “Well, sometimes one has reasons to be discreet. Here’s to our meeting, Monsieur *l’Américain*, and may you continue to escape your enemies.”

Heartened by this excellent sentiment I went my way. I had seen enough for one evening. I was nervous and felt as if I were really a fugitive from justice, so that when on the Boul’ Miche’ someone gripped my arm I had a start of fear. To my surprise it was Peter. I had not seen him since I had made my sudden trip to the States. His new importance awed me, he was so pompous now, with his talk of the Peace Conference, Lloyd George and Clemenceau. He roused my inferiority complex so strongly that I had made up my mind to lose touch with him. “Why, Rubbert,” he said, “I wouldn’t have known you. What part are you playing now?”

“I’m an *apache*,” I told him. “You don’t want to be seen with me. As a matter of fact I’m documenting myself on the underworld. Dressed as I am I go to places you would never dare to enter. But come—I will take you to one. I know the *patron* so it will be quite safe.” I hailed a taxi and before he could protest I pushed him in. “I’m taking you to the *Auberge des Assassins*.”

Of all the black and bitter boulevards that encircle Paris the one called Macdonald is the most discouraging. Why it should have a Scotch name I never discovered, but the fact seemed to reassure Peter who otherwise was rather alarmed. But as we entered it he became dubious. On the one hand, black and reptilian, was the slaughter-house, on the other scabrous and sinister, the Zone. About midway was the *Auberge des Assassins*.

In the old days its custom was largely composed of that desperate type of the *apache* known as the bandit, a fellow who would stick at nothing. Even now it was kept by an ex-pugilist who had done two prison terms. By day it was chiefly patronised by fleshers from the slaughter-house. They drank deep, fought with knives over their women but were honest enough. From the nearest gate of the *abattoir* they emerged between spells of slaughtering, their knives stuck in their leather belts, their clogs brilliant with blood, big-bellied men with purple and violent faces.

At night the doors of the café were closed and the clients were watchful and furtive. Most were pale youths whose veiled eyes masked their sneering insolence. They, too, fought over the bob-haired girls with the raddled faces, and collected their earnings. They were so depraved they were beyond depravity. They treated their women with deliberate cruelty and patronising contempt, yet few of them were out

of their teens.

It was into this sink of iniquity I now led the alarmed Peter. I knew the *patron*, having paid my way on a previous visit by buying drinks for the house. I whispered something in his ear and he looked at Peter with a respect amounting to awe. A whisper went round the room and all eyes were turned on my friend with the same look of awe. What I whispered to the *patron* was, "He's a well-known British diplomat," and the word went round: "*C'est Lloyd George.*"

Now I knew that Peter had always prided himself on his resemblance to the little Welshman, and he had cultivated that likeness till he looked more like Lloyd than the eminent politician himself. For he had greater dignity, longer hair, and was more immaculately dressed. I was sorry to see he had shorn off his shaggy eyebrows which had reminded me of those of a Skye terrier. How often my Missus had longed to tweak them to points and adorn them with bows of baby ribband! As I looked at his blue serge suit, silk shirt and neat bow tie I thought: What a far cry from the sloppy Bohemian of the Café du Dôme!

He still liked to drink though, for it was with a grand gesture he told the *patron*: "Pinard for all the world." So bottles appeared at every table, red wine flowed and approving glances were turned on him. Then as he leaned back with a devil-may-care look I realised that here was the old Adam coming out. But presently he took from his pocket a gilt-edged card and gave it to me impressively. It was an invitation to dinner at the British Embassy. "What a bore," I said. "You don't have to go, do you?" He looked shocked. "Of course, I'm going. You would, too, if you had a bid." "Like hell I would," I said. "I'm not particular, but I draw the line at Embassy dinners."

He seemed surprised and a little hurt, but I think he saw my point of view. He was becoming a snob and he knew it. "I'm taking the wife," he said. "She likes that sort of thing. You must come up and meet her. We have an apartment in Passy, a nice little dump. Come for dinner." "Thanks awfully," I said. "We're just simple folk. We don't eat dinner. Just a bite of supper. Besides, the kid has to go to bed early. But I'll drop in some evening."

So I let it go at that, though I saw he was becoming a little uneasy. His snob spirit was asserting itself. That card to the Embassy Dinner was bloating him with vanity. "We'd better be going while the going's good," I told him. It was too. We made quite a triumphal exit. He might really have been Lloyd George from the affable way he bowed to everyone, and even those sewer rats were impressed when as a final gesture he told the *patron* to give each one a packet of cigarettes. He must have spent a hundred francs in the joint. As he strutted and swelled they gave him a

round of applause. “Good-bye, Monsieur le Premier,” said the *patron*, and the *apaches* raised their glasses. Truly Peter stole the show. He had kept the taxi waiting and as we drove back he said: “It’s been a grand evening, Rubbert. We must meet again. These boys played their parts well, but it’s too realistic to be real. It’s a great set-up. I must give it a boost in the Press and put the tourists on to it.” I assured him it was the real thing, but he refused to believe me, and went off thinking he had been entertained at a fake show such as one finds in Montmartre.

## Chapter Eighteen

### CAUGHT IN THE CRIMINAL NET

I went on with my studies of the Lower Depths, and one morning I stood in front of that saturnine pile—the Conciergerie. There, through a gloomy tunnel, the girls of the city went to get their permits renewed. All day long in a steady stream they came. Some would drive up in taxis and enter with a rustle of silk, some slink in carpet slippers with their heads bare. Some were in their teens with their hair down their backs, others ancient hags scarred by decades of battle. Some had an air of modesty, some of effrontery. Some were flashy and raddled with paint, others pale and dressed with quiet taste.

Often I was surprised as I followed with my eyes a sweet-faced girl in black, only to see her turn into the dark doorway. Or another time it would be a bold-eyed wench in an orange sweater, rouged and bobbed, who would pass with a look of disgust. I learned to distrust my judgment. As a rule, though, they were true to type, snippings on the scrap heap of life. By nature they were lazy, vain, pleasure loving. But how many of their respectable sisters are that. Unfortunately for these they had been born in poverty. Yet they deserved little sympathy. Not many were really vicious, but most were sensual and ease-loving. . . . So at least I judged them, watching that endless defile between the wine dark Seine and the lowering Conciergerie. And those who arrived in their autos and those who came in slippers feet seemed akin the moment they entered that dark portal. That was the strange part of it—the instant they stepped over that threshold all airs and graces dropped from them. In satin or rags they were sisters of a common shame.

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My family were growing querulous regarding my noctambule habits. It was not so much the risk I ran, for I was careful to convince them that I never went where danger lurked; it was their fear I might bring home insect activity. My concierge, too, had advised me to not go alone at night. However, it took a final adventure to decide me I had better be careful.

I had heard of the *Lapin Vengeur*, and had been warned not to go there. But I thought I might take a chance, so with three days' growth of beard and my oldest

sweater I made my way to Belleville. It was eleven when I reached the tavern and with a cap well drawn down, no one heeded me. Near me were three men who struck me as *apaches* of the most villainous type. One was a powerful chap with a pock-marked face, who seemed to be waiting for something or somebody. His stumpy fingers drummed on the table and he gnawed his wiry moustache. The second had a purple face and canary coloured eyebrows. The third had a skin the colour of under-cooked spaghetti and eyes like small black olives. There was an air of tense waiting about them as if they were expecting a victim, and were sitting near the door so as to make a quick getaway.

As I watched I had a thrill of excitement. About a score of men and girls were in the place, none of them much over twenty. Most of the men were dressed in black, and there was not a collar amongst the crowd. All wore cloth caps with extra long peaks and shoes that were thin-soled and light. Their faces were dark and sallow, with hair plastered so sleekly it had the effect of a wig. The hands with which they rolled cigarettes were soft and uncalled. The girls wore sweaters, each of a different colour—orange, gooseberry green, purple, mauve. Their hair was bobbed around their paint corroded faces, their eyes bold, their voices rough. Street sluts from the outer boulevards, preying on the butchers from the *abattoirs* and the labourers from the *usines*.

I knew, too, the type of these lads living on the girls, spending their earnings and thrashing them when they failed to earn. Mere boys, they had been schooled in vice from infancy, till at eighteen they were *blasé* and cynical. They carried arms and fought among themselves. They feared the police, but if chance offered to commit a crime safely they would not hesitate. They would knock a drunk on the head, or attack in a band the solitary man in a quiet street. They would enter a home with a false key and if the occupant happened to be an old woman they would squeeze her throat till she ceased to breathe.

But they were only the small fry of the underworld, not to be confused with the true bandits like those three by the door, who looked as if they were waiting to “descend a *type*.” Now they were staring at me and whispering. Perhaps they took me for a police stool or maybe a member of the *Sûreté*. Anyhow they thought I had their number and they had mine.

Somewhat intimidated I was inclined to retreat. But as I hesitated a shirt-sleeved waiter beckoned me to a seat at the other end of the hall. Skirting the dancers I gained it. “A *ballon*,” I ordered. He brought me a glass of pale beer, but most of those about me were drinking *pinard* which they ordered by the bottle. Sitting over my glass I took stock of the surroundings.

It was a long, low hall with dirty green walls. Strung across it were light bulbs, some white, some red. Small tables crowded the sides, each capable of holding six. In the corner was a raised stage for two musicians. One was a grizzled Spaniard with withered face and the narrow side whiskers known as "*galeries*." He strummed the steel strings of a very large guitar, sonorously but without enthusiasm. That seemed reserved for his partner, a tall girl with yellow hair like a golden helmet. It was evident she enjoyed playing, for the music she produced was full of fire and rhythm. A simple java, she elaborated on the waltz theme till it was glorified. She played it in the minor, in a poignant treble, in jazz, with strumming pauses, runs and ripples. Sometimes the air seemed to be lost in an ecstasy of florid notes; then again it soared sensuous and irresistible. It seemed as if the girl was amusing herself, mocking the dancers, then humouring them in a sweep of impetuous melody.

As the java ended the couples slid to their seats. The oily youths went back to their *pinard*, the girls to giggle in a group by themselves. There was no attempt at politeness; the men simply released the girls where the end of the dance found them and turning a contemptuous back left them to find their way to their places.

Suddenly the three men near the door rose and put themselves at my table so that I was crowded to the wall. They looked at me with a marked resentment. In morose silence they rolled their cigarettes. As I realised they were trying to account for me a sense of helplessness invaded me. It would be so easy to pick a quarrel and pinned in there what chance would I have? But the beginning of another dance relieved me for a moment of my fears. At the first note of the music each of the young men got up and at the same moment a girl rose and went to him. It seemed as if the man always danced with the same partner. When he did not, he would look across the room, and in answer to his *hist* a girl would come to him. It was like master and slave. Then the two would interlace and swing into the dance.

Rarely did they speak, going round with a seriousness that was almost weird. Often the man would hold the girl with one arm, while with the other he smoked a cigarette. They seemed to dance with the precision of machines—gravely, unsmilingly, and their dancing was devoid of sensuousness. In the night clubs of society it would often be frankly indecent. In crowded spaces couples would remain almost in the same place, their movements confined to bodily wriggles. Men would hold their partners by the hips and there would be much dipping and swaying. But here the couples showed no sign of sex attraction. Holding each other almost indifferently they seemed to have no other thought but to keep time to the music.

Then I saw what a gulf there was between Belleville and Montmartre. These people were brutal but they were not perverted. They would steal and stab but they

would not seek strange forms of sin. The men gambled during the day and danced with their girls at night. They drank moderately and conserved their virility. Among themselves they fought like tigers, despising the effeminate *maquereaux* of the Butte. As for the girls they worked for the men after the ancient manner, loving them in a fierce and stoic way. They frowned on dope while among them the Lesbian was unknown. For that the men would have killed them. In their primitive fashion they had a code of conduct that would have shamed their gilded sisters of the Champs Elysees.

Then again I wondered: was this callousness not due to precocious development? Were not these lads and wenches so *blasé* their passions were sterilised, their emotions burnt out? That might account for their automatic gyrations in which the spirit of the dance, for the dance's sake, was so curiously realised. . . . I had reached this point in my speculations when the one-step came to an end. I had meant to slip away but had become so interested I had lingered. Now it was too late. I was aware of sullen glances and a slight jostling from the fellow nearest me. Wisely I ignored it. I was making myself discreetly small in my corner when a new dance began.

This time it was the famous *choupé*. Holding each other by the shoulders, or in some cases by the neck, they rocked and swayed in time to the sensuous music. Yet again it was evident that it was of the music alone they thought. Seriously they gave themselves up to its rollicking swing, dancing it like a lesson learned. The only one who showed any sign of enjoyment was Casque d'Or, the accordionist. Swaying, swinging, bending over and throwing back her head, she laughed joyously and seemed to enjoy the very spirit of the music.

Soon the dance was done and still I held my place. Yet now it was pride that kept me. I would not let these animals drive me away, and on the defensive I stared straight at the purple-faced man. But there was no further attempt to jostle. They muttered in low tones with a slang I could not understand and with inimical glances towards me.

It is hard to say what might not have happened when again the music burst forth. This time it was a tango, but a real tango, weird and virile, not the emasculated versions of the drawing rooms. And in its primitive form these people knew how to dance it. Their holds on one another were violent, the women pliant, the men brutal. In the throbbing passion of the music I could see Casque d'Or leaning forward, her eyes ablaze, seeming to incarnate the ecstasy of the dance. Then the music changed to a minor, the white lights went out, crimson ones went on. The effect was startling. To the wild beat of the music these denizens of the underworld rose to their parts.



Fierce animals of the human jungle their brutality was unleashed. There were sharp cries, half pain, half ecstasy; forms held savagely, fury, abandonment. Many were whirling dizzily, their lips locked together. . . .

Casque d'Or quickened her tempo. She was rousing them to a fury, laughing triumphantly; while spurred out of their apathy they shouted approval. The lights were white once more; then again that quick change to the ruby glow. . . . Fierce faces half seen, the gleam of exultant eyes; bodies bent double, swaying this way and that; guttural oaths and choking cries; pleasure that was half pain, excitement that was half *délire*. . . . Then a final confusion of whirling forms, like demons spinning in a bath of blood; a final kissing with teeth that ground against teeth; a final triumphant crash of music . . . The lights went up, the dance was done.

Wiping their brows the men went back to their seats, the women looked exhausted. There was a clamour of applause and in the midst of it I was aware that the spaghetti-faced man was looking at me with a malicious grin. As he licked the gum of a cigarette paper the sneer in his eyes grew bitter. "Who are you?" he demanded in a hoarse guttural tone. The others watched warily. As he edged nearer I took no notice. I would have risen but pride prevented me. "What are you doing here?" he went on. "You are not of the *milieu*." Still I did not answer. Uncertain what I should do I was preparing for the next move. I had been a fool to wait so long.

"Get out," said the fellow, pointing contemptuously to the door. Still I did not move. Others at near-by tables were staring at us. "D'ye hear me?" he growled. "*Fiche le camp* and never come back." I was scared but I could not take such a demand from this ruffian, so I looked at him defiantly. I heard murmurs about me. "*Flic*," some said. There was a tense moment of waiting . . . then it was broken by a sudden scream. It came from Casque d'Or. She was staring and pointing at the door from which erupted blue uniforms. *The Police*. . . . "Too late," said the man beside me. "Monsieur, you are *pincé*. This is a raid. We tried to warn you, but you would not heed. We are of the *Sûreté*, friends of Jean Dulac, your concierge. Now you must go with us to the *Commissariat*."

So I was marched with a score of others to the local police station. It was of the usual type—gangrene-hued walls, bare benches, the Commissioner in his little bureau. While the others were locked up I received official attention right away. I had good papers, a card testifying that I was a benefactor to the Force and a subscriber to its charities. Besides this I had my British passport announcing that I was an author. It was this last that intrigued the plump little man at the bureau who regarded me smilingly.

"I understand, Monsieur," he said, "you are an *homme de lettres*. You are writing of our *bas fonds* like Zola, like Gaston le Roux, like Carco. But you are not by any chance a poet?" "Monsieur," I admitted, "I am sometimes guilty of writing verse." "I am enchanted," said he, shaking me by the hand. "I must read your work for I understand English." "I will give myself the pleasure of sending you one of my books if you will do me the honour to accept it," I said. He announced himself as ravished. Then, turning to the waiting policemen, he told them: "Monsieur is a celebrated poet." There was a murmur of respect. A poet! I realised that here in artistic Paris the word had an honourable meaning for even the least of those policemen and won a respect it would have done nowhere else in the world.

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So I left that place in a glow of glory and at the door I saw my three *apaches* grinning widely. "Forgive us for being rough," said the chief. "We tried to get you away in time. But avoid these joints in the future. There was not a man there but who would have slit your throat for two *sous*. In future if you want to visit the *bas fonds* we will be glad to guide you." I shook hands with them and thankfully took myself home.

That was my last incursion alone into the underworld. Thereafter I took advantage of the friends of Jean Dulac, for the headquarters of the *Sûreté* were only a few yards away from the Pantheon, and it was easy to contact them. They were the most intrepid men I ever knew. One was an ex-prize fighter, another had served in the Foreign Legion, while the leader was a Corsican. I do not think he enjoyed danger or appreciated excitement, as it was all in the day's work; but I am sure he was absolutely without fear. For one night I saw him go up to a bandit who was brandishing a gun and take it from him. He had made some notable arrests in his time, yet his ambition was to be a private detective and do divorce investigations.

Everywhere I went with him he was known and respected. He introduced me as an American detective studying French methods, so that I received a mild reflection of his glory. I went out with these men night after night, and when they had an interesting job they always advised me. I was present at a dozen raids, helping to make a number of arrests. So in my character of amateur "cop" I put in many an exciting night. Often I wished I could be a real sleuth instead of a phoney one. But alas, I am too nervous for such work. One has to be clear headed, cold blooded and above all—brave. I am a coward, always was, always will be.

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The result of these nocturnal excursions was that I collected a bulky note-book of material. Armed with this I retired to Dream Haven to write my novel. But when I

came to tackle it my stuff soured on me. I am no reporter. I must work with imagination and only time and distance can endow my writing with that quality. So I put my notes away and dug up that other note-book labelled: *South Seas*, and then and there I started a novel with a Tahiti background. It was a series of dramatic situations linked up to form a story. When the hero was not rescuing the heroine from dire peril the heroine was saving the hero from imminent disaster. In the course of the yarn both became so real to me that they did things of their own accord.

I got a lot of fun writing this book, remaining by the sea long after the family had returned to Paris. I associate it with long tramps through the fenceless fields of early winter with a bracing wind, and my dog crazy with joy as he accompanied me. I, too, was full of happiness, because the work went without a hitch. So for nine months in imagination I lived in a brighter and warmer world. What a strange *métier*! to detach oneself from one's environment and mentally consort with vivid shadows on the other side of the globe.

I ended my book one evening at tea time, wrote the lovely word FINIS and sat there quiet, tranquil, content. Another job done, another book in the bag. I thanked the gods for their goodness to me, and was too terribly happy for words. Was there ever such a lucky fellow? . . . Hark! I heard the *Harps of Heaven* and knew they were the echo of my own heart.

My book was a success. It was a best seller and was sold to the Cinema people. They made an entirely different story of it and even wanted to change the title. So what remained? I wondered. And why that five thousand dollar cheque they paid me? What a crazy world where one gets something for nothing.

I was in magnificent health, but it is not well to be too well. I have almost done myself most harm in trying to do myself good. So now in the pursuit of physical perfection, which was my aim at this time, I brought on myself a calamity which I will proceed to describe.

## Chapter Nineteen

### CONFESSIONS OF A CARDIAC

“Whatever have you been doing?” demanded the doctor. “Keeping fit,” I answered, bunching my biceps and cording my stomach muscles in the approved washing-board fashion. Yes. I was proud of myself. Had I not at fifty attained to a physical development that would have done me credit at thirty? I expanded my chest muscles and tried to look like a picture postcard of Gene Tunney, but the doctor’s gaze was grim.

“What’s the idea?” he snorted.

“It’s so jolly to be an athlete,” I told him airily. “You know, I can walk on my hands.”

I expected him to be surprised. He was. After a pregnant pause he asked: “What’s your system?”

“Strenuous rather. Yesterday, for instance, I worked two hours in the gym. Then I had a swim in the pool before lunch. In the afternoon I did a three hours’ hike. In the evening I put on the gloves. That’s what I came to see you about. I thought of going in for a boxing tournament and wanted to be sure that everything’s okay. . . . It is, isn’t it?”

“Wait a moment.” He left me and returned, holding in his hands a big rosy apple. With a snap he broke it in two. Its core was black. “That’s the answer. The motor’s the matter. Running a hundred to the minute. Stuttering too. Leaky valve. Backfire. Your heart’s as big as that of an ox and it *whistles*.”

“But I never felt so well in my life.”

“I don’t doubt it. All the same, you’re killing yourself. Slow suicide. Wanted to be a *beau garçon*, I suppose.”

“Well, it’s nice to have a clean line and feel easy in one’s clothes.”

“Is it? Then, let me tell you the man who tries to make himself an athlete at fifty is probably going to make himself a corpse at sixty.”

“But surely I must keep fit?” I gasped.

“The fitness of a man of fifty is not the fitness of a man of thirty, or even of forty.

You have made an effort out of proportion to your years. In developing your muscles you have strained the greatest of all. The walls of your heart are dilated. There's regurgitation; perhaps a lesion. You're in bad shape."

"What must I do?"

"Give up all this Olympic stuff. Your idea of keeping fit at fifty is all right, only you've gone about it the wrong way. You've perfected your body at the cost of its most vital organ. At present, to all men of middle age, though you may seem superb, you are a Warning and a Lesson."

"I see . . . I've been a fool. Will I ever get over it?"

"I can only hope so. And now I'm not going to give you any drugs. I want you to cure yourself *naturally*. You must cut out alcohol, tobacco, red meat, coffee and every form of exciting food. Eat very little in the evening. Walk a great deal but never hurry. Keep cheerful, cultivate calm, practice placidity. Above all, give up your exercise *gradually*. As a man of muscle let your fade out be long and lingering."

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I had walked into that doctor's feeling like a million dollars; I slunk away looking like thirty cents. Where now was my swinging stride, my glowing eye? My feet dragged funereally as instinctively I whistled the *Dead March* of Chopin, and my gaze had as much glow as a fried whiting. In ten minutes I seemed to have grown older by ten years. The blue sky mocked me, the sunshine was sardonic. I had a sense of being in a dream, and the people who passed me were strange and unreal.

No doubt I was a little stunned. Had I not received what seemed to be my death warrant? Doomed! Cut off in my prime! Already I could feel the shadow of mortality. My heart seemed to be swelling like a sponge with the blood it was too feeble to expel. Unconsciously I had quickened into the old stride; so again, crumpled and crestfallen, I dropped into the Cardiac Crawl. I began to dramatise myself in my new part. I walked wearily with what I thought was a look of pathetic resignation. I even imagined that the passers-by were regarding me with pity. They seemed to be saying: "Look at that poor devil, hard-headed for the boneyard."

Then suddenly a gleam of cheer! Tea was not on the taboo list and I adored afternoon tea. For three months in the stress of training I had foresworn it; now I could indulge without reproach. Yes, I would buck myself up with buttered scones and orange pekoe. So in the window seat of a snug tea shop I sorrowfully ordered hot muffins and ate them with that patient fortitude peculiar to cardiacs and cows. Across the way I could see into a well-known dressmaker's and the sight of the mannequins changing their robes cheered me somewhat, so that with my third cup of tea I was inclined to be less pessimistic.

“From now on,” I mused, “my whole life will be transformed. In a twinkling I have been changed from an athlete to an invalid. Never again shall I be a He-man. Flabbiness makes cowards of us all. After punching a bag for half an hour how capable one feels of punching a human jaw! How often have I swaggered up to a chap with a chip on my shoulder (prudently regardful that he was my own weight) and no one has knocked off that chip. Now no one will ever get the chance. From this on I will take lessons in belligerency from a buck rabbit.”

*Sad reflection:* Forever must I bid adieu to my Sadow self. My proud muscles must melt like snow in the sun. No more will I watch them ripple under the skin or stand out clear like a chart of anatomy. Alas, I must kill the thing I love! For it has taken me three years of effort to bring my exultant body into being. How often have I driven myself to the daily discipline. I have been severe. I have trained myself to a point where exercise is tyranny. . . .

*Cheering thought:* Now I can relax, take it easy. At fifty have I not the right to slack up? No longer will I be the slave of my muscles, goaded on by a desire for perfection. . . . And after all, there are worse things than heart trouble. Think of cancer, consumption. It’s not good form to talk about one’s liver, one’s kidneys, one’s tummy; but the heart’s a noble organ and can be discussed even in a drawing room. A *chic* malady, a *chic* death. Go out like a snuffed candle, burning clearly to the end. How lucky I am! If one has to be sick let it be the heart. . . .

*Bright resolution:* After fifty years of brutal health will it not be interesting to be an invalid for a change? I who have never been ill in my life will now be an object of solicitude. Of course I won’t make the mistake of under-estimating my infirmity. If I have a rotten heart I won’t forget it—nor let anyone else. I’ll get all the sympathy that’s coming to me—and then some. I’ll exploit my heart. . . .

“There’s comfort even in calamity,” I concluded, as I fingered my fifth muffin. “Now let me take a gentle stroll to the cemetery and pick out a cosy corner. Or how about a cheerful saunter to the Crematorium?”

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Of course I “got the wind up” and instead of breaking off my exercise by degrees, I threw my dumb-bells out the window, burned my extensors, cursed physical culture and collapsed into inaction. And then the fun began.

Up to that time I had been physically unaware that I possessed a heart; now I seemed to be *all* heart. I could feel it tapping on my eyeballs and throbbing in my finger-tips. From head to foot I vibrated like a rickety flivver. For my heart, after being accustomed every day to make a prodigious effort, suddenly found itself ignored. With violent indignation it protested. The master muscle, after responding to

all my exigencies, was not going to be let down like that. It rebelled. It began to cut up like the very devil.

It was at night it enjoyed its greatest triumph. How I grew to dread the sleep time! You would, too, if you had the sensation of a coffin lid being battened down on you the moment you lay flat. Later on, it became a mere paving-stone that reposed on my chest, so that I had to take short, gasping breaths. If I dozed off my respiration became so rapid it woke me up again. Often I spent the night in a sitting position.

Then, if I did chance to sleep, there would come a swishy sound in my skull like a whirlwind in an attic. This would awaken me with a start of terror. Or else I would dream of nameless horrors that would rouse me with a heart beating like a wild thing. For months I expected to pop off in my sleep, and for a whole year I could not lie on my side.

But worst of all was the eternal *tock tock* under my pillow. It was as if I had put a large alarm clock there, a clock with a defective action. For hours I would listen to it; with every ten ticks or so it would falter and break, like a galloping horse that stumbles and recovers; only, in the pause that preceded recovery, it was as if that gee-gee had kicked me in the wind. I lay waiting for that interrupted action, dreading it.

And how often I felt as if I would never get warm again! Let me pile quilt on quilt, still I seemed to be immersed in chilly water. Despite three pairs of socks my feet would be freezing. I would awake with my arms dead to the shoulders. I got to look on my bed with the same joy a victim of the inquisition might have regarded a charming specimen of the rack.

Yes, my heart was taking its revenge, and even by day it allowed me no respite. After eating it became so fussy I became afraid to eat at all. Following a meal it would thump for hours. And wasn't I nervous! If you spoke to me suddenly I'd jump a foot; while the slam of a door shocked me as much as did during the war the bang of a Big Bertha. If I rose quickly from a stooping position I would get so dizzy I would have to clutch at something for support. Even blowing my nose made me giddy. And the look of me! My face was as yellow as a guinea, my eyes had the dull glaze of a dead fish, my neck was as scraggy as that of a plucked pullet.

So I crawled round wretchedly, made my will and resigned myself to fate. And thus passed the first year of my "athlete's heart," a year of martyrdom.

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However, this is no mere tale of woe. If I dwell on my miseries it is to show that in the end one may triumph despite the devil. For almost imperceptibly I began to be

aware that I was entering on a more cheerful stage. I was accepting my condition, even making a joke of it. Then one night I realised that the alarm clock under my pillow had become a chronometer. It did not keep me awake so much. Bit by bit it became attenuated to a tiny wrist-watch. Indeed sometimes I did not hear it at all. Yet there had been a moment when I was glad to sleep in a train so that the racket of the rails would dominate the infernal rumpus of my heart.

Other improvements too. Feet less icy. Could tie a shoe lace without getting giddy. That heart-thumping after meals had simmered down to a gentle flap. One after another the most distressing of my symptoms were vanishing. I just seemed to forget them; then suddenly remembering, behold they weren't there! Where now was that dragging sensation in my chest? What had become of that lancing pain from breastbone to armpit? No longer, as I read quietly at night, could I hear the roaring of the blood stream in my ears. Indeed, I had moments of exquisite tranquillity. As I carefully cultivated the sad, sweet smile of the cardiac, a Buddha-like calm pervaded me.

In this, my valetudinarian year, my pet hobby was the consultation of doctors. They all handed me out the same stuff—a local defect of the heart, hypertrophy, abnormally high blood pressure. Yet with care they said I might live longer than if I had nothing wrong with me. Paradoxically, if you would attain to old age you should acquire a fatal malady and devote yourself to its amelioration. So, trying to persuade myself that I was entertaining a blessing in disguise, I went about with a new interest in life.

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But if my weakness made a philosopher of me it also made me a social outcast. A man on a rigid diet does not relish being invited to dinner. To see happy people tucking away fancy food when your own life is one long Lent, is something of a sour note. Imagine the face of a head waiter, with pencil delicately poised, as, you order toast and spinach! And, the conviviality of the café! What a sad memory! No more *apéritifs*, cocktails, liqueurs. And where's the fun of sitting over a soft drink? Ah, how I regretted the old Bohemian days!

“Oh how I'd love to souse my throttle  
With rich red wine from a dusty bottle:  
Alas! my doctors says I oughter  
Drink only tea and Vichy water.”

Tobacco too! How comforting between spells of work the whiff of a Gold Flake or a Camel!



‘I’d love to puff a panatella  
With any other lusty fella;  
Alas! if I should chance to wish one:  
‘*Tabac’s* tabooed!’ shrieks my physician.”

So infinitely better, but still a crock, I spent the second year of my cardiac career. Although it was relenting, my heart continued to hold the centre of the stage. Always I was waiting, watching, wondering what the little devil would do next. The least worry gave me a setback and its stutter persisted. It was not until the third year of my heart experience that I achieved a return to normal, and this I owe to the magical springs of Royat in Auvergne.

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Oh, that I could chant a paean of praise to that peerless thermal station whose waters are the nearest thing to the fountain of eternal youth! Indeed the air of that little valley is so charged with their virtue that the natives of Royat are said to be the longest lived in all France. Yet, it is a place of quiet. If it were as well known as it ought to be its avalanche of visitors would appal us regulars, who come like faithful pilgrims year after year.

Above the door of the bath-house should be written: *Abound in hope all ye who enter here*. For as surely as you pass that portal you are going to emerge fitter and better. Of course it will not do the impossible. If your arteries are like pipe-stems it cannot soften them again; but it will defend you against the result of hard arteries. If you have a real malady of the heart you will get relief; if you have a false one it will vanish. Above all, if you have high blood pressure, down, down it will go till once again you know the joy of security and calm.

But let me relate my own experience. I arrived there sceptical and discouraged. I was neurasthenic. My heart action was depressingly irregular. I had little hope of beneficent results, yet from the first I felt better. The air was so tonic in its purity, the surroundings of such loveliness. The valley abounds in wooded walks, while at its head Puy-de-Dôme dominates a region of wild beauty.

Heart specialists are plentiful in Royat, but I had the luck to choose a good one. A little, round, rosy Professor of Clermont University, he fairly radiated hope and cheer. For five minutes he hovered gravely over me. . . . How long they seemed! . . . What would the verdict be? . . .

Suddenly he said with a cherubic smile: “The motor is sound. There is no lesion. By some great effort you have strained your heart. It is dilated and the rhythm is affected. Also it is nervous and fatigued. Now, *I am going to cure you*. With the

waters of Royat alone, I will restore your heart to normal size. After half a dozen baths that hesitation will disappear never to return. Your blood pressure is two hundred and twenty. I will lower it to a hundred and fifty. This I definitely promise you.”

“Go ahead, Professor,” I said with infinite relief. “I’ll do my damndest to back you up.”

Feeling enormously bucked I presented myself for my first treatment. The bath was of the Roman type, about three feet deep and abrim with what looked like tepid coffee. As I slid into it my heart gave a surprised bound, then settled down to throb slowly, steadily. Lying there with the running water rippling around me I had an amazing sense of happy arteries. The water was rusty in colour, because to temper it to the tyro it had lain all night in a tank; yet I had an immediate sense of its potency. So blissfully I floated till the clock warned me that my ten minutes were up. As I stepped out of the chocolate water I was a rich, rose colour.

From the bath one must hurry to bed and remain there an hour; and in all this record of voluptuous experience that hour is most to be cherished. As I lay under the blankets my body seemed to purr, and every touch of the sheets was like a caress. Happiness flooded me, so that each vein seemed lyrical. I was like a careless god, high floating on ecstatic clouds. Bliss pervaded me till the sounds of life, like music, became fainter and more faint. So in delicious languor I drifted off on a golden sea of sleep.

And after five days that two-year falter of my pulse disappeared and has never returned; while my blood pressure dropped so rapidly my doctor kept me in those same emasculated baths instead of promoting me to more virile ones. However, I backed him up with religious fervour. Especially in diet. After a ten-mile tramp in the woods it is difficult to refuse dainties that would tempt an epicure. But haughtily I waved away the *velouté de volaille* and the *soufflé à la mandarine*. “Bring me,” I said sternly, “the steamed potatoes and the stewed prunes.”

I had conceived my cure in terms of rest, but to my surprise the doctor told me to walk, walk, walk. “At least fifteen kilometres a day,” he said. “Circulate your blood. March till you’re tired, but not too tired. As long as you don’t get out of breath exercise all you can.”

So from after lunch until nightfall I roamed the high hills, and it was then I became conscious of a magical change in myself. I can only call it a *renaissance*. I seemed to live entirely in the moment, and that moment was of such sunny serenity that merely to be alive was the height of happiness. I gloried in the instant, so that every breath was ecstasy. I thrilled with the joy of nature, the hope of spring. Never

was sunshine so smiling, sky so bright. Rapture can only express my mood. My gaze rested in rapture on the beauty of the world about me. Every leaf and blade was radiant, the birds mad with glee. Yet beneath all this shimmer of joy was a profound peace and thankfulness.

Soon my probationary baths of water prostituted in the tank were over, and I was promoted to the virgin spring. Here in all its virtue the water comes right from its source. It is clear as cut glass, sparkling as champagne. As it is released it chuckles joyously. And now for the first time you can appreciate the *aesthetic* quality of the bath. For as you lie in that limpid clarity your body seems strangely beautified. It is like a statue of white marble. Then suddenly you see tiny bubbles clinging to it. Lie very still so as not to disturb them. . . . See how they spread, this army of bubbles camped on the hills and valleys of your frame. Look how they are entrenched in the hollows and fortified on the heights. Do not disturb them, for in their tenacity lies the virtue of the bath.

Watch how they gather in mass and strength, emanating out of nothing. Now they cluster so thickly that your skin begins to have a corrugated aspect. You glance at the minatory hand of the clock, for only ten minutes are allowed you. But it is so delectable, this milky warm limpidity welling up from the bowels of the earth that you take twelve minutes. In your ears the bubbles break like tiny bells. . . . Your body floats ethereally. . . . It dissolves in ineffable serenities. . . . You have no body. You are all spirit. . . . Nirvana! Oh, to prolong this bliss forever! You rouse with a start.

No, your body is still there; but Oh, marvel! It is sheathed in silver. You are a statue of silver in a crystal casket. So thickly clustered are the shiny beads there is no sign of flesh at all. From head to foot you are brocaded with pearls. . . . How sad to destroy this beautiful thing you have become! To scatter those myriads of fragile globes, each cupping your arteries to eager action! But the clock hand points reproachfully, and already you are faint. As you step out of the bath the statue of silver becomes one of coral.

Yet there is a spring of even greater potency, and if you advance to this you are proud indeed. Here the bubbles are as big as hazel nuts, the seed pearls are oriental ones. Like flagellants they whip you, till the after lassitude becomes positive fatigue. After their pummelling heartiness how good it seems to sink into bed! As the sheets caress you like carded silk, what a sublimation of comfort! You feel like an instrument perfectly tuned. You listen to the symphony of happy arteries. You hear the harmony of health. . . . Then tranquilly you drift away on an elysian sea. . . . Golden unconsciousness, with awakening to the laughter of a joyous world.

I dwell on this experience because after the first season I never quite recaptured

it. Never again did I feel so exalted as in those first weeks of regeneration, when to breathe and to be was to envy not the gods. I could have rested for hours, silent as a stone, content with merely existing. I could not read because even the most banal words suggested a wealth of images that dazzled me. Then an eager energy spurred me on, and I walked the high hills of Royat with my head in the clouds.

And you too, my friend of fifty, may have a similar experience. If your heart is flabby or your arteries beginning to crackle Royat will do you more good than a dozen doctors. Towards the end of their cure you hear people say: "I feel ten years younger." And you in your turn will say the same. As I bade him good-bye my little doctor beamed with joy. My heart and blood pressure were normal again. Physically and morally I was a new man. "My friend," he told me, "if you only look after yourself as you ought to do there's no reason why you shouldn't turn the century."

## *Chapter Twenty*

### THE BOLSTER

Royat is a charming village, caught red-roofed in the cleft of the hills. The eager pines run down to its doorstep. The green valley goes up and up, and precisely at its head the Puy-de-Dôme goes up and up. It is like an arrowhead, pointing prodigiously at the sky. It draws the eye like a magnet, calling for wonder and admiration, as becomes a proud peak in isolated majesty. A motor road corkscrews round it to the Roman temple at its summit, and from its base you can see black cars climbing it like fleas on the hump of a camel.

On a clear day it was a challenge I rarely refused. But I climbed it by a precipitous path, with breathing spaces on bluffs of windy dizziness. The horizon widened to vastness; the valley diminished to a checkerboard of moor and forest. Here so close to the teeming town it was as savagely primitive as at the beginning of time. The crash of the tusked boar broke the silence of the piney crepuscule, and the bronze-green heaths were scarred only by solitary sheep-tracks.

What a contrast between the rugged background of Royat and the glittering opulence of its hotels! It was in the lounge of mine one evening I saw a tall old fellow dallying with a young lady of no uncertain charm. I envied him his companion who seemed to be a guide to the beauties of Auvergne. There are such, and if a traveller is lonely he can avail himself of their services. This elderly fellow was evidently of such a mind and I was approving his choice when suddenly I recognised him—Sir Pelham Pelham. He had changed little since our last meeting and greeted me with gusto. He wanted me to have a drink but I excused myself.

“A cocktail,” said I, “is poison to me at this time. But what about that feminine cocktail you are entertaining?” “My grand-niece,” he said with dignity, and as she disappeared soon after I had no opportunity of verifying the relationship.

Next morning in the park of the Thermal I met him sitting in the sun handling an exquisite little volume of Montaigne. “It was given me,” he said, “by Claribel, Countess of Camlachie. A remarkable woman, both as author and explorer. Beautiful too. We first met in the gargling grotto over there. You see, to gargle

properly is an art. We were gargling in adjoining booths and she very kindly told me I was doing it badly. She said I reminded her horribly of a drowning man. One can gargle gracefully and she became my professor. She was indeed the most musical gargler I have ever heard, and soon we were performing duets together, she soprano and I baritone. I never made love to a more delightful woman."

"Do you generally make love to them?" I asked. And he answered proudly: "It is my privilege as a great-grandfather to make love to every pretty woman."

"No doubt they feel they're safe with you," I said. But Sir Pelham stiffened. "Because I happen to have a great-grandchild don't think I am not capable of having a child," he said icily.

I regarded him enviously. His face had a rosy hardness, his eyes were bird bright. He was smoking a black cheroot, while even a mild cigarette was forbidden to me. "You're a better man than I am," I admitted. "How do you do it?"

"Chiefly by not following doctors' advice. For instance, at meals we have two menus, one regular and one *régime*. My doctor says *régime*, my appetite says regular, so I please each by eating both."

Marvellous man! How anyone in the seventies could dine heartily on salmon, roast duck and apple dumpling and get away with it was beyond me. I looked at him pensively. "I suppose you've been a bit of a love pirate," I ventured.

"I have not been without experiences and the name of the Countess of Camlachie reminds me of one. If it will not weary you I will relate it."

I expressed my eagerness so, frowning reminiscently, Sir Pelham began.

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It was in the first year of the war and I was acting as Town Major. I was returning to my post after a forty-eight hours leave, when a burst tyre compelled me to stop at the little village of Puceville-sur-Somme. At a pinch I could have repaired the damage, but the hostess of the local *estaminet* was a most charming creature. So I telephoned in that I had broken down and would be detained for a few hours. Then I inquired of the pleasing *patronne* if I might have a room for the night.

"Alas, *mon Colonel*," she told me, "the only available one has but a moment ago been retained. A very grand English lady, the Countess Camlachie, has reserved it. It is so unfortunate. Monsieur is but a few minutes too late."

"It does not matter, Madame," I said. "I would have ceded it to the Countess in any case."

"Monsieur is gallant. And does Monsieur know her?"

"No, but I admire her immensely. She could have my room if I had to sleep in a ditch."

"That would be too bad. Rather than permit that, Madame, if she is as nice as you say, might allow you to share her room in which there are two beds."

"I dare not hope for such a privilege," I said. "Besides, the Countess of the highest virtue."

"Ah, it is sad, is it not?" my hostess said smiling. "To be so beautiful and also so virtuous. But it sometimes happens and there is nothing to do about it."

She was such a rosy, dimpling creature that I said: "And what about *your* room? Are there not also two beds in that?"

"Alas! no, Monsieur. Only the one I bought with my late lamented husband when we were first married. How sad for me! Six weeks of wedded happiness had I when he was taken away."

"How long have you been a widow, Madame?" I asked sympathetically, and she answered: "Two years. Ah! it seems so long. . . . But do not let Monsieur worry about accommodation. I will try to arrange."

She was a jolly little widow if ever was, and I was so agreeably impressed with her that I begged her to have a glass of champagne with me. I had seen nothing of the Countess, but a glimpse of a figure in motoring costume going hurriedly to her room. She had dined there and was doubtless now sleeping soundly. "Well, Madame, where are you going to put me?" I asked my charming hostess.

"If you do not mind taking *my* room, Monsieur. It is plain but comfortable, and the bed is very soft."

"I could not think of that. For what about you, Madame?"

"Oh, I will sleep on the divan in the salon. It is not the first time. I will be quite well."

"I will never permit it, Madame. It is I who will take the divan and you will keep your room."

"Ah no, Monsieur. You do not know what you say. The divan is short and you are long. You would not be at all well."

"Before we go any further," I said, "let's see the divan."

An inspection of it did not arouse my enthusiasm. It was one of those French sofas that are made for a race of dwarfs. It was covered with crimson plush, and if the tyre that held me up had only been so resistant I might well have reached my destination. The more I looked at it the less I liked it.

"There, Monsieur, you see how it would be impossible for you. And now come and I will show you my room."

As she insisted I accompanied her. The bed was unusually large and looked voluptuously comfortable. When I thought of that dumpy little sofa I felt depressed.

The bed was covered with a swansdown quilt and there were two big feather pillows reposing on a long bolster. "If you do not mind, Monsieur," she said, "I will take the quilt and one of the pillows. With these I will be quite comfortable on the divan."

"No, Madame," I said firmly. "It is I who will take the pillow and the quilt. I, too, will be quite comfortable on the divan."

"No, allow me, Monsieur."

"No, permit me, Madame."

We struggled amiably for possession of the two, and laughing and breathless a little, she seemed more and more charming. Finally I got the pillow and she retained the quilt and we both made a bolt for the door. We seemed to get jammed in the doorway, however, and there the polite squabble was resumed.

"No, I cannot permit it, Madame."

"But I insist, Monsieur."

How long we would have argued I know not, when there came a warning rap from the door of the Countess. "*Voilà!*" said my hostess. "We are disturbing the slumbers of Madame. We must be quiet." Then she went on in a whisper. "Oh, it is all so stupid, this discussion."

"It is," I agreed, "when it might be settled so easily." Then I looked back at the bed and an idea came to me. "By Jove! I have a solution. . . . The bed is big. We will lay the bolster down the middle, dividing it into two. You will take one half, I the other. It is all so simple."

"I do not know if it is so simple," she demurred. "From the way you talk one would think the bolster was a solid wall."

"As far as I am concerned it shall be," I assured her. "Frail barrier of feathers though it is, it shall be as obstructive as bars of iron. You on your side shall sleep as safely as if I were a hundred miles away."

She seemed doubtful, yet the idea seemed to intrigue her. We re-entered the room and thoughtfully she looked at the big bed. Taking the long bolster I laid it down the middle and placed the two pillows at the end of each section. "There!" said I. "Be not afraid. Believe me, as we lie each on our side, there is between us, not a flimsy bolster, but a wall of adamant."

"I hope so," she said sternly. "I am a woman of chastity."

"And I am a man of honour."

"If I was only sure I could trust you."

"You can, Madame. I will respect your lofty ideals."

"And you will not try to cross the bolster?"



"I swear it."

"You will not move it?"

"I take my oath I will not."

"You will not reach over it . . . or under it?"

"May I be forever accursed if I do."

She studied the bolster carefully, then finally she decided. "Well, I trust you. But I warn you if you forget yourself for a single moment you will be sorry, for I am a virtuous woman."

"You will be even more virtuous tomorrow morning," I said, "for your virtue will have been proved. And I, I give you my word of honour as a soldier I will not disturb or try to pass this barrier we have put between us."

"Not as a soldier. Give me your word of honour as a gentleman," she preferred.

"As an English gentleman I will give you my word of honour not to cross the bolster either in whole or in part. I further promise not to disturb its position in any way. Indeed I undertake not to touch it at all. It shall be as a screen of fire between us."

And indeed I meant every word of it, for the chastity of the dear creature made every appeal to my better feelings. As an English gentleman I should respect her as—as if she were my grandmother.

Well, she seemed satisfied at last. "I will leave you to retire," she said, "and in a quarter of an hour I will return in the darkness and take my own place. But bear in mind—it is as if we were in different rooms. You must not even speak, or betray your presence. Remember, I trust absolutely in your word of honour."

"I have never yet broken it," I said solemnly. "You may sleep the sleep of a child."

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Sir Pelham paused. Puffing his little black cigar he seemed to sink into pleasant reverie. After an interval unreasonably long I ventured to say: "Did you keep your word?"

"I did," said Sir Pelham proudly. "I let her slip softly into the room in the dark. I heard her creep into her portion of the bed. We both slept profoundly."

"You deserve the Victoria Cross. You are a wonder."

"No, I am a man of honour. I had passed my word I would not cross the bolster, and I would have cut off my right hand rather than do so."

"Then nothing happened," I said, rather disappointed.

"Ah! I did not say that," said Sir Pelham pensively.

"Ha! then for once you broke your word of honour. You proved yourself human."

You crossed the bolster.”

“I did not break my word of honour,” answered Sir Pelham sternly. “I did not cross the bolster.” Then he added very softly: “*She did*. . . . Perhaps I shouldn’t have given the dear little woman away,” he went on. “But till now I haven’t breathed the matter to a soul, and it’s all of fifteen years away. She married shortly after, and has a family of five. . . . Yes, it was she who capitulated, but at least I saved her pride. For I happened to see her not a month ago and I said to her as I paid my bill: ‘I’m afraid, dear Madame, you will regard me as a man who once broke his word of honour as a gentleman.’”

She is fat now, but she can still dimple divinely, and she answered with a blush: “Ah! my dear Monsieur, if you had not broken your word of honour as a gentleman, you would have been no gentleman.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

### RIVIERA RAPTURE

What a lovely land France would be if it were not for twenty million Frenchmen! One of them bought the building I lived in and sought to sell me my proud apartment. The price was two hundred thousand francs; today it would fetch ten times that. Not being a prophet, however, I turned the profit down. For even Paris may pall after fifteen years; and though I knew it like the inside of my pocket I did not want to be a boulevard barnacle. A few visits to the Riviera had convinced me that *there* was the earthly paradise. California may run it close; but for lovely, irresponsible living give me the Riviera.

So south we went with happy hearts, and I took an apartment in the rue Dante in Nice. Despite its poetical name it had a slummy suggestion; for it was a working-class quarter and the house was old. The rooms had high ceilings painted after the beautiful Italian fashion. What joy to live under such lovely ceilings! We had seven rooms, but . . . no bathroom. The rent came to two hundred dollars a year and we paid our maid ten dollars a month. Indeed, with the popular market at our door life was idiotically cheap. No matter how lavishly we spent we could not help saving money—a very sad state of affairs. However, there were people we could help and that consoled us for our budgetary surplus.

I loved my neat bedroom for I made of it a combined den, library and workroom. My books lined the wall, while above them hung my collection of guitars. In a corner was my roll-top desk, a typewriter and easy chair. Best of all, I had the most wonderful bed, an old-fashioned four-poster, covered with gay chintz, with beautifully carved woodwork. I had special mattresses made for it and wedge-shaped cushions that tilted it up, so that it was like a trough. Instead of supporting a quarter of my body it sustained one half. As I advanced in life I decided my bed was my best friend, and all money spent on it was wisely spent. I relaxed in it with a sigh of content, never ceasing to be grateful for its comfort. I have now enjoyed it for twenty-five years and cheerfully hope to die in it.

Our apartment was on the second floor, and the view of the street with its

scrabble of sordid humanity was always interesting. A block away was the sea where I bathed every day till the water got too cold. I usually kept up my bathing till the end of October—longer than anyone else. When the sea was rough, the waves rose like the wall of a house and crashed down on the shingle with a thunderous roar. One had to swim just beyond the wave break, for to be caught in that cataract of foam was to be stunned and half-drowned.

One day, while walking on the promenade, I saw a black figure pitched on to the shingle. The next wave washed it out and I did a lightning sprint to the beach. Plunging in I grabbed it just as it was being carried into deep water. I hung on and a huge breaker crashed us up on the cobbles. Resisting the back surge I let the next comber wash us to safety.

It was a poor devil of an Italian youth with a *chagrin d'amour* who had tried to end his life. He nearly succeeded, for it was hours before he regained consciousness. I had saved him from suicide, but I got no kick out of it. Indeed, he claimed that having yanked him back into existence I was responsible for his future, and he sought sustenance from me. Perhaps he was right. Having restored him to the misery of life it was up to me to alleviate it. However, confronted with a severe cold and a ruined suit I hardened my heart.

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That first winter in Nice was delightful. While my family worked hard to make home habitable I gave them my moral support. As I played my guitar and watch the passing throng, I felt little moved to tackle my typewriter. My poor Remington! Sometimes it would be merry for a month, then lapse into disuse, saying, no doubt: "That lazy devil! Neglecting me for his idle strumming. Thinks he can sing, the silly mutt; making cheap melodies and putting idiotic words to them. He's just as phoney at that as he is at everything else. His job with me is the only one he *can* do; yet he fritters away his time in futilities, when he might be making my keys tap out Eternal Truth. . . ." Well, let my typewriter reproach me. What did I care? I was having a grand time. Nice was charming and I was adapting myself to its graces with enthusiasm.

I discovered that a town is more deliciously livable in than a city, and of all French towns mine was, to my mind, tops. In place of winter gloom I found sunshine, flowers, gaiety. The people were as joyous as their abode. Here were no tedious hours wasted in taxis and the Metro. The Opera, the Casino, the Cinemas were right at our door. In this Home of Carnival I delighted to think of the happy years before me, and again I recaptured that "too good to be true" feeling. I lived each day as ardently as if I were reborn to rapture and joy. Again my heart sang to

the *Harps of Heaven*.

But again I heard the call of Dream Haven and, after the excitement of the Carnival and the various battles of flowers, we set off for Brittany. We had a new car, a De-Dion that was a thing of beauty. I hated to sell the Sigma, but it was now too small for us. As with sad heart I watched a stranger drive it away, it seemed to reproach me: "After so many years of gallant service you discard me. We have lived and worked so happily together, and now . . ." Silly sentimentalist! Yet I have always felt like this about giving up things that have served me well. Even old shoes can move me to tearful regret. Well, all life's like that—loving and leaving; and the last leaving of all will in its sadness be the measure of our love. . . .

The motor trip across France took us five days and we made it twice a year for twenty years. During this time we had three cars—a De-Dion, a Renault and a Lancia, and we changed our route many times. In this way we got to know much of France that the tourist never sees, and we loved the by-ways more than the highways. It was always an adventure, but for a nervous chap like me, something of a strain; and the joy of arriving at my destination gave me a sense of achievement quite out of proportion to my deserts. After all, I was an oldish fellow with a natural loathing of machinery, and haunted by the horror of a breakdown. I was a pusillanimous driver who should have been arrested for *slow driving*, for I was rather a nuisance as I crawled along at forty kilometres an hour. Cravenly careful, I painted my Renault a sealing-wax red, so that its accentuated visibility might suggest danger and prevent others crashing into me. However, in a million miles of driving I never had an accident.

Back to dear old Dream Haven and its rapturous routine. Blessed days in bathing trunks, letting wind and wave work their will with me. Swims before breakfast, sand striding days, the canoe and the motor bike. All that Brittany can give to please and enchant was mine, but in the midst of it I buckled down to work. For the old urge was riding me again; the grey goose quill was itching to my hand. So once more I pushed life away and concentrated on the job. But this time my self obliteration was not so complete; for I had determined to do the book on health I had long contemplated, and it did not take me out of myself as a work of imagination would. I was even able to link my writing to living, so that all went swimmingly.

But this time my book was no clarion call to cultivate physical fitness; it was a warning to men of middle age to soft pedal on the strenuous stuff. Still suffering from an athlete's heart I aimed to prevent other fools of fifty from acquiring one. My book was to present myself as a painful example of vanity and ignorance. Nevertheless, I was enthusiastic in my worship of health, and determined to be an apostle of radiant

well-being. Crank though I might be I was on the side of the angels.

I called my book: *Why Not Grow Young?* and it is the only one I will mention by name in these pages, for it is dear to my heart. The others do not matter much, but to me this one does; for I wrote it, not for gain nor glory, but to do good. I read a hundred books to post me, and I filled it with quips. I wrote it in one adorable summer of dream-drugged mornings, when I sprawled half-naked on the sand and looked with rapture at the lazy, laughing sea. I remember I got sun-stroke working without a hat and had to lay off for two weeks. During that time a motor hummed in my head and I could not even think of thinking. Neither could I sleep for that infernal buzzing in my brain, and spent the night pacing the garden in distracted impotence. I also had strange spells of loss of identity, in which I could not remember my own name. It amused me a lot as I struggled to think of who I was and how much money I had in the bank. For a Scotsman the last was a radical test of amnesia.

Turning to the preface of this book I read: "Having already produced a dozen volumes of virile verse and frenzied fiction, I can honestly declare I have never had the egotism to re-read one of my own books. I hope I shall make an exception of this one, however, for if the reading of it will do me as much good as the writing has done, I will not have wasted my time." . . . Well, I have re-read it and have found it as fresh and stimulating as when I wrote it. Indeed, I doubt today if I could do a job so well. It is written with gusto and voltage, and if it lacks wisdom it has plenty of wise-cracks. It was daring of me to write it, for I was invading the field of the medical man, but I always told people: "If Nature can't cure you doctors won't." My book was a plea for simplicity and self-help. It was based on moderation, clean living and common sense. Its sub-title was "Living for Longevity," and it advocated the planned perpetuation of existence. Some day I propose to write a book called *Ninety Not Out* in which I will describe my conflict with the calendar and my triumph over time.

In any case my book was a joy to write, and I hoped it would do a lot of people a lot of good. Alas! it had only a sorry sale, and for the first time I confessed to failure. It was the old trouble. Once a man gets tagged for doing a certain type of work the public are loath to accept anything else from him. From Yukon ballads to health homilies was too rude a break even for my most devoted fans and my book fell flat. The publishers grumbled, the public recoiled. Yet a few people praised it, and my good friend H. G. Wells told me he practiced the special exercises I gave for middle-aged fitness. His kindness consoled me, but very few would take me on trust. To be serious is to be a bore. I am afraid I imposed on the patience of my audience, yet my intention was good. Of course I know it ill becomes an author to

praise his own work, and I am guilty of this for the first time. But after twenty-five years I can look at it impersonally and I say again: "Yon's a brave wee book."

If my first winter in Nice was spent in adapting myself to the amenities of the town, my second was occupied in exploring the hinterland. Here I was able to satisfy nobly my pedestrian passion. These high hills and deep glens never had a more ecstatic votary. Again I was the solitary foot-slogger of the lonely roads, with the snowy Alps hovering approvingly over me and the verdurous valleys inviting me. I was friend to all that scenic splendour and it seemed to me I was its only worshipper. For in my roamings I rarely met a soul, and never a fellow tramp. This country seemed to belong to me and displayed its beauty for my pleasing.

Every day I had a tryst with Nature, starting off in the early morning and returning when the city lights called me home. Eating my lunch by the wayside I laughed with joy. Often I wondered if I were not half "loony" to get such a kick out of living, forgetful that it was Nature laughing in me and expressing through me her beatitudes. Never was I so much one with Her, and to be blissfully alone with only rocks, trees and a rippling stream for company, gave me an inexpressible joy. Perhaps I am foolish to flatter myself that there was something unusual in me as regards this love of loneliness and my passionate joy in Nature. There must be others but I do not think they are many. It was the Thoreau in me, and if I had not been a family man I would assuredly have been a hermit in the high hills.

In the sparkling mornings I would take a bus to some mountain village perched over the dizzy vastitude and walk downhill to the sea. All the way that glorious panorama held my eyes; I knew rapture, I heard the *Harps of Heaven*. I thought nothing of a forty-kilometre hike. Every day I had a new itinerary and never seemed to exhaust my promenades. Even when I was footsore I would plod patiently on, my mind full of sweet imaginings though my body was weary. I knew that whatever the distance I could rely on my reserve power, and that my loyal legs would take me gallantly home to toast and tea.

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One day on the Promenade des Anglais I encountered a journalist from Paris, and in the course of a pleasant chat I asked him what had become of Peter. "The old devil hasn't contacted me for ages," I said. "I hope he's still in the land of the living."

"Very much so. Haven't you heard? His wife came into a hundred thousand pounds and they have a villa in Vence. He's no end of a swell now, with a Rolls and a chauffeur, and about a dozen other domestics. Go and visit him."

I said I would, but it was hard to imagine him like that. I still saw him as the shabby Bohemian on the terrace of the Dôme with his *Picon citron* and his *Caporal*

cigarettes, wistfully wondering where he could borrow a hundred francs till his next cheque came along. Now bloated with unearned dough he was throwing his weight around among the mondanites of the Riviera. No, I couldn't see Peter like that, so I sought him out. I had no difficulty in finding his villa for I had often passed it on my walks, never suspecting who lived there. I was almost intimidated by its grandeur and wondered if he would be as pompous as his domain.

With some trepidation I passed two gardeners on the drive and rang the bell. A trim maid told me that Monsieur was resting but that Madame would receive me. Indeed she came rushing to the door, as pleased as she was surprised. "Hush!" said she. "He's sleeping and must not be disturbed. You know, he's had two major operations and is far from being the man you knew. I'm afraid you'll have a shock when you see him. I will waken him in a little and break the news you are here."

In the meantime she showed me round the house, which was richly garnished. I admired his modern pictures, his Persian rugs, his Oriental bric-a-brac. The set-up impressed me, yet I did not envy him all this grandeur. I thought thankfully of my cosy comfort. Then Mrs. Peter said suddenly and with a certain bitterness: "Come and see *my* room." It was in the basement, giving on the garden, and was furnished chiefly with a sewing machine. "Here," she said, "I make all my own dresses. Here I'm quite happy. I ask nothing more. You can have the rest."

I understood, and was relieved I could soft pedal on my admiration of the house. Then we opened the door of a small room and there lay Peter asleep. I was really shocked, for his hair was snowy white, and though he was little more than sixty he looked like an old man of eighty. Mrs. Peter whispered: "Here's someone you'll be glad to see." He roused, stared, gasped and I thought he was going to faint. "Weel, Rubbert," he said, "I took ye for a ghost."

"Oh, I'm not dead yet," I told him, "but I might as well be for all you've fashed your head about me. You had my address. Why did you never send me a line?" To tell the truth I was equally to blame, but I thought I had better reproach him before he got a chance to reproach me. He took it like a lamb, looking ashamed and saying: "Well, I've been so under the weather I've got out of touch with my pals."

So we yarned of old times and old friends, many gone to their last home. I tried to cheer him up and I think I succeeded, for over a beautifully served tea Mrs. Peter looked at me gratefully. "You must come often," she begged. They wanted their chauffeur to drive me home but I laughed at the idea. "Thanks," I said, "I have my legs and they're itching to hit the trail. I need a two-hour tramp and that's what's the matter with me. So long, folks, be seeing you soon." They couldn't understand that anyone would want to walk when the finest car in the world was at their disposal. To



prefer to plod in the dust when I could sweep regally in a Rolls—how few *could* understand that? Yet today I am the same and shrink if anyone offers me a drive.

From then on I saw a lot of Peter, and we resumed our friendship. Once a week I would walk up to Vence for tea. Peter neither drank nor ate on those occasions. He would bring out a gold cigarette case and offer it around but his enjoyment of tobacco was vicarious. He also offered me a rare wine, but would not touch it. An empty shell of his former self he seemed tired of living, though he carried on manfully and his brain was keen.

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One day when I was exercising on the lawn at Dream Haven who should come hobbling across the tennis court but Peter? He was making a tour of Brittany, and I think the high light in it was this surprise visit to me. A humpy, bow-legged old man with snowy hair, white eyebrows and blue eyes, he stood there chuckling over my amazement. But when he saw the old canoe he looked sad. “Rubbert,” he said, “ye mind yon day when we ran before the storm, out yonder abin the island? Ah! that was a grand day.”

“Yes,” I said. “If it hadn’t been for your masterly handling of the craft we might have been crab-meat.” And he chuckled: “Aye, aye, it takes an old Clutha yachtsman to weather a gale like that.” In truth the sea had been a bit choppy and he had done no more than I could have done, but I was pleased to humour him. So he wandered around the place, renewing old memories which seemed dear to him. He had spent many happy months there and in the local taverns he was popular with man and maid. He loved that, too, for every afternoon he would disappear and return looking lit up.

But that was over now—no drinking, no smoking, no delicious food. Life was very dreary, and he was just a sick, unhappy old man. Rich, yes, but as he observed bitterly: “Money’s one of the meanest things on earth.” The villagers crowded round his car, their eyes agog with admiration: while his chauffeur with the gorgeous uniform fended off the local curs that tried to piddle on the tyres. But Peter got no kick from his glory. With a sick stomach and a conky heart he knew his days were numbered: so suddenly feeling tired he drove back to his hotel and went to bed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### THRILLER MILLER

I will always think of Peter as the friend I liked best; but there was another I made that winter in Nice who was also dear. One day on the promenade someone said to me: "I want you to meet Byron Binns, the old music hall star, and incidentally your *double*."

This was only remotely true. As Peter had a distant resemblance to Lloyd George, so Byron faintly suggested myself. We both sported monocles, were about the same height, had ruddy faces of an open type and greyish hair. But there the likeness ended, and I never could understand why unknown females should bow graciously to me. It annoyed me because I was slim where he was stocky, I was prim while he was cocky. He loved society while I shied away from it. He was lethargic while I was all vitality. Although ten years my junior he seemed that much older than I.

But it was sartorially we differed most. My friends dressed well. Peter was natty, Byron was dapper, while I was decidedly sloppy. Byron always looked as if he had stepped out of a band-box, pinned at the four corners. He had everything that went with an eyeglass, and he resented my Bohemian abandon. I had a well fringed sports jacket he called Whiskers. He even trimmed it off a bit in an effort to make it less disreputable, and when we were going anywhere he would say: "Please don't wear Whiskers."

Mentally our differences were even more marked. He was mystical while I was material. A fanatical Christian Scientist he often tried to convert me. His smug assurance made me angry and several times we parted in wrath. Indeed, though outwardly people confused us, inwardly we were miles apart. Yet we were the greatest of friends, because he was the most versatile man I ever knew. Please let me give a brief outline of his history. . . .

Uncle Byron "broke wind" at breakfast, and Byron, the boy after whom he was called, hated him for it. Uncle Byron knew this and persisted till Byron, pale with rage, took his ham and eggs to another table. His mother sympathised with him, but

his father roared with laughter. He had never heard his mother speak to his father. She had, I think, found he was having an affair with a mill girl and could not forgive him. His father was a mill worker and they lived in Wigan.

As a young man the stage attracted him and he joined a minstrel group on the sands. Then he wangled an opening in a small music hall where he promptly “got the bird.” For a time his life was one of vicissitude, but he could not give up. For him it was the footlights or the gutter. He sang to the queues outside the theatres and got small fees in music halls. Then came an opening in a Manchester hall, and sudden splendid success. Almost over night he became a head-liner.

I had seen him once on the stage of the Tivoli. He came on, impeccably dressed in tails, with cane, topper and monocle, and gave a “silly ass” act. He was the first of the monologists and the greatest. He improvised his patter as he went along. He started a topic, became diverted to another, and finally—between monocle, hat, cane and talk—he was ludicrously tangled. To follow on, he sang a song of his own writing and composing; then finished with a recitation also written by himself. In short, a born entertainer.

When I knew him he had given up the stage for years. He “chucked” it right in the height of his success. With a snap of his fingers he told the producers of a big *revue* to go to the devil. He wanted no leading part, no big money. Fame, fortune, the footlights—to hell with all that. He was through—and for good. All he desired was obscurity and peace.

And the cause was a woman, his wife. She was French, but they couldn’t hit it off somehow. I do not altogether blame her, for he was finicky and egotistical; but she might have been more understanding. Perhaps if he had cared for her less she would have cared for him more. Anyway, they scrapped continually and he was the most miserable of men. He would leave the stage with its applause ringing in his ears, to plunge blindly through the puddles of the rainy night, careless of all but the ache at his heart.

Such the romance of my good friend as I knew him in retirement. He revealed himself to me with *naïvete*. Hundreds of times we walked the promenade, with Byron talking to beat the band. Carried away by his own verbosity he would stop and go into a song or a dance. In his time he had written and composed over a hundred songs, many of which became popular. He would write a song in a night—words and music—and sing it next day. He made big money from the sale of his songs and from his gramophone records, but today they are forgotten. Only of his recitations is there any record. One of these was quoted by Kipling and recited by Charles Laughton. He published two books of a humorous character, which were

fairly successful, yet today few remember his name.

Through Byron I got to know a number of well-known people. There was Rex Ingram, one of the most decorative men I ever met. He, too, had a profuse talent, writing books, sculpturing, directing pictures; a connoisseur of art and a specialist in the culture of Arabia. But he, too, seemed to have a philosophical indifference to fame. Writer, sculptor, actor, he had an imperious quality that made it difficult to bear patiently with vulgarians.

One day Byron halted me in front of a burly, bearded man. He was always forcing introductions on me, and I groaned, wondering who this imitation of a Corsican bandit could be, when he said jovially: "Why, if it isn't George Robey!" Having recited my stuff George seemed glad to meet me. He told me salty stories which I afterwards retailed with success. In fact, to this day when I tell a smoking-room yarn I often say: "Here's one of George Robey's," and it goes over with an extra wallop.

I like George in spite of his beard; but he had to grow it for they were making a picture of *Don Quixote* and he was playing Sancho Panza. The picture was a poor one in which he failed to be funny. They said that Chaliapin, who played the Don, was always falling off his horse (due to a dizziness not altogether caused by the altitude) and if they had shown this in the picture it might have been more amusing than the efforts of George with his donkey. How he loved that donkey! He spoke of it with enthusiasm, and as the picture was finished his feelings were divided between joy at losing his beard and regret at parting with his ass. An abstemious man, unlike many of his profession, he took good care of his health and today is carrying on, as hale and hearty as ever.

Another actor I knew was Laddie Cliff. One night in the Casino he sang my song *Lipstick Liz* to the consternation of the croupiers in the roulette room. A little man, neat as a jockey, with a hoarse voice that suggested the malady that was to end his bright career. He went around with one of the Lupinos, and in front of the Negresco bar, between the rituals of "putting another back," they would do tap steps. A gay little bird, dancing in the shadow of doom.

But the big shot of my Riviera scene was Frank Harris. There were others—Oppenheim, Locke, Wells, Maugham—but they were not obtrusive to the public gaze while Frank hit the eye. He had his *apéritif* on the terrace of the Méditerranée, where he would sit with fiery face and blazing blue eyes. He was naturally arrogant and had none of the bland geniality one associates with age. He wore a white hat with a rakish tilt, white shoes, white flannel trousers and very fancy waistcoats. Some said he dressed like a Jewish pawnbroker, some like a drummer for perfumery. He

had a dark moustache, fiercely uptwisted, and coal black hair which Wells told me was dyed. He had a deep voice which he cultivated, because being small he sought to impress people by the power of his vocal delivery. He had a big nose that suggested the Jew, though he was aggressively Irish. He walked alone on the promenade, seemingly absorbed in memories of which he had a rich store. His stare was discouraging, but let a pretty woman pass and how his eyes lighted up!

I was introduced to him by another Irishman, also a Frank. Frank Scully was the local correspondent of *Variety*. He had a gift of original phrasing and a sardonic style. His pungent paragraphs were a joy to read. He has since written amusing books in which his tart humour has full scope. But in those days he used to refer to himself as a man with one leg, one lung, one wife, one son. He had a leg taken off as the result of a wound in the first World War, after having suffered years of pain. He showed amazing courage during the operation, telling them to go high, so that there would be no future trouble. A gay stoic, his life is a triumph over obstacles that would have discouraged most men, while as a writer he would have scorned the *clichés* in which I revel.

When I last visited him on his hilltop home above Hollywood he was surrounded by his numerous brood, and my mind went back to a day in Nice when there was only one on the way. He had a treasure of a little wife, and he made her get on a weighing machine, proudly pointing to a pound increase. Now that unborn child is taller than his father. . . . How the world wags on, and everything seems to work out in the end. To be simple, kindly, human—these are the virtues that will serve us best in a scene of hypocrisy and humbug, and I think of Frank and Alice Scully with a gladness that I have known them.

But though I encountered Frank Harris every day it was not till his seventy-third birthday I met him. His wife, Nellie, whom Wells called Frank's "one hold on respectability," gave a cocktail party to celebrate the event; and Frank Scully, who at that moment was ghosting Harris's book on Bernard Shaw, gave me an invitation. Frank had an apartment on top of a four-storey building. As is usual on these occasions the lift was out of order, so I climbed four flights of steps to a door from which came sounds of revelry. In answer to my summons two maids took my hat and coat and piled them on dozens of others. Rather anxiously I watched my new Raglan tossed on the heap, hoping I would retrieve it safely.

So I straightened my tie, smoothed down my hair and boldly entered a room in which there seemed to be about a hundred people. At any rate they were making noise enough for that number. Weaving my way through the mob I gained the friendly fireplace, twiddled my eye-glass and haughtily surveyed the throng. Not a soul did I

recognise. I was wondering if I couldn't "scram" discreetly when a dark and pretty girl offered me a sandwich. "Are you not Spanish?" I said by way of making conversation; and when she denied it rather indignantly I told her: "You are a definite Castilian type, and if you are not Spanish you should be."

While we were arguing this matter a rather beautiful woman came to me with a cup of tea. "Whatever are you two quarrelling about?" she asked. "By the way, I'm Mrs. Harris." I told her who I was but she didn't seem to catch on for she said: "I'm so glad to meet you, Mister Pleasant." Then the two went away, leaving me to balance my cup till a poker-faced man sidled up. He was stiffly dressed and spoke in a throaty voice. "This is indeed a happy occasion. I've known old Frank for forty years and he's still going strong."

I told him my name, and he said: "Not the writer chap?" When I said: "*Mea culpa*" he seemed rather impressed. "Well, well, how often I've recited your *Shooting of Sam McGee*. My name is Kilmore." "You're not a doctor?" I asked innocently, and he answered: "No, but I've a brother who is a dentist." I was in the stage of being duly impressed when again Mrs. Harris bustled up. "Oh, Mr. Kilmore, I want to introduce you to Mr. Savage," then she bounced away. Before I could explain Mr. Kilmore snorted indignantly, glared at me and retreated to the other end of the room.

Then a little woman came up and danced a jazz step before me. "I know you," she said. "You're the man who makes poetry pay." "Well," I answered, "I make rhyming remunerative." Then she did another dance step. "I'm Emma Goldman." I was sorry I could not sing the International but I told her I had enjoyed her autobiography. She bubbled with vitality, yet I could not reconcile her with the firebrand of my imagination. We parted cheerful friends, after she had said: "Come and I'll introduce you to dear old Frank."

Frank Harris held a cocktail in one hand and asked me why I was not drinking. He appeared to resent it, so I said: "My heart. If I drank that I would hear it beating in bed all night long." He grunted. "When I go to bed it's to hear somebody else's heart beating." I took from my pocket one of the little blue books of Haldeman-Julius in which was an essay of his. "There's a story you tell here," I said, "about a man and a woman in the cabin of a sinking ship, and the man said to the woman: 'We're going down in five minutes, so we might as well kiss.' . . . Now, did you really mean just kissing?" "No," he said, "but I should have given them half an hour. Five minutes are no good. Even half an hour. . . ."

All his conversation was in this erotic vein, and when he looked at a pretty girl his eyes gleamed. He professed never to have heard my name, but when we parted

he asked me to come to lunch some day. His wife was very sweet, begging me to write in her album, and I immediately scribbled something like this:

Frank Harris, let me greet with glee  
Your birthday seventy and three;  
And say, old buddy, I'll be vexed  
If you don't ask me to your next.

How he must have snorted with disgust if ever he read the doggerel; but he never did ask me, for by his next birthday he was eating his salad by the roots.

Except for his pornography I had the greatest admiration for him. He was a highbrow and would consequently despise me and my work. At the time I knew him he was very hard up. He told me he had asked Bernard Shaw for a loan of several thousand dollars and Shaw had told him he couldn't afford it. Frank was peeved about it, evidently regarding Shaw as a multi-millionaire. He was a good spender, but his earning days were almost over. Only his life of Shaw mainly written by Frank Scully, solved some of his economic problems. When he died Nellie Harris wanted me to take over the apartment, but the top stair was so narrow the thought of descending it in a wooden kimono dismayed me. Besides, I would have had to sleep in the room in which Frank passed on, and that, too, discouraged me, for I remembered the night of haunting I had passed in the chamber in which Oscar Wilde quipped that he was dying beyond his means.

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A gloomy gruesome hotel with an electric night sign that went in and out like some semaphore of sin. A cadaverous man told me I could have the room for the night, and a cadaverous woman whined to a dejected looking *valet de chambre* that I could go up. The room was on the first floor overlooking a court. There, the valet assured me, was the identical bed on which HE died. "Are the sheets the same?" I asked, and he shrugged: "But Monsieur, they have been washed." It was a bed of varnished pine of the cheapest description. There was the usual hotel wardrobe, the usual red plush armchair, but not the usual clock of chocolate marble. Everything so sordid; yet for a moment I could see that fallen demi-god, as with eyes despairful as death in their tear-corroded sockets he stared into that rain sodden court.

I spent the night there with a copy of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. I tried to sleep but the tragic horror of my thoughts obsessed me, and after six hag-ridden hours I was glad to see the dawn sneak scurvily through the tawdry curtains. What a den to die in! I thought of writing a poem on the death of Oscar Wilde, but the subject was too painful; so I went to Père Lachaise and stood in melancholy mood

by the Epstein tomb. It had shocked the French authorities and was boarded up. I was the only one that morning to visit the dreary spot. . . .

So passed my Riviera winter, radiant and ringing with joy. I met only interesting people. Sitting with Byron in the sparkling sunshine I listened to his yarns of his old vaudeville days. I would draw him out, for I never tired of theatrical talk. He was writing a play which he called *Prevailing Wind*, a vague title to my mind. He was always starting plays and abandoning them half-way. In front of a café he would read me whole acts which I would think were perfect, but the last act would never satisfy him. He was too finicky to finish a play. He saw his situations from too many angles and would alter and improve out of recognition. Then when his tinkering had obliterated his original design he would tell me he had junked the whole thing and started on a fresh plot. Five times he did this, to my great disgust; but when I asked him the title of his new play he would tell me blandly: *Prevailing Wind*.

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And now the time had come to trek north again, so we loaded up the old bus and started out. As usual we stopped off for a month in Auvergne and I had my cure at Royat with the usual result of miraculous well-being. I covered miles of mountain roads as if I were walking on air, and in bracing solitudes I soared to heights of ecstasy. At the hotel I got to be friendly with a French statesman called Cailloux, who sported a monocle like myself and was hated for his arrogance. I failed to meet Maeterlinck because our seasons did not coincide, but we had the same genial little physician who spoke of his distinguished client with scant reverence. No man is a demi-god to his doctor.

Our arrival at Dream Haven was always an event. There was Coco, ready to tear me to bits with joy, Tasie and her family with tears of gladness in their eyes, and that jolly old sea begging me to plunge into it. Before me were five months of radiant living and divine loafing. But once again the craving to write came over me, and the old typewriter tapped joyously. However, I was in a dilemma. I had promised two different publishers my next book. How to satisfy them? By writing two, of course. And that is what I did. I began on my Paris underworld book, finished it that winter, and the day I wrote *The End* I began the first chapter of another. This time the scene was laid in the country around my beloved Dream Haven, but with my *penchant* for the *macabre* a gruesome book I made of it. Its preparation accounted for another year, then I handed over both manuscripts to their respective publishers.

Each of these books was successful. They ran into many editions and brought me in a useful bit of brass. They also established me as a writer of thrillers, but I was not proud of it. I was fed up with this form of imaginative debauch. Oh, I had had



lots of fun doing them, and it had been easy going. I just had to picture my scenes as if I was watching them on a cinema reel, and write down what I saw. But there's a limit to what one wants to do in this line. These four thrillers had purged me of my passion for pulpwood fiction. I had let my imagination run riot, given rope to my invention, relieved my cluttered mind of exuberant ideas. Now it was clear and clean again.

These books are dead, yet they did what I intended. They kept people awake at night. But they were synthetic—plots, not stories. I was really ashamed of them, and when people praised them I winced. Reviewers were tolerant and frequently used the word “vivid.” Yes, they were so vivid they were almost convincing. They were all action, excitement, never to be taken seriously. I think they were competently written, colourful, dramatic. Perhaps for their entertainment power I may be pardoned them. One must be natural, write as one feels. I cannot be dignified. I must try to please people, and my friends are the humble folk of the earth.

So having finished two novels and published them almost simultaneously I planned fresh fields of endeavour. I was hoping to add to my stature when an event happened that was to derail me as a writer for a full five years.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### THE GREAT CARBUNCLE

Having rid my system of lurid literature I thought a spell of rest was indicated, and I was beginning to enjoy it when one day I received a lawyer's letter. Up to now lawyers had played no part in my existence and I disliked them as much as I did doctors. And now this letter left me paralysed with horror. With heart thumping I read it over and over, scarce believing my eyes. For it accused me of libel most foul and most reptilian. It seemed I was a slanderer, a base-minded bespatterer of the reputation of a certain member of a well-known family. In my latest book I had maligned his family in the most insidious and evil way, and it was going to cost me dear.

No one could have been more innocent than I, and it still seems to me that no inference could have been more far fetched. But there you are. Writers are a race to be reprobated, and I was told that if I defended my case it would cost me thousands of pounds and I might lose in the end. It was not the money that mattered but the horror of appearing in court. Then again so many other innocents were involved—even the printer; so I said I would agree to pay up.

One day lunching with H. G. Wells at his home, *Lou Pidou* near Grasse, I mentioned the matter and he was very indignant. "We must stop that sort of thing," he said. "No author is safe these days. Writing is becoming one of the dangerous occupations." I said: "Do you mean to tell me that if you introduced a disagreeable character called Bugs, and there was some chap called Buggins who was known to his pals as Bugs, he could sue you for libel?" Wells nodded gravely. "He could, and the case would probably go against me. But I think you should fight it. You would probably be pilloried in court but it might be a good advertisement." "Thanks," I said. "With my inferiority complex I would cut a pitiable figure. Though innocent as a lamb I would give the impression of a sinister criminal. No, I'll let it go." That was how I felt, but the whole affair left me with a feeling of disgust. If authorship, I thought, exposes one to such injustice then to hell with it. I'll never write another line.

I will always remember that lunch with Wells. It was there I met the brilliant

Odette, the most coruscating creature imaginable. Indeed she stands out in my memory as the cleverest woman I have ever known. I only saw her on two occasions, but she created a profound impression of wit, vivacity and charm. Sitting on a high seat at the head of the table Wells was wonderful in an Olympian way. He ate very little but emitted sparks of wit and wisdom at frequent intervals. He was rather unique with his high pitched voice and esoteric eyes. I had known him for thirty years but he had not changed much. He brimmed with vitality and was quite disappointed that I refused to play Badminton with him, the result of which would have been my humiliation. From his terrace the perfumed valley sloped gently to the sea. It was so peaceful I did not wonder he chose to write his books there. Now it is empty, neglected, sad; and if ever I revisit it, it will seem to be haunted by the ghost of a very great man.

I often visited Peter in his villa in Vence, but I was wary, for at that moment he was celebrity hunting. One he bagged was Joyce. Joyce was suffering from sick eyes, and Peter begged him to stay at their home and rest a while. I have photographs he took of the author of *Ulysses* working on his new book and looking very dignified. On the other hand the photos Peter took of Wells were free and easy. Peter was a camera fiend, and his pictures of the great and near great would have filled an album. But one he failed to get was Lawrence. Although the hospital was only next door Lawrence died before Peter could snap him. However, Frieda Lawrence was often at the house and posed to his satisfaction. If Joyce and Lawrence had met in Peter's villa I wonder how they would have reacted. But I dreaded these literary big shots and shrank from meeting them.

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And now, having put away my typewriter, I had to find some other outlet for expression. I sought it in music. I had played the guitar for many years and I strummed on the piano. I am a one-key piano man, but I have that down pat so that I can forget my fingers. Singing and accompanying myself gave me a lot of pleasure, however painful it sounded to others. It is difficult to hear oneself objectively. One has to make a record—then, oh! what a shock! Through the years I had composed many songs for the guitar, where words and tune seemed to click, and now I sang them swung round on the piano stool to an imaginary audience. Although I could not imagine that audience applaud, my efforts seemed to me, if not good, at least not too bad. And they were all mine, so I made a book of them. I published it under the title of *Bath-tub Ballads*, twenty numbers with a complete musical setting. The format was pleasant; I hoped some of them might catch on.

I should have been warned by Byron, that maker of so many successful songs,

who told me how difficult it was to break into Tin-pan Alley. I had my book sent to many well-known cabaret singers, but no one, as far as I knew, ever sang my songs. They were a colossal flop. My friends did not compliment me, while musicians were strangely silent. I had not expected such ignominious failure and for a while I was crushed. But . . . they still sound good to me. For I still sing them to imaginary applause and still I go on making others.

My songs were arranged for the piano, guitar, ukulele, and accordion. I could play the first three instruments so I decided to tackle the fourth. I bought a beautiful piano accordion with one hundred and twenty bass chords and a range of three octaves, and on this instrument I worked for four years. I found the bass easy but the piano key-board gave me more trouble, for one has to play by touch, not sight. However, once I got the feel of the notes I made rapid progress. In the end I got to know a hundred different numbers by heart and could play for hours, never repeating myself. I often used to play in the dark, realising how this instrument is ideal for the blind.

The Italians are famous accordionists. In cafés round the rue Dante were shabby fellows who, with a glass of beer and a cigarette dangling from their lips, would play with nonchalance music that had a splendid swing and a wealth of floriture. I admired them. I would have given thousands of francs to perform with such virtuosity. Yet these poor professionals were glad of a few *sous*. Often I went to shady dance halls just to listen to the rhythm of the accordion, and sometimes I would persuade a player to let me take his instrument for a java or a tango. But I always became nervous, and however well I knew the number I would bungle it; for I tried to play to the steps of the dancers instead of making them keep time with me.

So much for my musical mania. It was rather futile but it gave me a lot of fun and did nobody any harm. I do not regret the countless hours it cost me, though today I remember nothing of my accordion repertoire. I never played it well enough to earn my living as a blind beggar at a street corner, but it filled part of my time so that I was never bored. Otherwise I expended my energy in tremendous walks and in physical culture; and it was the latter that for the second time nearly proved my undoing.

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On the beach before a swim I practised my own system of exercises. They were based on moderation—no more trying to walk on my hands. But this time it was an exercise in which I pivoted on my back that brought about what I call the adventure of the Great Carbuncle. No, it is not a precious stone of great beauty, as you may find it described in your lexicon. Dictionaries have so little sense of humour. It is a

very pernicious affliction. In France it is called an *anthrax*, but no name could be ugly enough to describe it. I have related how at one time I had a series of boils—well, a carbuncle is a cluster of about twenty huge boils concentrated in a mound about the size of a soup bowl. . . . And it was this I now acquired by grinding round on the small of my back on the infected gravel of the beach. Thus, again, I did myself most harm by trying to do myself the greatest good.

My first consciousness of it was a rubicund convexity to the left of my spine. When I was pivoting on my back on the gravel it hurt a lot, so I left out that particular exercise; but the boss kept getting bigger and redder till I suspected it was the beginning of a boil. Then it began to sting and burn till I was conscious of hardly anything else. It grew to a steady, throbbing pain, and finally came to a head, or rather several heads. The pain gained intensity till it made me sick at the stomach. But instead of erupting in one place the supposed boil broke out in half a dozen. The pain was now like a spike through my body, riveting me to my chair and making every movement agony. I walked bent double; I sat up for two nights groaning and suffering. Then reluctantly I went to see a doctor; as I waited in his visiting room I felt I just couldn't bear it any longer.

When the doctor looked at my back he threw up his hands. "It's a carbuncle, and a monster. You've let it go too long. I must operate on it right away. A day longer and it might have been too late. Your back is nothing but a big bunch of putridity." So, sending me home, he came along presently and, using a freezing mixture, he gashed me a bit. It hurt like Hades and I passed a night of horror. Next morning he came early and looked at it with a glum face. "I don't like it a bit. I daren't do any more. You must go to a hospital and I'll get a specialist to operate on you right away."

His energy probably saved my life. In an hour I was in a clinic and in another I was on the operating table. On the way I was too wretched to care what happened. Brutalised with pain and stunned by this sudden calamity I moved like a man in a dream. Before the operation a nurse presented a thunder-mug for my patronage. I am unusually modest but this was no moment for physical shyness. The nurse was painted to the eyes, and a hook-nosed surgeon with black-rimmed spectacles that made him look like an owl said: "Monsieur, you will soon be deprived of your carbuncle and I assure you you will never have another." I assured him I had no intention of taking out a subscription.

Soon I was trundled on a stretcher into the operating room where five masked men in white were awaiting me. They had just finished another job, and I glimpsed a bucket of blood and jags of flesh. But I did not shudder. I was stoical by now. I did

not think I would come out of the operation, but at least death would release me from my burden of intolerable pain. The best I can do, I thought, is to put up a gallant front; so I tried to joke over the situation and laughed at my own poor wit. As I lay on the operating table I said to my doctor: "Watch my heart. It's weak and may give out on me." I really thought it would.

They gave me an injection in the arm and told me to begin counting. I counted up to sixty and was still conscious, hearing the surgeon grumble: "This anaesthetic only lasts for thirty-five minutes. I never can finish in that time." None too cheerful to think I might regain consciousness in the middle of the operation, but I was too numbed with misery to consider the matter. . . . The injection was having no effect. They told me to stop counting and resorted to chloroform. I took one long whiff . . . nothing. I took a second . . . I remembered no more till I felt myself being slung on the shoulders of a strong man.

I was in a strange, glacial borderland between life and death and I felt that at any moment I might be wafted over that shadowy frontier. Then a sudden, glorious warmth, the comfort of a cosy bed, a voice saying cheerfully: "Open your eyes, Monsieur." So I opened my eyes to a bright sunlit room and there was my nurse looking like an angel, the surgeon all mellow beneficence, and myself—safe, snug and free from pain. I will always remember that moment of joy and relief. It was incredible that all was over, for it seemed only a second ago since I had lain on the operating table.

For a while I simmered in content, but I was not to get away with it so easily. I begged for a drink which was refused. I did not realise I had a high fever. Gaily I sang one of my own songs over and over, not knowing it was delirium. That night they gave me a strong sleeping injection, so that I remembered no more till early dawn. As long as I lay still I could feel nothing, but the slightest movement was agony. Still tormented by thirst I crept out of bed and drank from the water tap. Then a new nurse entered like sunshine and greeted me with a cheery good morning. I liked that nurse—she was so bright and gay. Yet I learned she was a lunger, and should have been nursing herself instead of me, for soon after she died.

My recovery was slow and hesitating. How anxiously I watched my daily chart, and how glad I was to see it take a downward slant after rising to Alpine heights. My nights were hideous, for though I begged for a sleeping draught they would not give it to me. My bed was high, hard and humpy, while over me a sinister blue light seemed to me to symbolise a minimum of hope. It was in those long, sleepless hours I visioned my finish and it made me very sad, because of so much work undone, my tangled affairs, and above all the sorrow into which my death would plunge my

family. I did not care so much for myself, but I hated to cause grief to others.

And I had good grounds for my fears. On the first day the matron of the hospital took off my bandages I saw her shudder. "*Quelle horreur!*" was the exclamation that burst from her, and hurriedly she bound me up again. This coming from an elderly woman seasoned to gruesome sights filled me with despair, and though the surgeon asked me to have a look at my back in a double mirror I refused. I never dared look at that mutilated torso. Even today I have never seen the huge scar it has left me for life.

Said the surgeon: "It was the most beautiful carbuncle I ever carved into. I am a golfer, Monsieur, and I went at it as I would with my mashie if I got my ball into a bunker. You were an hour and a quarter under the knife and I did three feet of cutting. With enthusiasm I scooped the putrid stuff out of you." That was the worst—to think I had been *unclean*—I who had written: "To make myself a temple pure wherein I live serene." Well, it took steel and fire to purify me.

Yet there was a moment when the surgeon looked grim. *Septicaemia*. Sometimes he toiled over me for half an hour, breathing hard, sighing, sweating. I avoided looking at his instruments so beautiful, bright, glittering. I chewed gum. When it hurt most I twisted a towel and jammed it into my mouth to stifle the strange sounds I made. I hated myself for any lapse from stoicism, but at times the pain was like molten lead dripping on my flesh, and once it was so excruciating I fainted. Yet, oh, what a relief when he decided to finish and bound me up again! How I dreaded those daily dressings when my mangled back was exposed to the light of day. Then there was a second operation with a local anaesthetic and more savage gashing. In spite of the freezing it hurt horribly and when it was over I collapsed on my bed, wanting to blubber, but ashamed to.

And as I lay there a gentle sunshine stole through the window curtains and caressed my bed. Then suddenly there came to me a new sensation, one of relief, of hope, of high courage. At that moment I knew I was saved. A strange instinct told me I had just been snatched from the Valley of the Shadow. Looking up I saw a blue sky smiling down on me and then again I heard my celestial music, the *Harps of Heaven*. Never had it seemed so sweet. Filled with an ineffable sense of happiness I closed my eyes and for the first time since my trouble I slept like a child.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

### RED UNREST

Convalescence. Glorious word. No longer did I mind the dressings, though they hurt like hell. My body was growing clean again. The pinky, honey-comb cells were marvellously building up. Then one wonderful day I was told I might go home. Oh, what radiant happiness! I was so weak I had to be half-carried to a taxi and helped upstairs to my room. But what joy to see my beloved bed, to sink blissfully into its soft comfort. I closed my eyes on the familiar blue of the wallpaper and my precious pictures and slept for hours.

I was awakened to a huge hamburg steak which I tackled with appetite. I had been told to eat all I could, and especially of meat. I did. Stomach, liver, pancreas rose to the occasion, and it seemed I could digest anything. Twice a day I ate my fill of chops and cutlets, and oh, how I savoured them! Nature was making up to me in pleasure now for the pain she had cost me in the past. And in my sickness I discovered a new definition for happiness—freedom from pain. I did not demand positive pleasure, just physical serenity. So in these days of recuperation in which I did nothing but eat and sleep, I lived radiantly. Animal living, no doubt, but perhaps that is the best kind, for it is often bad for us to think too much. My mind was blissfully blank, while my body built up and I simmered in an ecstasy of comfort.

Soon I was able to get up and hobble around with a hump on my back like a camel. I could sit at my window and watch the intriguing life of the rue Dante, the housewives carrying home their long loaves of bread and nibbling it on the way; the one-legged beggar who squatted on the cold pavement and sold fortunes to willing women; the retired Major of the Foreign Legion who smuggled girls into his room when his landlady was out of the way. I had the eagerness of a child, and little things seen in the street interested me as never before. Then one day I tuned up my guitar and sang in a weak, quavery voice that sounded so pathetic I felt sorry for myself. That was the only time though, for day by day I grew stronger, read more, sang more and even crawled out and sat on a park bench in the sun. Then I began putting on weight. Presently I was back to normal: soon I had passed it, and in exactly four



months after my operation the last little hole that represented my wound serenely closed. I was a hale man again.

If I have dwelt over long on my trouble it was because it played such a big part in my life. I date events from before and after it. It was the only grave crisis in a career of superb health, for I do not count my heart trouble with the same seriousness. Heart weakness is often a *brevet* of long life for it makes people more careful. Besides, it is a fine clean ailment that often means a clean and merciful end. But a carbuncle is a poisonous corruption and save for the skill of my doctor and the devotion of my nurse I would have ceased to be.

One incident I remember in connection with my sickness. Every morning I used to go to the clinic to get my bandages changed. My nurse would check the too rapid growth of skin and otherwise annoy me, but I forgave her though she hurt me a lot. Then one day when she was away the director of the clinic did the dressing and never was it done so well. When I returned two days later they told me he was sick. I was surprised and sorry, because he was a big handsome man and I liked him. Then a week after they told me he was dead. . . . Strange, I thought, both nurse and doctor, young and elate, to be snuffed out so suddenly, while, I an old codger of sixty odd years, dragged stubbornly on.

Royat that year did me a power of good and Dream Haven put me on my solid feet again. I went on my wonderful walks, did my physical culture with religious fervour and had, according to my lights, a glorious time. But I never thought of doing any writing. It seemed as if I had sloughed off my writing skin for good. I looked at the row of books that bore my name and imagined they had been done by someone else. Yet there they were, the concrete result of my dreams and the source of the comparative luxury in which I lived. But the fellow who wrote them was not the fellow who now pumped an accordion and looked at them with indifference. I felt as if that other fellow had died, and one day I had evidence that others thought so too.

Taking up a copy of *The Times* I came across an article entitled *Heritors of Unfulfilled Renown*, and there was my name among a number of poets who had been killed in the war. Probably I had been confused with my brother who lost his life in the trenches before Ypres. But apart from this, I found that many others supposed I had passed from the earthly scene. Perhaps it was because I had not published a volume of verse for seven years. Evidently they did not associate me with my books of machine-made fiction, and had never heard of my health book. I was a ballad maker, and nothing else counted. They thought me dead, so I never bothered to deny it; for I savoured a kind word, even if I had to pass on to win it.

On the other hand it rather pleased me that my efforts at self-obliteration had

succeeded. Here in a slum of Nice no one had ever heard of me. I cultivated obscurity as assiduously as others strive for publicity. Very few of my neighbors knew that I wrote. I was just one of them, content to go on like that to the end. I loved the casual, easy-going Riviera with its wealth of amusement and its sunny charm. I enjoyed the irresponsibility of living in a foreign land where one is an onlooker, and cares nothing for the way things are run as long as one's own comfort is assured. This was my attitude, till a great political upheaval roused me from my apathy.

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I am no political bug. Both Tories and Reds jar on me. But having climbed from ditches to riches I do not want to be cheated out of the fruits of my labour. My family were conservatives, yet in my youth I inclined to be a liberal. Today that is probably my measure, though I have never voted in my life. But as I look back on my Nice days I see a little man furiously anti-Red. I carefully concealed it for I was in a society that seethed with revolution, and as a foreigner I had no right to take sides. Around me I heard people say: "Better Hitler than Stalin." And though I hated both, as a capitalist I did not want my wealth to be taken from me.

Yet that was in the air, and for a time anything might have happened. As I stood in the midst of a mob who groaned when the newspaper announced that Madrid had fallen I enjoyed their discomfiture. The Communists fascinated me. They were so violent and unrestrained. I went to their meetings and got a great thrill out of the fighting and rioting that ensued. I also went to a Doriot meeting, and hated the Fascist audience; but all around the hall were a mob of Communists who tried to prevent me entering and even threatened me with violence. I believed I had the right to hear both sides, and was incensed by the attempt to intimidate me. The rabid, riotous mob who called themselves the proletariat were just as disgusting to me as the sly and secret supporters of Mussolini.

No, I did not like extremists. I deplored passionate expression. Rage, hate, fear were poisons in the system—not for a healthy man. I cultivated serenity, detachment and humour. I was convinced that if you gave a Communist a million francs he would become a capitalist overnight. As to the class to which I belonged, their creed was not to hold what they had by hook or by crook but to grab more. Of my personal friends no one took any interest in these matters. Byron was sublimely indifferent, while Peter, entrenched in his bourgeois opulence snarled: "Instead of talking, why don't you *do* something about it?"

That was it. I might pity the inarticulate masses but I was not prepared to help them. As for the vociferous section, all I wanted was to stop them interfering in my

business. Already the Unions were trying to control us. We could not dismiss a maid without their permission, we dare not hire a man who did not belong to them. Dictation! I thought wrathfully. We must make an end to it. Peter's chauffeur and gardener were Communists but he did not know it. They were enemies in his house, consumed with envy and class hatred. Those who served us took our money with a false obsequiousness, cursing us in their hearts and awaiting the day when they could put the knife to our throats. The very waiter who brought me my drink would gladly have dashed it into my face.

So I went to Communist conventions, read Red papers, joined the clamouring crowds outside the newspaper offices. I saw police charges, windows smashed, wanton damage done. No one took any notice of me, for I was obviously an innocent bystander. On the fringe of free fights I watched with fascinated delight the clash of mob with mob. I saw mile-long processions of leftists, but neither cheered nor jeered. I enjoyed the excitement of the General Strike, hoping it would be broken, for was it not directed against the public of whom I was one! It was all intensely dramatic; passions were inflamed, conflict encountered on every hand. There was a suggestion of civil war that came to a head with the Paris riots.

Even in Nice we had our class clashes and police intervention. For a time it was dangerous for a well-dressed man to venture in certain sections of the city. If a Communist saw a sleek and shiny car the correct thing was to spit on it. So I tucked away my monocle and wore a beret and sweater; but even then I would be assailed by jeers and sneers.

And it was in the midst of this atmosphere of turmoil I conceived the idea of going to Russia. Then I could say to these arrogant leftists who proclaimed that country to be an earthly paradise that I had been there and had found it an anti-chamber of hell. Or was it? Perhaps it really was a terrestrial heaven. It was not fair of me to judge it without seeing it. Perhaps a visit to the land of the Soviets might convert me to Communism. I had always felt a sympathy for the down-and-out, surely I could extend it to the up-and-coming. I would go to Russia with an open mind, observe dispassionately and form my own conclusions.

So I wrote to Intourist in Paris and promptly got back a list of tours with an application form for entry into the Socialist Republic. I was asked to indicate the tour I preferred—"ten per cent of its cost payable in advance, please." I filled in forms which, I understood, were forwarded to Moscow. I do not believe that I was investigated, except perhaps to see that my name was not on any particular black list. Towards the end I got cold feet and hoped my application would be refused. Even when it was accepted I would have backed out had it not been for that

advance payment. To the very last my friends thought I was a dotard going to my doom.

In the following chapters I will try to cram my record of two trips to Russia. They are the reactions of a simple-minded soul to a set of surroundings new in his experience. I had no sympathy for the Soviet system but I had a respect for the right of the working man to achieve his legitimate aspirations. Security, leisure, comfort were what no one had any right to deny him. I wondered if in Soviet Russia I would find this ideal realised. I resolved to be fair in my judgments. No doubt there was good and bad. To some it was a proletarian paradise, to others a mountain of misery. I would see for myself, and put it all down in a note-book with scrupulous care to avoid exaggeration.

I will not waste space in telling of my travels through Scandinavia. Denmark, Sweden, Finland came in the scope of my itinerary and in each I had a wonderful time. Particularly I liked Stockholm where I had food too rich and delicious for my digestive comfort; Copenhagen, city of the bicycle and the blonde maiden; Helsinki—well I was not there long enough to discover its charm. On a late evening I got on a train for Leningrad and once again I found myself following the adventures of the unknown trail.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

### ON THE FINLAND TRAIN

As I stood in the corridor of the Finland train I was disquietingly aware of my aloneness. It was like a coach of the dead. Through half-closed curtains I could see faces on pillows giving no sign of life. There was something almost terrifying in their helpless abandonment. I might have been like them had I not been too excited too sleep. That and the fact that the carriage jolted so much I bounded up and down like a rubber ball.

Excited! Yes, how often I had dreamed of visiting Russia; and now, practically an old man, I was making the trip. My friends had advised me not to, saying: "They'll put you in prison, knowing how you hate their doctrines." "But they don't know," I told them. "I'm supposed to be a sympathiser, otherwise I would never have got my visa. Besides, I'll play fair, keep an open mind. Maybe they'll convert me." Nevertheless I realised I was entering unfriendly territory. I felt like a spy. Then I felt like an ass, dramatizing where there was no drama. Or was there none? One never knew. . . .

In the drab and draughty corridor I stared at the passing woods. Ever since leaving Helsinki they had been streaming past. I had watched them in the moonlight, lonely and mysterious. Now they were bathed in morning sunshine, virginal in their cold purity. For scores of miles there was no sign of human life. The trees were fir and silver birch with little underbrush. There was something clean and tonic in those woods. In winter the boughs must be crystalline, the snow crunch crisply under foot, and the cold would be dry and bracing. A lusty land, much like the Yukon, only less lonely and without the mountains. I wondered what the life was like; but the forest was inscrutable.

Then after a time it relented. In a small clearing was a log hut. It was strange to see it so quiet and to think of the life it harboured. Then further on I saw more cabins, and from their chimneys smoke arising. Then a man standing in a doorway stared sleepy-eyed at the train. Then a woman with a shawl over her head was fetching an armful of firewood. . . . There in the peaceful autumn sunshine Finland

was awakening to life. After that we passed many cabins and poor little fields with meagre harvests of rye and barley. The crops were in the sheaf, impaled on rods stuck in the ground. Harvesting must be difficult on account of the rain. A hard life, a hardy people. Occasionally I saw a woman milking in a field or a man going to work. The men wore top-boots, the women shawls on their heads.

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All this I noted as I stood in the corridor of the train. How strange to see these people sleeping their heads off! What precious moments they were missing! Or were they? Perhaps they would be bored by this woodland sunniness, shudder at its solitude. They were wise, no doubt, to bounce up and down with their eyes so resolutely shut. No doubt I was a fool to get up at five. But here we were getting into Viborg where I was due to have breakfast.

The sun was bright, the air bracing, the busy restaurant waiting to welcome me. A hostess addressed me by name and gave me special attention. In fact, I had a table-cloth while some Generals in the Finnish army ate off the bare board. I enjoyed an excellent pot of tea, bread, butter and two boiled eggs. As I ate I watched the others. Most were soldiers, their uniforms of a dusty grey and shoddy of cloth. Punctiliously they saluted, and their salutes were returned just as scrupulously. One wondered how the Generals could eat at all, they were so busy saluting.

It was curious after all this bustle to go back to the train and find my coach still wrapped in slumber. Its occupants seemed determined to ignore the existence of Viborg. As we pulled out I resumed my watch by the window, now fortified against hunger and feeling at peace with the world. But where the bumping over the rails had failed to arouse my companions the momentary lack of it seemed to have startled them into consciousness, and one by one they began to emerge. With that sense of superiority the early riser feels for his sluggish brother I watched them, imagining they felt a little ashamed of themselves. Probably they didn't. Perhaps they thought me a damn fool for getting up so early. No doubt they were right. They had got in a whack of extra sleep and would still be able to see a sample of what I had seen. Indeed it was much the same, saw-mills, small farms, monotonous miles of forest. But we were rapidly approaching the frontier, and that excited me.

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Two stations stood almost side-by-side, only a shallow ravine dividing them. It was filled with a tangle of barbed wire. One side of the bridge that spanned it was painted white, the other red. On the Finnish side a smooth sward ran down to the wire, on the Russian an ugly tangle of brushwood. But both stations were handsome—the Finnish one grey, the Soviet one brown. There they stood like rivals

confronting each other across the ravine. It was a direct challenge. Finland wanted to show what she could do, and Russia responded.

Our station was called Rajajoko and it would have done honour to any country in the world. It was of granite, handsome and dignified. Set in well-groomed gardens it seemed self-conscious of its perfection. It was ten times more impressive than the Viborg station, so that I imagined that Viborg must be ten times smaller, but I never discovered if Rajajoko existed at all. There was no sign of it from the station, and I did not look any further, preferring to think that that palatial building was a final gesture of the Finland State Railway.

So I roamed its marble halls, marvelling at their magnificent emptiness. Then I realised that my fellow voyagers in the sleeping car had got ahead of me. There they were in a beautiful dining-room tucking into a breakfast that made mine modest in comparison. Not only had they bagged an extra three hours of sleep but they were feeding better than I had. With a feeling of virtue unrewarded I watched them; then I consoled myself with some lemonade and buns. Not that I wanted them, but because I aimed to get rid of the small sum of Finnish money that remained to me. It is always incumbent on the True Traveller not to get stuck with the small change of the country he is leaving. And I yearned to be a True Traveller—which I define as one who does a maximum of sight-seeing with a minimum of effort.

As I was strolling the trim paths I saw a young man regarding me with circumspection. He was sprucely dressed and wore a red tie. His figure was inclined to be assertive round the middle, his face pink and plump-jowled. As we looked at each other with that ostentatious indifference of travellers who have not yet broken the ice I had no doubt he was thinking: "One of these stiff Britishers. Eno's Fruit Salts, Burberry, grey flannel bags, red face—a typical specimen." Then he spoke: "Pretty swell *dépôt*. They gave us a grand breakfast. I guess it's the best we'll get for a long time."

"Yes," I said. "We're drawing into the country of the 'Cocos,' as we call the Communists in France." He stared at the red tie I was wearing. "I thought you were one," he said.

"I took you for one, too," I replied. "That tie of yours . . ." "No," he assured me. "I only wear it to tone off my complexion." "So do I," I answered. "I'm told you can search Russia through and you won't find a red tie. Most of them don't wear ties of any colour. Funds don't run to it, or else they're considered bourgeois. . . . Did you sleep well?"

"No," he said with a grimace. "These damn Finnish trains have square wheels. I suppose we'll soon be in Petrograd—I mean Leningrad. I mustn't give it the wrong

name or I'll get in bad at the start."

"Well, don't forget to send a post-card to that little blonde you left in Helsinki," I told him. He gave me a sharp look. "What d'ye know about her?" "Nothing. Most good looking lads like you leave little blondes behind them." He sighed. "That's true. I've left a good many." Then he treated me to a yarn of his adventures in Helsinki, and was still sighing when we drew into the Russian station.

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As the train pulled up I had a thrill of excitement. The Red Army! Its soldiers thronged the platform. Their uniforms were shabby and shoddy; they were thin and pasty of skin; they looked grim and unfriendly. Cold, hard, cynical, I felt they despised and disliked us. I was there on sufferance and must be on my best behaviour. Nervously I waited when a girl, shabby and slightly deformed, spoke to me in English. "You must now visit the Customs. Your baggage will be carried there." And sure enough I saw my valise on the shoulder of a greybeard with a white brassard. I followed him.

My entry into the station took my breath away. I was fronting a gigantic statue of Lenin, while on the wall behind were big canvases depicting Stalin and Kalinin. They gloomed down, making one feel very small. As I gazed at that huge figure and those vast portraits I felt the Soviets were handing me a preliminary jolt. Feeling somewhat groggy I staggered after my porter into the examination room, and there found my fellow passengers opening their bags. There were the usual counters behind which stood the examiners. They glared at me disagreeably as I hastened to unstrap my valise.

"Revolver!" a saturnine soldier barked at me. "I haven't got one," I said, tapping myself reassuringly. "Money!" he snapped. I strewed the counter with French notes and some small change. He ignored the metal, but took count of the paper. "Letter of Credit! Travellers cheques!" I gave him my Express orders and he took note of the numbers. Then he handed me a receipt. "Keep it carefully," said the shabby girl. "You must show it when you leave the country."

Sighing with relief I gathered up my wealth. Then I found two other soldiers examining my bag and I was glad I had only one. They had taken everything out, inspecting it for places of concealment. They were envious of my toilet set, and looked admiringly at my safety razor. Evidently those glittering baubles gave them revelations of the capitalistic country from which I came, for they looked gloomy and disgruntled. I had nothing but the minimum equipment of clothes for the journey and with looks of disappointment they allowed me to put everything back. There! My examination was over. Now I could see how the others were getting on.



My American friend was in hot water. They had taken from his valise a copy of *Vanity Fair* with a picture of Hitler on the cover. Reproachfully they confiscated it and proceeded to give him the works. Among other things he had a mysterious sealed canister. They made him take off the adhesive tape and turn out the contents. These consisted of five pounds of fruit drops. As he stood there, rueful and distressed, I thought he must be a commercial traveller, and this was one of his samples. Otherwise I could not imagine him packing around all that cheap candy. It looked very mysterious but, after sifting it, they allowed him to return the heap to the box. Altogether the poor man, who had three bags, was under examination for about an hour and when he rejoined me the sweat was running down his face.

“Wheugh! Did you see what a combing over they gave me? That box of candies I bought in Copenhagen to take to my old mother in New York. You’d have thought it contained a bomb. Or poisoned maybe. They wouldn’t taste them. Have one? They’re the finest ever. Won’t colour your tongue.”

“I thought you were a drummer,” I said, “and these were your samples.”

“By Gosh, you’re right! So I am, but not the kind you mean. I’m a trap drummer in a jazz band. I’m a musician.” I was pleased to hear it. I love music, even drums, and from then on I called him the Drummer.

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Of the journey to Leningrad I remember little. Maybe I was too excited to notice much. One thing I recall was a railway siding near our swagger station. Around it were about a hundred peasants waiting for a train. They had their household effects and their bedding and they squatted with stoic patience. They would wait for days like that, in their verminous rags, resigned and uncomplaining like the serfs that in spirit they still were.

Otherwise all I can remember is that everything seemed very Russian. The men wore dirty blouses, top boots and peaked caps; the women shawls on their heads and shapeless skirts. There were log huts and lumber shacks, each in its neglected garden, yet with geranium plants in the windows. There were villages with low houses and wide streets. The small stations were untidy, dirty, crowded with peasants waiting for a train of any kind. The immense fields had been cropped and looked deserted in the pale sunshine. Huge farm buildings loomed on the horizon but I saw no sign of cattle.

Everything looked chaotic and cheerless, a land where people existed rather than lived, and to which joy was a stranger. Then we entered an industrial area which was even more joyless. There were factories, tall chimneys, smoke, grime, all that heralds approach to a great city. Then at last—Leningrad.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### LENINGRAD

My first impression of Leningrad station was of shabby meanness. It was old and grimy, not at all like the swank border terminus. From the packed platform peasants gazed at us unbelievably. Who were these plump and dapper strangers? By the way they stared we might have been from another planet. They looked at our clothes with envious wonder. Well they might, for they had been told that in foreign countries there was nothing but misery. Only in happy Russia were people well clad, well fed. We must be pillars of capitalism.

They did not resent us because, at heart, they too were capitalist. Aren't we all? We love to live on unearned increment, and clip our coupons, wishing we had more. I like Russians but I dislike Communists, and it is pleasant to think that in Russia only ten per cent of the population are Marx-minded. And it is only on the faces of the latter one sees sour envy of the well-dressed stranger. The others, no doubt, are envious, but there is no hate in their hearts.

A girl with a patched skirt took charge of us and we were caught up in the machinery of Intourist. Tattered porters grabbed our baggage. They looked so hungry one wanted to tip them but we were told tips were taboo. However, it was pleasant to be herded like sheep with nothing to worry about. Cars were awaiting us. Everything was arranged.

"Hotel Astoria," said the girl guide. "The best in Leningrad," said the Drummer.

I have nothing but good to say about Intourist. They treated us well, and though I travelled second class I had the best hotels and bedrooms with baths. The organisation was good. If the employees were sometimes indifferent is it not the same with Government servants everywhere? But why, I wonder, *is* Intourist? In all countries they have fine offices which, I am sure, do not pay expenses. It is not the money brought into the country, for this is small. And it is not to welcome sympathisers, for most tourists are hostile. I think it is to prove that Russia is making progress. One is shown all that is worth seeing and steered away from the unsightly. They are naively proud of the advance they have made. Before the war they were a

hundred years behind civilised Europe. Now they are about thirty, and in that time they may overtake us. But will they keep it up? I question it. I do not believe Russia will ever attain the culture of France. Just as Japan has remained Asiatic, so will the land of the Soviets.

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I will never forget my first impression of Leningrad. There was an open vastness about it, a lavish spaciousness. No pedestrian proposition this. At the thought of perambulative sight-seeing my legs ached. Is there any other city that offers such wide vistas, and stretches with such assured majesty? True, one noted the streets needed repair, the paving was broken, the asphalt caved in. The buildings were unpainted and crumbling in decay. And the further one went the more one was conscious of poverty and neglect. Even as we thrilled at the magnificent prospect we were bumped by the roughness of the road. Even as we were roused to admiration by the monuments and mansions we were conscious of corruption and decline.

The Hotel Astoria is historic. It stands in the shadow of St. Isaac's Cathedral and in olden days was the scene of civic splendours. It also played a part in the Revolution. As we drew up a porter advanced who looked like an admiral. There were several of these door porters, old-style Russians with beards and shabby uniforms. The hall-porters were of the Soviet type, lean-jawed, unshaven, in black shirts and sandals. The old men were sad and gentle; the young insolent and cynical.

We surrendered our passports and were given rooms. As I went up in a lift I could realise that this hotel had been palatial. There was a drawing-room to each floor, furnished with the faded splendour of the past; and in an alcove a chambermaid in black, with cap and apron of lace. She seemed to fit the elegance of the alcove with its overhead lighting. As a rule she sat at a Louis Quinze table, looking like a French maid in a Parisian setting. The effect of these reception rooms from the passing elevator was theatrical.

By a long corridor I reached my chamber. A bristly valet in a dirty blouse showed me in. It was large and over full of furniture. There was a sofa, seven chairs, a round table. Everything was dingy, faded, none too clean. The closed window gave on a court, the air was warm and stale. The wash-basin had no plug and had become detached from the wall, so that only the water pipe held it in place. I mention this to show how everything pertaining to the old *régime* is being allowed to go to ruin. As a relic of Czarism the Hotel Astoria seemed to be doomed.

It was two o'clock, so after a hasty wash I dashed down to lunch. But I need not have worried for it was just beginning. I found a place in the dining-room that looked out on the Cathedral and hoped for the waiter. There were seven of them

with soiled linen jackets over shabby street clothes. After ten minutes or so one of them approached me leisurely. "Ticket!" he snapped.

I gave him my Intourist coupon for a mid day meal and he handed me a bill of fare in French. I decided to make my lunch as Russian as possible, so I chose caviare, bortsch, boiled sturgeon and ice-cream. My experience is that from the time of ordering a meal and receiving it half an hour elapses. At first you are impatient but after a while you get used to it. There seemed to be no hurry and one ceased to hurry oneself. I would not have minded waiting if the man had brought me what I ordered; but he forgot the caviare, gave me cabbage soup which *repeated* all day, served me fried sturgeon instead of boiled, and ordinary ice-cream instead of *Pêche Melba*. However, I accepted everything meekly, washing it down with the inevitable glass of tea.

Afterwards I learned to do better. I insisted on caviare with every meal, the black Beluga—not the red tinned stuff; I got the real bortsch, blood red and turning to pink as I added cream; I found sturgeon hard and gluey and came to prefer stergel. I stuck to ice-cream, which is made in Government factories and of good quality. I drank Narzan or pink lemonade. Occasionally I had gobbets of lamb, impaled on a dagger. One got enormous helpings. If you ordered chicken half the bird was served. The food was rich and satisfying; but, after all, I was staying at the first hotel in Leningrad.

I succeeded, however, in accelerating the service, so that instead of waiting half an hour for food a quarter sufficed. This is how it happened . . . There was a waiter of an aristocratic type who suggested the old regime. He was very melancholy, with a faraway look in his eyes. Perhaps he was dreaming of the gilded past in which he had been an honoured guest where he was now a shabby servitor. In his slow distracted way he waited on us, looking so sad I felt sorry for him. Then one day I suggested to the Drummer: "Suppose we try to tip him."

"Don't you do it," he warned. "It's against the rules of the Soviet Constitution. It's an insult not only to them, but to Stalin and all the Kremlin gang. He will resent it. There will be a scene. We'll have the whole bunch down on us."

"I don't care," I told him. "I'm sorry for the poor devil. I'll try to slip him a rouble." I was nervous about it but I plucked up my courage, thinking that at the worst I could only be conducted to the frontier. The dramatic moment arrived. The Prince, as we called him, was standing in a trance near the door, a dirty serviette over his arm. I tickled the palm of his hand with a bill and the effect was magical. Eagerly he grabbed it while his face lit up with a smile of joy. In a moment he was bowing us to the door, holding it open for us. I have never seen a tip so thankfully

received. After that I did it all the time, and people wondered why I got served so quickly. Tipping may be forbidden in Russia, but because of that tips are doubly welcome. Never did I have one refused.

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"I want a comb," I said to the Drummer. "Let's seek one on the Nevsky Prospect."

So we strolled forth and soon found ourselves in that famous thoroughfare. The packed pavements were streams of shabby humanity, jostling in the hot sunshine. Most of the men wore only short sleeved cotton shirts, shoddy trousers and sandals on bare feet. Of the women not one in a hundred had a hat, and only a few "perms." They walked with the loose freedom of the corsetless, their breasts proudly advanced, their hips unrestrained. Their bare feet squeezed into high-heeled shoes. They seemed sensual in a healthy way, while their broad faces had a contented look.

By comparison with the packed pavements the great boulevard looked like a desert. I suppose it must be the broadest street in the world, for the crowds on the opposite side seemed dim and distant, and the policemen stationed in the middle were like remote mannikins. They were alert, however, for when we decided to make a dash across, a shrill whistle arrested us. As we were already half-way over and the policeman was two hundred yards distant I suggested we keep a-going; but we saw a Red soldier turn in his tracks and go back, so we, too, obediently retraced our steps.

The Nevsky Prospect, avenue once so proud and opulent, had fallen on evil days. Again one noted that passion to blot out the past and to show, by degrading its monuments, how futile and abortive it had been. Says your Bolshevist: "Let us obliterate this accursed heritage and live only for the future. All that is beautiful we hate because it was conceived under Czarism, and we will do all we can to reduce its grace to misery and derision."

This was visible in the Nevsky Prospect, but most of all it showed in the shops, once so richly cosmopolitan. Mirrors were cracked, cabinets broken, silver brackets wrenched away. The inlaid woodwork was scarred and filthied, while the Red riff-raff eddied about the products of the Soviet Union which boasts that only Russian goods are sold in Russia. There was no attempt at display. In most cases the shop windows were almost empty, which did not prevent them being besieged by a mob of buyers, eager to turn their roubles into something concrete. To them, deprived so long of the needs of life, even banality seemed beauty.

It was easier to print roubles than to produce goods and the first had outpaced the second. It was more important to make tractors than to make shoes, yet the man

who makes tractors wants to spend his wages on clothes. As he finds few of these his roubles often remain unspent. For instance, in a furrier's shop was a consignment of squirrel coats. They were his whole stock and they would be sold that evening. A mob of women were pawing and grabbing at them, trying them on before cracked but bevelled mirrors. They were shapeless as a sack, though the fur seemed fair. And as I stood in that lamentable shop I saw a woman who had the look of a factory worker exchange a roll of paper money for a graceless fur mantle. In the days of the Czar she would have worked a lifetime to own such a coat. No wonder she looked radiant.

The next shop I did not enter, for a crowd of two hundred waited to go in. Some of them had been there for hours, green roubles clutched in sweaty hands to be exchanged for a pair of shoes. For buying shoes is a slower business than buying sugar. One has to have some sort of a fit, hence the long line that extended round the block. Yet many would go home shoeless, for before they could pass those portals the consignment would be gone.

The third shop filled me with a frantic desire to escape, for the air made me want to vomit. The counters were piled with pork products, chiefly various kinds of sausage. There were also canned goods and groceries. But the mob of buyers was assailing the stock with such avidity it looked as if it would soon be exhausted. To make a purchase one had first to buy a ticket for the exact sum. This was exchanged for the article desired. There was no quibbling. You took what was slung at you by a snappish shopman who did not conceal his contempt for the crowd. They were Government employees and their job was to serve the customer, not to please him. I was glad to get away from the mass of smelly humanity that stood three deep for a can of peaches or a pound of tea. Then I remembered I had come to buy a comb.

In a shop near the Black Cathedral of Kazan I thought I might find what I wanted. It was below the level of the street and jammed with women buyers. There were half a dozen shop girls in grey slip-overs, and seen in the dim light they were unusually discouraging. I tackled the nearest but she turned her back on me. To the next I seemed to be invisible. A third deigned to regard me with distinctive dislike, and to her I confided my need, by making the motion of combing my silvery locks. After gazing at me for a moment with proletarian disdain she brought me a card of *small tooth combs*. In my best Scotch accent I advised her to keep them for her own use and left the shop.

Outside I found the Drummer in conversation with a stranger. He introduced me. "A Jew boy who wants to speak English with us. He says he has only studied it a month and already he's a wonder." The young man was about twenty, tall, slim,

handsome. He had silky black hair, velvet brown eyes, clear pale complexion and fine aquiline features. His clothing consisted of a cotton shirt, old cotton trousers and broken canvas shoes. In short, he suggested grievous poverty. Yet in his hand he held a fistful of roubles.

He spoke English, halting over each word and bringing it out with difficulty. I told him of my attempt to buy a comb, so he volunteered to help me. We re-entered the shop and the girl was impressed by his air of assurance. She brought us a card of celluloid combs, very thin and flimsy. I took one and the Jew boy said he would take one also. Then he said: "I'll pay for yours. I have lots of money—two thousand roubles." Of course I told him the thing was impossible even if he had two hundred thousand; but I would gladly pay for his, which I did.

Then we rejoined the Drummer and our new friend offered to accompany us on our promenade. At a lemonade kiosk he wanted to buy us a drink but we did not fancy the pinkish liquid. As we walked he told us he had just received a scholarship of two thousand roubles and was going to study electrical engineering. Meantime he played the accordion in a jazz band. I noted his long, delicate hands and asked if he played the piano. He said he played Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart. He would love to devote himself to music but there was no money in it. He could do better in electricity. He was handsome, vivacious, charming. Standing there in his rags with his pockets full of roubles he made a curious impression on me.

"It's funny he hangs on to us like this," I said to the Drummer. "He's delightful, but I imagine he's got some game on." "I think so too," said the Drummer. "He's too clever to be disinterested. We'll wait and see what happens."

We decided to visit the Black Cathedral which had been turned into an anti-religious museum. The Jew boy insisted on paying our entry fee so that we had some difficulty in refunding him his money. Always he kept harping on that two thousand roubles and displaying a big roll of bills. . . . The museum was instituted to show that Religion was founded on Fear and fostered by Ignorance. It tried to prove that belief and superstition were one and that the church down the ages had been the enemy of human enlightenment. Beginning with primitive man it claimed that religion had its birth in darkness and dreams, and that from the gods of the jungle grew the Deity idea through the centuries.

It showed the sinister side of worship, the blood rites, the massacres done in the name of the Church. In places it was a veritable Chamber of Horrors, Inquisition cells, witch doctors, bones of saints, and holy relics which the public were invited to regard with ridicule. To me it seemed grotesque. It slammed religion so savagely that in the end one sympathised with it. Soon it became a comic show; yet here were

bands of school children conducted by their teachers and told how the Church and Capitalism were the twin oppressors of mankind.

But though this interested the Drummer I noticed that it bored our Jew friend. He admitted it was the first time he had been in the place and refused to answer our queries, saying he did not know. Then he began to ply us with question about America, prices, social conditions and the chances of making money. From his eagerness it was apparent he regarded the States as an earthly paradise and would have given one of his eyes to go there. And he would have been a success, for he had charm, looks, intelligence. But there was no hope for him. He must make the best of this Russia where he was a prisoner for life.

All this he made plain to us and we felt rather sorry for him. Then at last he revealed his interest in us and why he cultivated us so assiduously. It was *Clothes*. . . . “Look at me,” he said. “I am a beggar, yet I have two thousand roubles. I want to be dressed like you. I want American clothes, English clothes. I want coat, suit, trousers, shirt, tie, shoes—yes, above all, shoes. Please, please sell me some clothes—any clothes. I give you all the money you want. I don’t care for money. I want to dress like you. Please you sell me . . . No?”

We tried to explain that we were only travelling with what we actually needed and that our shoes would not fit him. “That’s all right,” he told us. “Fit no matter. Leather good, cloth good. That good for me. Come, I give you all my money—two thousand roubles. You give me suit, shoes, shirt, tie, I dress like American. . . .”

It struck us that if we accepted his offer we could be put in prison for illegal trading. Perhaps he was an *agent provocateur*. Again we assured him we had nothing to sell. Yet he pleaded desperately. He would meet us any time, anywhere. He would come to our hotel that evening. He touched our suits wistfully. He begged for my old school tie and the Drummer’s silk socks, but by this time we were so scared of him we were adamant. Then suddenly he saw it was no good. He was beaten, and all at once his manner changed. He became cool and contemptuous. Looking like a nobleman even in his rags he drew himself up and bowed icily. Then without a word of good-bye he turned on his heel and was lost in the crowd.



## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

### PUSHKIN

A section of the fine but faded lobby of the Astoria was devoted to the office of Intourist. Here a pretty girl arranged the daily excursions. There are certain trips you are encouraged to take. Factories, hospitals and social centres are considered more worthy of your attention than art museums and historical monuments. Yet the latter are not entirely debarred and it was with considerable eagerness I elected to visit the Palace of Pushkin.

An ancient bus jolted us over a rough road, while from its floor came an evil odour. It was like stale vomit; indeed two of our party were sick owing to the bumpy motion. They were French school teachers and, of course, Communists. I noticed a large, pleasant looking woman smiling at me and wondered if I was making a conquest, despite my silver locks. However, it turned out she was our guide.

Intourist guides sometimes complain that visitors try to seduce them, yet nearly all with whom I came in contact were in no danger in that way. Rash would have been the Casanova who would have dared to lay seige to them; but one of them haughtily turned down the Drummer when he offered to buy her ice-cream. I have no doubt she thought he had designs, though being rickety and otherwise ill favoured, she might have considered herself safe.

However, our present guide, though hardly worthy of seduction, was a personable female, fat and fortyish, with stockings and a turban of canary colour. She spoke English with little accent and told us she was preparing to take her final exam for a professorship in that language. Her husband was an engineer, so that between them they made a snug income and approximated to the bourgeois type. Yet she was a good Communist, defending the system with spirit. In answer to my polite curiosity she told me her first name was Tamara.

On our way to Pushkin we passed through a slummy district and saw before a shop a line of customers extending down the block. There was something desperate about that patient column, or would have been if they had been waiting for food. But Tamara told us it was for silk stockings. The guides did not like us to notice these

long queues and tried to explain them by the temporary shortage of luxury goods.

In this section of the city much building was going on, and the expansion was encouraged by the Government, as it developed a Leningrad of Soviet origin. To house the workers in the near-by factories huge blocks of apartment buildings were going up. The apartments consisted of two rooms each, with a communal kitchen for every seven. They were box-like constructions of concrete, as if the architect had aimed at ugliness instead of beauty. There were more aesthetic houses of red brick, but these were designed for Government departments. Here I saw a groping for something essentially Soviet in architecture, but so far no clearly defined style has developed.

Emerging from this industrial zone we found ourselves in a farming region. In the distance were factory-like buildings, while the road was lined with log cabins of the old Russian type. There would be a slovenly garden, mud-plastered walls, a patched roof of rotting thatch. Half-naked children played without enthusiasm, while bare-footed women fetched water from the wells. The scene suggested a procrastinating people, who took life easily, preferring to suffer sordid conditions than to make any effort to rise above them. Here is the traditional Russian peasant and it will take a lot of communising to change him. Progress may go forward in a series of drives but, these exhausted, human nature will triumph in the end.

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Entering Pushkin through an arched gateway we found ourselves in a broad avenue, flanked by houses that resembled small *châteaux*. Now they served as institutions for the people. But beauty and Communism do not click, so everything was allowed to run down—lawns strewn with refuse, crumbling stone and rotting woodwork. But please do not think I complain of this democratic decadence, for I have only to think of the old Czarist regime to feel as ruthless a Communist as the best.

And now as we drew up before the Palace of Pushkin I surveyed with amazement its vast proportions. In the olden days it must have rivalled Versailles in beauty and splendour. Its ornate façade stretched in a terraced vista, fronted by fountain, garden and grove down to a lovely lake. But it would take a dozen chapters to describe this palace which is so beautiful even the Bolsheviks held it inviolate. However, they preserve it not for its beauty but as an object lesson. The people are admitted free, then . . . well, listen to the guide:

“Look how good we are to you. In the olden days you could not have entered here even on your bended knees. Now you are welcome, for it belongs to You, the People. Look at this magnificence born of your sweat and toil. In hunger and

poverty your fathers built up these palaces; in sickness and suffering they lived like beasts to bring this beauty into being. They were treated like dogs, unfit to breathe the air of the gilded domes their bleeding hands lifted to high heaven. But now *you* breathe it. You laugh and feel at home in these splendored halls, for they are yours. Their former masters died the death of dogs and it is your turn to triumph. You see how they lusted and orgied and mocked your misery. Now it is you who rejoice and give thanks to the glory of Communism, for it has delivered you from hell and given you a new heaven.”

Pretty propaganda! No wonder these lovely floors are kept polished by human scarecrows, these exquisite walls preserved by emaciated artists, for they are damning proofs of a dark and iniquitous past. And so from all parts of the land the People are brought to see them, not to admire, but to condemn them as infamous and degrading exhibits of Imperial oppression. Tamara was something of an artist, yet after pointing out some rare bit of loveliness she conscientiously gave her approval a proletarian twist. But obviously she loved beauty for its own sake, for her propaganda lacked fervour. Then again her sense of humour balked her, for she was one of the few I met who seemed to have it. That’s what is the matter with Marxism. It lacks a saving sense of humour, forgetting that only stupid people take themselves seriously. The peasants are more intelligent. They laugh, and most of all at themselves. But then no one likes the peasants—except the peasants.

But to return to Pushkin. . . . It struck me as a country edition of the Winter Palace. There were the same succession of marvellous halls crammed with richness. You passed rapidly from one vast room to another, and each seemed to surpass the former in beauty. All were so different as to make a bewildering contrast; yet their number was so great you had to go through them quickly, so that your final impression was one of despairing satiety. They merged into a picture of barbaric magnificence, of sybaritic splendour. There are over a thousand rooms in the Winter Palace, and I do not know how many in Pushkin, but Tamara almost sprinted to get them in. Continually she spurred us on, then she would remember her job, stop short, and shoot off a line of dope boosting the Soviets.

After a bit the Drummer and I got on to these interludes and as she yawned in the midst of a harangue we told her to cut the cackle and show us the sights. The pictures alone were a show in themselves. There were many paintings of Catherine the Great, though our guide reproved me when I called her “Great.” She was, said Tamara, a horrid woman, given to eating and drinking and sleeping in turn with every soldier in her regiment. The last she did not express in my rude language, but hinted at it delicately. As a matter of fact that was the feature of Catherine that interested

the Drummer most, but Tamara would not let him draw her on this subject, and was disgusted when he avowed his admiration for the Imperial nymphomaniac. On the other hand, she said Peter the Great really deserved his title. There was a Man. He would have made a good Communist. Communists like Peter because he once worked in a shipyard and was a ruthless character.

There was another band of sight-seers led by an earnest girl guide who was handing them propaganda by the yard. They were peasants and she addressed them like children. The women had bright blouses and bad teeth, the men were hulking oafs. But the moment they saw our little party the guide might have been talking to four walls. With eyes wide and gaping jaws they stared at us as if they had never seen a foreigner before—which probably they hadn't. And as they followed on our heels they continued to regard us as one of the wonders of the Palace, which otherwise seemed to bore them. As some of the girls nudged and tittered I accused the Drummer of making his usual killing, and perhaps I was not far out. No doubt some village damsel went home to dream not of the marvels of Pushkin but of the dashing stranger fresh from another world.

We were foot-sore and fed up with banqueting halls where dinners lasted all night, and boudoirs where the insatiable Catherine entertained her lovers. We were weary of halls of lapis lazuli and amber and porcelain. We wanted to see human stuff, and that was to be the climax of our visit, the intimate Palace of the Czar. Since the massacre in the vast square before the Winter Palace the Czar hated it. A kindly soul, he retired to Pushkin and lived a life almost bourgeois in its simplicity. That part of the Palace near the lake was occupied by the Royal family and is ideally beautiful. The swarded banks slope to the water, while noble trees preen themselves in its sky-blue mirror. With their ice-cream kiosks and rowdy row-boats even the proletariat cannot mar its charm.

It is when one enters the series of rooms one realises that kings and princes are no more than plain people and their pomp and pride a hollow sham. Perhaps it was for this reason the Government preserved those rooms exactly as the family of the Czar left them. But the feeling aroused in the intelligent observer is one of pity. However, such commiseration is foreign to Communist mentality and the hordes who pour through these rooms get the Soviet slant on the exhibition. For these intimate vestiges of Royal domesticity are shown to the vulgar public in a spirit of jeering bravado, even the bathrooms and water closets being exposed to the gloating gaze. Besides being sad there is something indecent about it, but there is little decency in the Communist character. Even Tamara looked on it with sheer contempt, as if the Royal family were vermin who deserved to be stamped out.

I don't think there is any remorse in Russia for that massacre, and perhaps they were right in what they did. The continued existence of the Czar and his son might have led to efforts to restore him to the throne. Better sacrifice a dozen lives than risk the slaughter of a million. There will never again be a Czar of the Russias and this is to the good, for hateful as is the new regime the old one was detestable. Deep as is my disgust for Bolshevism, at the thought of Czarism I become an ardent Communist.

Of the score or so of rooms that make up the Royal suite three remain vivid in my memory. The first is a Council Chamber panelled in exotic wood. There is a marble table that during the war used to be spread with maps, and round this the Czar and his generals would spend hours. Here, warmed by good wine and smoking their cigars, they decided the fate of millions. That amateur soldier, the Czar, had the last word . . . No, I am wrong. The last word was still more amateur. It came from the Czarina. For overhanging the Council table was a gallery and here sat the Czarina with Rasputin. And it was she, prompted by Rasputin, who had the final say. Often a decision would be countermanded at the last moment by the brutish monk who was the real ruler of Russia. I sometimes wonder if other councils of war are not equally irresponsible.

The second room was the living room. It was of medium proportions, and had rather a low ceiling. Stairs led to a gallery behind, which in turn led to the sleeping quarters. To the right was the Czar's writing-table—small, leather-covered and of horse-shoe shape. On it were his pens and inkwell, just as when he wrote his last letter. There he used to sit smiling, dreaming and watching his family. On the opposite side of the room was a vast divan in brown velvet, and on this the children used to throw themselves, romping or sitting clustered over a book. To the rear, like a cushioned throne, was the chair of the Czarina. It needed little imagination to picture that scene of loving gaiety. Yet here was the girl guide of the peasant group telling them that the Czar was an ogre and his children a brood of vampires.

The third room was most pathetic of all. It was the nursery of the little Prince, spacious and overlooking the lake. In the sunshine it must have been bright and joyous. The feature of it was one of those toboggan slides so common to Russian nurseries. But this was a giant one. Mounted by a winding stair it was about twelve feet high, and its shining surface projected one far on to the polished parquet below. I confess I myself longed to have a shot at it. In the space under it, as in a garage, was a little electric automobile, along with tricycles and other toys, all exquisite and expensive. The guide pointed to these with malicious joy, asking her following to compare this opulence with the wretched homes of those who contributed to it.

“These monsters got what they merited,” said she, and her flock agreed.

On the walls were pictures of the Czar and the Czarina. He looked a bearded mannikin, but she . . . well, I stood gazing at her portrait for five minutes, she was so lovely. There was a haunting melancholy in her expression, no hint of haughtiness, just serene beauty. Was there ever a Queen who looked so well the part? On the wall opposite was a painting of Marie Antoinette who seemed dowdy in comparison. This portrait was given by Poincaré and at the time it was regarded as an evil omen. Now the two queens gaze mournfully at each other across the nursery of the little prince.

I came away from Pushkin feeling a sincere pity for the tragic Romanoffs. It left an impression on me which its big sister, the Winter Palace, did nothing to efface. The Winter Palace might be compared to the Louvre with its buildings straightened out and laid in a line. It is said to have a thousand and fifty separate halls. These give on a corridor so long that looking down it one cannot see the end. Tamara guided us with a hangover look. She said she had been studying for her examination but I suspected she had been making whoopee. She galloped us through the rooms at racing speed, so that we had only a vague idea of their incredible magnificence. It would take a week to see them thoroughly and a book to tell about them. Catherine was partial to change—both in men and meals, and there was a dining-room for every day in the year. Dinners used to last seven or eight hours, accompanied by music and interspersed with amorous interludes. All of these high jinks were, of course, duly emphasised by Tamara as examples of Imperial depravity.

The pictures alone would take days of study and there were many examples of classic art. Tamara grew almost enthusiastic as she pointed out the beauties of a Rubens, a Rembrandt or a Murillo. She had been trained as a professional pianist but had fallen while skating and broken her thumb. Her great hope was to visit the United States where her husband might be sent to get technical experience. But I am sure if she were allowed to accompany him the Soviets would see them no more. “If,” I say, for the Government has a way of holding wives and children as hostages against return. She complained bitterly that the climate of Leningrad was vile, and she wanted to live in Moscow. But her dream was of the Caucasus, and she exulted in the thought that in a month she was due for a holiday in Yalta, where she could bathe in the Black Sea.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### THE SINGING SOLDIERS

Tamara, our guide of the banana yellow turban, was of the communist *bourgeoisie*, or perhaps I should say she was a silk stocking socialist. She took me aback by asking me how much money I made. I told her I was lazy and only earned enough to keep me in luxury, but the bulk of my bloated income came from dividends. At this my popularity suffered an eclipse, but I pointed out that many communists were capitalists, that the State Bank paid them three per cent on their savings and that this interest came from the exploitation of labour. She said it came from Rent. Everyone paid rent to the State to the extent of six per cent of their income and each person was entitled to twelve cubic feet of space. She earned six hundred roubles a month, her engineer husband a thousand roubles. She was very proud because she had a small apartment of two rooms and kitchen.

She tried to convince me that conditions in Russia were better than in other countries, and anything I said to the contrary was put down to boastful lying. She challenged me about prices, from silk stockings to motor cars, but owing to the fictitious value of the rouble we got so tangled up I was glad to change the subject. We were driving in a car which ran sweetly enough and I asked her about the price of gas. She asked the chauffeur. He did not know. He was a Government servant and got his petrol with his car. As only Government officials were allowed to own cars, petrol was a ration and had no market value.

By putting idiotic constructions to all she said I tried to neutralise her propaganda. In the square behind the old British Embassy was a mound under which one-hundred-and-sixty-five martyrs of the Revolution were buried. I insisted that the bodies should have been planted deeper, as the odour was quite distinct. Expressing my concern for the children playing round this charnel heap I suggested chloride of lime. As she recited Pushkin about them I metaphorically held my nose. Poor Tamara! I'm afraid we did not click.

Like other guides she discouraged slumming, and was blind when misery heaved up. Once a street arab passed, his rags tied with string. I asked Tamara the whyness

of him, but she declared I must have been mistaken. Misery did not exist in the Soviet Union. If she had encountered such a boy she would have investigated his case. He might be one of those pariahs who have no homes and used to be a plague. But now they had been sent to institutions and such cases were rare. Rare they might be, I insisted, but I had seen some of them. Quoth Tamara: "A great city cannot be cleaned up in a day."

Of beggars, too, I saw a number. They were very discreet, demanding charity ever so craintively. In the olden days Russians were kind to beggars, but Communists treat them with the harshest cruelty. They are spoken of as "those who won't work," and looked on as a discredit to the State. Yet tradition dies hard and people still give. "Never tip and never aid beggars," Tamara told me, so joyfully I did both.

I admit the job of eliminating misery in Russia is a tough one and no doubt it is making progress. But through the Red Realm poverty is dominant. In the large sense people do not live; they exist, and existence is full of fear, suppression and hardship. I mean hardship according to our standards, not Russian ones. If you have been used to a hovel two rooms seem a palace. The past was so black, the present seems golden. Yet in the United States no workman would submit to the standard of living in the Soviet today. He would not wear their best clothes, even to work in, and he would feed to the pigs much of the food they eat. The English worker on the dole can exist better than the Russian on full pay; while to live as the French worker does he would have to work eighty hours a week instead of forty.

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It is difficult to sidestep the tentacular solicitude of Intourist; but on one or two occasions I evaded their clutches and roamed the streets. I went cautiously at first, frequently taking my bearings. The spaciousness of Leningrad is rather stultifying and my legs are no longer those of youth. I stared at the yellow Ministry of Marine and the vast Winter Palace. I paraded the Square of the Revolution and gazed at the Fortress of Peter and Paul. I followed the Nevsky River watching boys bathing. I saw semi-naked children playing in the streets. I beheld men and women with torsos nude, leaning from their windows. For in Russia there is no false modesty. Women suckle their children with breasts proudly displayed and urination is a frank function.

The crowd took little notice of me. Perhaps they thought that to stare would be to flatter me, for their eyes were cold and hard. The Drummer attracted attention, for he was dressed in the height of Broadway fashion. His shoes drew the eyes like a magnet. Of patent leather and white kid such a pair did not exist in all Sovietdom. One day as we stood in front of St. Isaac's Cathedral some boys threw paper



aeroplanes over our heads, shouting loudly. An Englishman who was with us asked us: "Do you know what they are saying? They are shouting: 'See the aeroplanes of the Soviets flying over the profiteers.'" In the eyes of the crowd we were grinding capitalists and they hated us.

The public squares sagged in spots; the streets were ruggedly in disrepair. The mansions were broken fronted, with disconnected drain-pipes, chipped masonry and crumbling ornamentation. All that was bourgeois was doomed to be torn down and replaced by box-like buildings that embodied the Soviet ideal of utility. In the meantime many mansions were used as lodging houses, their entrances dark and dirty, their windows dingily blank. From splendour to sordidness these homes of wealth and rank had fallen; from patrician refinement to proletarian filth.

The shops seemed open at all hours. Even at two in the morning the grocers and bakers were crowded. In a window of the latter I counted ten kinds of loaves, but they need only one, their own black bread, the most nourishing in the world. With that and cabbage soup they can thrive. Yet while the grocers were well stocked the green-grocers were almost empty, for they depended on supplies fresh from the country. I saw two men with crates of tomatoes selling them to a line of over a hundred women. One took the money while the other handed a pound of tomatoes to each person. And they had to take what they got without any wrapping. In another case it was green melons. As each man went away with his melon he would cut a wedge from it and eat it on the road home.

I saw no cafés but lots of cellar drinking-dens, dim with smoke and jammed with unshaven men. I saw numbers of drunks yet people gave them no attention even when they slept in the gutter. In other countries they would have been locked up, but here they were treated like naughty children. The Russian is a philosophic drinker who looks on getting drunk as a diversion. Many of the men wore hair cropped close and I do not remember seeing a single hat. I don't believe you could find in all Russia a claw-hammer coat. The bigshots affect the blouse of the peasant.

The name of Stalin must be uttered with reverence. The Drummer and I referred to him as Mr. S. and thus were able to make him the butt of our jibes. Not that we had anything against him, but having him always thrown at us as a god rather soured us. As for Trotsky—Oh no, we never mentioned him. That might mean trouble; in Russia it is advisable not to argue but to agree to everything.

The women looked happier than the men. Ninety per cent had the look of workers; for a man must earn big pay to be able to keep his woman at home. Many wore high-heeled shoes and their chubby legs looked incongruous by comparison. Very rarely I saw one with stockings or a hat. But a few had pretty print dresses with

patterns of flowers. That sort of thing is contagious. I saw a girl stop another woman and touch the stuff of her gown eagerly. There is coquetry even in the Communist heart. Under their dresses many wore only a brassiere and knickers. They walked with the freedom that comes from few clothes. Their breasts protruded, their hips swung. From a health standard they were fine women. Also from a breeding one, judging by the many that were *enceinte*. There was no stigma on bastardy. A woman might have as many natural children as she wished and was honoured for it. Abortion had gone out of fashion but free love was freer than ever.

Everywhere one saw pictures of Lenin and Stalin, some gigantic. Producing them seemed to be one of the industries of the country. It is said there is a portrait of Lenin for every three citizens; I should think there must be three pictures for every citizen. One gets fed up with those two Muscovite mugs, including Kalinin, looking like an elderly goat. Molotov always managed to be impressive, but I never saw a portrait of Litvinov.

The tram cars were unbelievably crowded. In the interior one could see a solid compost of humanity, with growing from it a forest of arms. And however full, there always seemed place for more. The capacity for compression of the people was only equalled by their optimism. At every halt they stormed the door, clinging to the steps in clusters while the conductor tried to kick them off. I saw him tumble one woman on to her fanny on the street. She shrieked wrathfully after the retreating car, then subsided into laughter. They were good natured about it, but there was no sentiment of gallantry. Women were ruthlessly elbowed aside, and men sat where the softer sex stood patiently. Thus the Communist shibboleth of the equality of the sexes was proclaimed.

Night in Leningrad was weird, theatrical and a little sinister. Owing to the vague lighting it was like a mediaeval scene. As you approached the river the vast spaciousness engulfed you. It was so old and historic, the shadows so massive, the roadway so deserted. The starlit river with its fortresses and palaces seemed one with the brooding sky. And one night as I wandered dreaming of the past suddenly I heard singing. It approached, growing louder, louder, till I was aware of a strange rhythm. Somehow the sound filled me with joy. On it came with a steady beat, a regiment of singing soldiers.

There must have been a thousand of them, marching twenty abreast, stepping as one man and singing as with a single voice. And how they sang! It was worth while coming all that way to hear. They seemed oblivious to everything as they chanted their melodies so wild and strange. Up and down the streets they went, singing for hours, just for their own joy. Every evening I sought to hear them and never ceased

to be profoundly moved. In Moscow I only heard the raucous row of the radio, but the Singing Soldiers of Leningrad will always haunt me, and it was with that lovely memory I took my leave of a fascinating city.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### MOSCOW

I had come to like the shabby old Hotel Astoria and it was with regret I said good-bye. I ate my last dinner gazing at the equestrian statue with the weight of rearing horse and rider balanced on two slim hind legs. The waiter cleared the table of dirty dishes, flicked off the stained and hole-punctured table cloth, scattered the crumbs and laid it again. "Ticket!" he snapped. Then he offered the menu, and after waiting half an hour I got something quite different. It was the same as when I had arrived, but by now I was used to it.

For the last time I went down in the lift, past the theatre *décor* and the Frenchified maids. Brazenly I tipped, greeted with friendly smiles, for even in Red Russia servility dies hard. Then the Drummer and I went into one of the brown near-Cadillacs and swished to the station. Although it was ten o'clock the streets were thronged, while crowds seethed round the open shops. The station was gorged with anxious travellers. The train jam-packed, even the corridors being blocked by passengers and baggage.

The compartment was of the plainest kind, with hardwood seats turned into bunks. There were four and the space between was so narrow they almost touched. A girl in a brown uniform supplied us with blankets and linen against a receipt attached to our tickets. Parked in the corridor we waited while the attendant made up the berths. Waiters squeezed past with tea, lemonade, sandwiches. A little Russian with whom we were to share our compartment looked at us defensively. He had his wife and child and they were making a supper of rye bread and roast chicken. He wore top-boots, an embroidered blouse, a goatskin coat. His wife had an embroidered shawl. The little girl was peaked but perky. A devoted family, clean and neat. We called him the Cossack and by persistent smiles established friendly relations.

Owing to the crowding we decided to seek the sanctuary of our berths. The Cossack ordered his wife out of the compartment while we installed ourselves. It was easier than I expected. The sheets were sewn in the form of a sack, so that we

could crawl in, and by making a kind of a tent undress almost entirely. When we had finished the Cossack family followed suit. The little girl snuggled into next to nothing; but the haunches of the woman made a miniature mountain, while the Cossack stripped bare to the waist.

I found the berth unexpectedly comfortable and enjoyed my night. However, in the morning it was impossible to think of washing. There was a waiting line to get into the *cabinet*, but the Drummer, who made it, backed out in horror as the stench took him by the throat. Deciding we must defer our toilet till we reached Moscow we waited grimy and breakfastless in the corridor. I told the Drummer, who had a strong growth of beard, he looked like a *moujik*, and he said he felt like one.

So we stared at the dreary landscape, finding no comfort there. Vast fields of stubble stretched to the factory-like buildings of the collective farms. We saw forlorn villages of mud cabins, whose inhabitants looked poor and joyless. There were few towns, for when the Czar was asked to lay out the railway between St. Petersburg and Moscow he put a ruler on the map and said: "There!" utterly disregarding the communities between. Thus the line is the straightest in the world and the most crowded. In the end the crush in the corridor made us again retire to our bunks where we lay till we neared Moscow.

We reached there about one and drew up at a siding packed with people. As the train vomited forth another mob confusion was worse confounded. How glad we were to be hailed by Intourist guides, to be called by name and conducted to waiting cars. Our guide gave a direction and the Drummer whispered: "It's the Metropole, the best hotel in all Russia."

As we drove through the crowded streets I thought: "I'm going to like this place." At once I noticed a different atmosphere from Leningrad. The people were more buoyant, no doubt due to the kindlier climate. For weather has much to do with happiness. In the hot sunshine the citizens of Moscow seemed glad and gay, and no doubt if I went to Odessa I would find them ebullient. I suggested this to our guide, but she told me icily that in the Socialist Republic there were no sad sections: everywhere was joy.

"See! The twin towers of the Kremlin," said the Drummer, and even as I looked we drew up before the Metropole. Across the square from the huge Moscow Hotel came the raucous blare of a loudspeaker that never ceased day or night. The vestibule of the Metropole was reached by a short flight of steps and made a lounge as comfortable as it was shabby. So we trooped to the office where we surrendered our passports and were allotted our rooms. I was delighted to find mine had a bath. It is true the room was dingy, overcrowded with furniture, and the bathroom a

*rendez-vous* for cockroaches, but these were trifles; so refreshed by a wash and change I descended to the dining room, where I found the Drummer awaiting me.

We were wolf-hungry and looked eagerly around the grandiose hall. It was empty, no one in sight. Yet it was rather a famous place. In the old days it was the centre of sumptuous celebrations, while during the early period of the Revolution the Bolshevik Councils held sessions here. There was a stage where dancers and singers appeared every evening, and in the centre a fountain and fishpond. In its setting of ferns and flowers the effect was charming.

We took seats by the side of the fishpond. The fountain played melodiously and perch flirted in the marble depths. They were doomed, for on the following day they appeared on the menu, but in the meantime it was pleasant to watch them. We ordered lunch—caviare, bortsch, salmon, chicken and ice-cream, and after a wait that seemed interminable we were served with huge portions of everything. We did our best but with a sense of repletion we decided that a digestive snooze might be a good idea. Alas! there was no rest for us. We were told we were expected to go sight-seeing and the car was waiting.

We were greeted by a little lady who announced herself as our Moscow guide. I demanded her *Christian* name but she told me she was a Jewess. She had crepe-like hair, a plump figure and wore a new robe every day. Her dresses were cheap but too simple to be in bad taste. Indeed her whole character was of a disarming seriousness. I question if she had a grain of humour. Her Communism was a religion and she regretted the socialist compromise that had displaced it. She was married, without children, not living with her husband. She was paid six hundred roubles a month, and had a room for which she paid thirty-six roubles a month. As frank as a child and without guile, of all our guides she was the one I like best. Her name was Sara.

I'm sorry to say I disgraced myself in the car. Driving after lunch always makes me sleepy and as I listened to her discourse I was overcome by drowsiness. It was not so difficult to keep awake as we crossed the Red Square and passed the tomb of Lenin; it was less easy as we traversed the Moscowa and gazed at the grey mystery of the Kremlin. Seen from a distance it was dream-like in its solitary beauty. Yet we could see sentinels weaving on its walls, and were assured that the Man of Steel was well guarded. I should have been thrilled by the sight but . . . my eyes were closing.

We skirted the banks of the river and struck into the grey, industrial zone. Vaguely I heard our guide explaining: this was the factory where they made ball-bearings for all Russia; that was the Dynamo Trust; here was where our car was

made. Dimly I saw at the doors of each, pictures of Stakhanovites, the shock brigade of the Soviet heavy industry. They looked supremely uninteresting: uninteresting, too, the miles of grey walls and drab buildings. Desperately I struggled against my drowsiness. Several times I jerked myself out of incipient slumber, then finally collapsed and my snores drowned the noise of the motor. Poor Sara! I know I was rude and no doubt I lost much valuable information but I could not help myself. The Drummer explained that I had not slept on the train and was tired out. Sara was sympathetic, but when we drew up before a Workman's Club I woke with a sense of shame.

The Club was a square building of concrete and glass, excessively ugly from the outside and equally unbeautiful within. Its halls were without ornamental grace. There was a reading room, a lecture room, and a theatre, where propaganda plays were put on by proletarian players. Model institutions never exhilarate me. They reproach me with my irresponsibility and this was so blatantly efficient it depressed me. I would have appreciated it more if instead of theatres for democratic drama and map walled lecture rooms there had been billiard saloons and swimming baths; instead of dialectical discussion—beer drinking and song singing; instead of chart boards—dartboards.

Said the Drummer: "We have better in the States, so why should we be shown this dump like it was the cat's whiskers? Only our boys prefer baseball and beer to this stuff. I tell you it stinks." I was inclined to agree. The place was too self-conscious of proletarian progress. Its rectangular rectitude repelled me. All these walls adorned by portraits of shock workers! They looked alike—grim, tenacious, plebeian. They drove themselves relentlessly for the extra money it brought them. At least the Soviets realise the justice of pay by results. The idea of a fixed wage for fixed hours may do for silly Trades Unions in stupid democracies but not here. If a man does not complete his norm he is not paid the average wage. If he is weak and inefficient he makes a bare living, but if he does double the norm he may buy such luxuries as the country affords.

In Red Russia competition between workers is stimulated by the greed of extra gain. There is war in the factory between competing teams, strife in the workshop between men at the bench; rivalry in the *kolhoz*—where a ploughman will do his ten acres a day to his brother's five, and be counted a hero as well as earning double pay. But if they tell you they do it for the glory of Communism you can smile. They do it for the extra roubles they gain. By nature the Muscovite is lazy and must be lashed forward, just as the serfs were. Quite justifiable in the name of a bureaucracy that taxes industry thirty-five per cent for its support.

With relief I left this Worker's Club. If Sara found me enraptured she did not know me as a good actor. For instead of seeing young men pounding out points of Marxian doctrine I would have preferred to watch them swapping saucy limericks. As the Drummer remarked: "That's the trouble with them Bolshies: they take themselves so damn serious. They think they're putting something over on us when we have them licked endways. But you can't tell them that. They believe that outside of Soviet Russia everything is going to the demnition bow-wows, and their government won't let them leave the country to see for themselves. They figure they have a monopoly on social salvation, and if you're not Red you're ratting on the human race."

Sara suggested that we go to the Metro, so at the nearest subway station she dismissed our chauffeur. A neon sign over the doorway could be seen a long way off. Two soldiers with bare bayonets guarded the entrance. On a marble staircase that would have done credit to a palace were stationed other soldiers. The walls were also of marble and two animated bundles of rags were busy polishing them with loving care. Another bundle of old clothes, but with a brassard, was busy punching tickets. She was *enceinte* by about seven months yet valiantly she stood up to the job. With her maternal rest spell in the near future she punched patiently, but they might have let her sit down.

In the station I counted a dozen different kinds of marble, some rare and all lovely. The lighting was artful, while every few yards were distinctive types of sculpture. It was rugged and forceful. The faces were strong, square, stern; the figures tall, athletic, massive muscled. "The models were all workmen, soldiers or peasants," said Sara, emphasising their virile force and the almost crude vitality of their conception. "You see how we are developing new forms of art that are essentially proletarian."

Dazzling lights, frescoed walls, statues and marble arches, columns and pillars of malachite and lapis lazuli (or what might have been good imitations of them) it was more like a scene in an emperor's palace rather than a mere subway station. And keeping all this gorgeousness dazzlingly clean were these teams of ragged old women, themselves so unclean.

The platform was solid with soiled humanity who took the train by assault. In a mass they jammed the doorway fighting to be first. And there was no need for there was room for all. In the struggle for seats very few women succeeded. Ruthlessly the men elbowed them aside. The female can look out for herself. Gallantry would be misunderstood, consideration resented. Yet this mad scramble was good-natured, as if they were school children taking part in a Great Game.



And not the least of the game was the moving stairway. It was the longest and steepest I ever saw. Like eager children the crowd stormed it, laughing joyously. Of all the wonders of their magical Metro this was the most marvellous. They would have liked to cross over at the top and go down again but a stern soldier forbade them. Among the down-going crowd I watched an old peasant couple who gaped with consternation. They could not be persuaded to venture on that devil's descent to some earthly inferno. Finally they were pushed forward, and crouching and clinging to each other, they cried and prayed all the way down, to be projected forward on their faces when the bottom was reached.

Yes, the Moscow Metro is the finest thing of its kind in the world. No two stations are the same. Each vies with the other in gorgeousness. Here is a sight almost to be compared with the Palaces of Pushkin and the Hermitage. And above all it is a *Soviet* achievement. All Russia is proud of it. New stations are continually being opened, even more marvellous than the old. Soon in their surpassing splendour they will be adorned with crystal and silver, ivory, amber and precious stones—gaudy temples to the grinning gods of proletariat progress.

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We stood in the Red Square feeling lost in its vastitude. Facing us was the Kremlin, its walls frescoed with the foliage of firs. In front was the squat taciturnity of Lenin's Tomb; to the left the bizarre beauty of St. Basil bubbled against the blue. "Let's go over," I said to the Drummer, "and salute those two sentries who are guarding the gate of the Secret City. Perhaps if we marched boldly in they might take us for Commissars and let us enter."

"More likely poke us with their bayonets. But we might thank them for guarding Comrade Stalin so carefully. I have two picture post-cards of Comrade Lenin that I might present to them. Do you think they would be grateful?"

"I'm afraid they might have seen them before," I answered. "But we might give them the Communist salute with our clenched fists raised in the air."

"It's not done any more. You see, lots of people raised their clenched fists with the thumb pushed between the first and second finger. It makes all the difference. Try it and see."

I did, and found it decidedly suggestive of indecency, so I reserved it for an audience less intimidating than Red soldiers. "Well," I said, "if we can't have a squint at Stalin let's have a gander at old Lenin."

So we strolled over to the black and red marble tomb so saturnine in comparison with the graceful grey walls beyond. The Drummer pointed to a row of baroque buildings lining the other side of the Square. "They're going to pull them

down,” he said, “because they’re anti-proletarian in suggestion. In their place they’ll put up rat-coloured cubes of concrete, sky-high packing boxes of glass and cement.” Regretfully I looked at the handsome and dignified old houses now occupied by the Toilet Paper Trust and thought how much of the grace of the square would go with them. Tearing down and building up was Moscow’s mania. Destroying beauty to create ugliness. We must leave, they seemed to say, no trace of the old Russia. We must recreate it in the Marxist mould.

Crossing the Square we admired the fantastic grandeur of St. Basil. They will never destroy that, thank God! for they have made an anti-religion museum of it. Yet such institutions defeat their own object, for they nauseate by their very excess of hate. If I were the most militant of atheists they would turn me sympathetically to religion. If there be a Deity, how He must be flattered by Communist contumely!

“Do you believe in God?” Sara asked me, and I answered: “Even if I don’t I have the decency not to proclaim it. To deny God publicly is as common as it is vulgar.” Then I remembered that in the lexicon of Leninism there are no such words as “common” and “vulgar.” Perhaps because everyone is common or vulgar . . . But to get back to the Tomb.

Around it was a motley mob, ever changing like a kaleidoscope. That swirling throng was perhaps its most interesting feature. When it is open there are thousands of visitors, and to watch them is as amusing as a circus. From all parts of the Republic they are drawn to it as Moslems are drawn to Mecca. This crowd is full of colour, for South and East contribute to it. You may see turbaned soldiers from Turkestan, or sheep-skinned brigands from Armenia, entrained here to impress them with the glory of the Great God Karl. Maybe each returns to his *kahn* or his *kolhoz* the Compleat Communist. Maybe no. It is hard to make Marxist purses out of pigs’ ears.

All visitors are obliged to give up their arms before visiting the Tomb. Each person is closely scrutinised by the many guards. It is forbidden to carry anything in the hand, and peasants pass their packets of provisions to good-natured bystanders. As I watched a guard pounce on a girl carrying a wilted posy of asters I wondered if he thought it contained an infernal machine. Anyway, he took it.

As we joined the procession that moved slowly to the Tomb, a Red soldier dashed in behind us. “They don’t like the look of you,” said the Drummer. “There’s a Gaypayoo agent right on your heels. What about that bomb up your sleeve?”

At the word “bomb” I saw the Red soldier start and draw closer. I felt I was a marked man and that it was no moment for idle persiflage. So silently and with a pretence of reverence I advanced. I was, indeed, a little nervous for the atmosphere

was eerie and sinister. Solemnly we descended in semi-gloom mid walls of dark marble. Then, turning a corner, the air suddenly became intensely cold. It was like entering a refrigerator.

We were in a long, low vault. Soldiers kept moving us on. We were not allowed to hesitate a moment and our every movement was watched. We climbed half a dozen steps, halted, looked down . . . we were in the presence of Lenin. We arrived at his head, walked slowly to his feet, round them, up to his head again and out. The whole business lasted less than thirty seconds and there was little time to take in any details. . . .

He was in a glass case like a figure of wax. His face was waxen and composed. He wore a brown tunic while the flag of the French Commune was draped across his middle. One hand rested on it. There was a Red Star on his chest. His face showed no sign of decay, his hand no trace of withering. The vault was almost in darkness but the case of plate glass was in strong light. The effect was impressive, the showmanship good. Those who passed were silent, no doubt awed. It was a wonderful bit of preservation.

There are those who say the face is wax and the tunic is stuffed with horse-hair, but a doctor friend who examined it carefully told me it was a marvel of cold storage and the embalmer's art. I often visited the Tomb till familiarity almost bred contempt. It was just round the corner from the hotel so after tea we would say: "Let's stroll over and have a squint at the mug of old Lenin." Then solemnly we would file before the patient and long suffering dead whose face from its pillow wore a look of weary resignation. No wonder. To be exhibited like this for thirty years and to go on perhaps for another twenty. For when the crowd is gone the body is lowered into a crypt and anxiously examined for signs of decay. Then if it is necessary it is pumped with fresh dope, arranged with an eye to dramatic effect and once more hoisted into its tank, to be goggled at by thousands of morbid sight-seers.

"Poor Lenin!" said the Drummer. "Maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. Maybe he had a human streak, though he did his best to hide it. Anyway, what has he done to deserve this?"

I would have given much to take a snapshot of him as we paced past, but we were watched too closely for that. Still his face is graven in my memory. A touch of Socrates, a suggestion of Verlaine, and maybe a little of the genius of each. He was a bigger man than those about him, a cool leader, a shrewd thinker. He was crafty, far-seeing, dispassionate, yet but for the war he would have passed his life as an unknown and obscure pamphleteer. Now millions pass his tomb, gazing with gruesome curiosity, and going home to boast they have seen him. It is one of the

sights of the city, the chief side-show in the Soviet circus.

“Poor old Lenin!” I echoed. “What have you done to deserve this? . . .”

## Chapter Thirty

### THE PARK OF CULTURE AND REST

Today we visited the so-called Park of Culture and Rest. As we left the Metropole the loud-speaker of the Moscow Hotel was braying furiously. It was as raucous as a gin-pickled newspaper vendor. No one listened for no one knew what it played. One only noticed when it stopped, because of the sudden relief to the ears. Most of the time it seemed to be blaring something lugubrious which I supposed to be the Internationale, though I never to my knowledge heard that famous air. One never does in Russia, only in Westminster and Lavillette. In any case everything it played sounded alike so that it would be difficult to tell the difference between the Internationale and the Anthem of Imperial Russia.

On the way Sara told us about the Park of Culture and Rest. "It used to be a waste-land on the edge of the Moscowa where in the bad old days all kinds of criminals and lazy people lived. But we have reformed the criminals and put the lazy people to work. Now the swamp is made into a Pleasure Park for The People. The hovels have been torn down and in their places rise Temples of Knowledge and Palaces of Culture. And we all owe it to Comrade Stalin."

"Three cheers for Comrade Stalin!" I echoed fervently.

We crossed the river by a wide bridge and just beyond were the gates of the Park. "See," said Sara with a sweeping gesture. "Once a malarial marsh, now a garden of gaiety combined with culture. And it all belongs to The People."

"They seem to be paying to go in."

"Oh, a nominal charge to cover running expenses."

"Like Luna Park. One pays to go on paying."

"Not at all. There are many free attractions. And the Culture is *quite* free. We try to instruct as well as amuse."

"The Pill of Propaganda in the Jam of Joy. Well, as long as joy abounds no one can complain."

We paid about fifty kopeks and entered to the strains of a loud-speaker. "See!" said Sara, pointing triumphantly. On each side of the gate were herbaceous banks

and at first I did not see. Then gradually I made out that they represented enormous heads patterned by varying shades of verdure. Surely it couldn't be! Yes, there they were—dear Lenin, beloved Stalin. Even Nature trained to portray them. How proud the poor plants must have been to depict those noble features. And as if that was not enough beyond were the Mighty Mugs of High Commissars painted on vast spreads of canvas. All except Litvinov. Well, I don't expect he worried about it. But what a noble idea to so ceaselessly remind the people of the Great Ones who govern. Let us take a tip from Russia and blazen our public spaces with giant pictures of the Saviours of the Nation.

In the surging crowd Soviet youth was dominant; young men in ducks or dungarees, collarless cotton shirts and sandals on bare feet; girls in print dresses and scanties; no corsets, no stockings. Red soldiers with green bands round their peaked caps. Groups of peasants looking lost, with greasy packets of gluey black bread and cold duck. In sum—a grey, slip-shod, uneasy mob, pathetically anxious to be amused.

“Where shall we go first?” asked Sara. As I looked down the descending vista of the Park I had a crushing sense of dreariness. The attractions seemed to be scattered so grudgingly that I determined to be virtuous. “I don't want to be amused,” said I. “I want to be instructed. Lead me to Culture.”

So by devious paths we came to an alley lined with booths and each was tenanted by a specialist in Popular Education. “What do you want to be instructed in first?” said Sara. “What about a spot of Geology!” I answered “I always had a weakness for fossils.”

The Drummer followed disapprovingly. I think he yearned for amusement, but I was determined not to be amused. So we stopped at a stall where shelves of rock were ranged, and a spectacled Professor awaited an audience. I pointed to the most glittery looking specimen as with avidity he proceeded to instruct me. It was difficult to stem his flow of eloquence. Even Sara had a hard job keeping up with him. A band of boys, attracted by us rather than by the Professor, gathered around us and gaped as they gazed. From then on they followed us faithfully from booth to booth.

We could not listen to geology forever, so with profuse thanks to the lecturer we broke away. We passed up a booth on sexual hygiene where a glamorous doctress was explaining obstetric mysteries to a group of giggly girls. “What would you like next?” said Sara.

“I feel I could do with a bit of botany,” I suggested. But Botany was represented by three different booths and by the time we had covered them the voice of Sara was so dry she sounded like Sahara. The Drummer, too, had been growing more

and more glum. Yet for over an hour we continued our educative perambulation. We ran the gamut of ‘ologies, beginning with anthro’ and ending with zoo’, till my brain was splitting, Sara voiceless and the Drummer wobbly. Then all at once he bucked up. “What about phrenology?” he said. “I’ve always been crazy about bumps.”

Then I saw that the Professor of Phrenology was a girl and easy on the eye. In fact a peach, a bunch of beauty. The Drummer became rooted to the spot. She could talk all night to him, though he wouldn’t know what she was saying. Sara looked at him with pity. Again and again she suggested that we move on, and as my legs ached infernally I seconded her. Finally yet almost by force we dragged the Drummer away from that sweet-voiced siren.

We were “all in” now, so when Sara suggested we should listen to one of the lectures where we could sit down, we followed her blindly. It was a small theatre and before a hundred elderly auditors an emaciated lecturer was giving a discourse on Dysentery. Fortunately we did not understand what he was saying, but his voice was soothing and we rested thankfully in our seats. From Dysentery we passed to Spain, where we got a dose of fiery propaganda from an orator who proclaimed the fall of Franco. However, being indifferent to Franco I took an early opportunity to propose a cool drink. So we adjourned to a blue kiosk where we had pink lemonade and stared at a likeness of Lenin draped in crimson.

As we wended our way wearily home the Drummer growled: “I’m going to take in that joint this evening, but this time, by Gosh! I’m going alone. And I’m not going for instruction. I’m going for FUN. You get me? F.U.N., spelling Fun.”

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He went, but not alone. Sara had got wind of his intention and was on his trail. Deciding that he needed someone to look after him I, too, toddled on his track. When he turned furtively we pounced on him. We had the Newly-Weds with us and a car. So we all piled in and rolled in the direction of FUN.

The Newly-Weds were strikingly incongruous. He was spectacled, thick-set, deep voiced, a College teacher with Communist leanings. She was slim and dainty, with the newest freak in hats and frocks from the rue de la Paix. He was like a beetle, she a butterfly. They were quite happy because they had not yet found each other out. As she tripped on her very high-heeled shoes I thought of the grit of the Park of Culture and felt sorry for her. Sara took an enthusiastic dislike to her. Guides seldom like female tourists, especially when they are smartly dressed. Nobody has a right to be smartly dressed in Sovietland. Nobody is. . . .

Rouble-proffering proletariats were pouring through the turnstiles of the Park and the neon lights made it gayer than by day. There was a performance of ballet

that evening but though the standard was low the prices were high. However, so starved was the public for amusement there was not a seat to be had.

We were readily consoled, preferring the freedom of the Park, and set about finding other entertainment. One of the most popular attractions seemed to be a series of long arms each of which gripped its victim in a grasp of leather and swung him like an inverted pendulum. Up he went dizzily into the air, then down to the ground, standing on his head; then back again. It seemed idiotic.

"It's to make young people air-minded," said Sara. "Would you like to try it?" I warmly assured her I would not, but added that the Drummer was keen on that sort of thing. He protested, but I offered to pay him a picture post-card of Stalin if he did. He did. We followed his flight as, trussed like a lark, he soared into the sky till he seemed a mere speck; then down, down, and we got a glimpse of his distorted and congested face as he paused before making the return journey. When he rejoined us his face was a ghastly green.

"Did you say 'air-minded'?" he gasped. "It made me *prayer minded*. Not for a life size portrait of Lenin in oils would I do it again."

"Anything else to show us in the air-minded line?" I asked Sara.

"Why yes. There's the parachute jumping. We want to be a nation of parachute jumpers. It's part of the training of Soviet youth." So we went to a tall tower and from a platform little figures jumped into the void, attached to a parachute that opened half-way and let them down—more or less gently. Some stumbled, some tumbled, some made a somersault, but all landed safely. When one made a good landing the crowd applauded. Many were young girls.

"You see, even the children learn," said Sara. "Some day they will be taken up by our splendid airmen and jump from a real height. We have the greatest air force in the world. Lindberg thinks so. We love Lindberg. We would like to make him a Soviet citizen and put him in charge of our air force."

"Wouldn't that be just fine," I agreed. I always did agree with Sara. It was less trouble. I avoided stepping on her red-stained Communist toes. After all she was a square-shooter and Karl Marx was her God. So I let her take us to a lighted court where a dozen husky flappers were playing basket ball. They wore shorts showing over-stuffed knees. They looked healthy and happy and they played with joy. Now I am a seeker of joy and wherever I find it I rejoice. The sight of these damsels was a bright spot in my visit till Sara pointed to them as a proof of how the Soviets were helping youth to live.

I did not tell her that I had seen Youth being helped to live both in Germany and in Italy. The Youth Movement was not confined to Russia. But she would not have



believed that. If I had told her that what was limited to a few here was normal in England and America she would have sniffed incredulously. "Go and see for yourself," I might have said, and she would have been obliged to answer: "We are not allowed to go and see."

These were High School girls. They were poorly dressed but were none the worse for that. They were well fed and full of hope for the future. They would be teachers and preachers and spread far and wide the gospel of Communism according to their lights. Why not! Pure Communism is as good a gospel as most, only in Red Russia it has been supplanted by a bastard Socialism. Communism and Christianity have much in common, and though I do not believe that either is practical I have respect for both. I would not like to live in a world designed on Communist or Christian lines. I am too confirmed a sinner and an individualist for that. But Belief is blessed, and happy are those who have Faith in their hearts.

I have never had a sense of social brotherhood, only of artistic brotherhood. Let a man paint, make music or write, then I feel there is a bond between us. But brotherhood in the broader sense repels me. I accept it as an ideal, yet consider it contrary to human nature. There will always be a gulf between black and white, yellow and brown. Universal Brotherhood is a vain dream.

As a seeker of joy I looked about me. Girls and boys of the proletariat class were strolling everywhere, but there was little joy in their propinquity. Very sedate they were, or it may be, very discreet. I saw no hugging, no prolonged osculation, not even a timid holding of hands. Either Russian youth is very virtuous or very cold. The only bold ones were the Red soldiers, but perhaps they were allowed more licence.

Said the Drummer: "I don't see much necking or gum-sucking going on round here. They seem to be a highly moral bunch. In public anyway. Are there any abortions?"

"No," said Sara. "We've done away with that. Only in special cases. We want the population to increase."

"Have you children?" I asked her.

"No, I should have loved to have given a boy to the Republic."

"Was it the fault of your husband?"

"No, if it had been I would have got one by another man. I would so like to be the mother of a Communist." That was it. She did not want a son. She wanted a baby Bolshevik.

In Moscow I noticed many shops devoted to the sale of contraceptives, so there must be a demand for them. But this was probably among the Communist

*bourgeois*, that is to say, the bureaucrats. For I saw so many women among the humble classes heavy with child that it seemed as if motherhood was becoming a cult among them. After all, it meant nine months of ease and care. Medical supervision and nursing, good food and long rest.

“Mothers have a swell time in this country,” said the Drummer. “They might make a profession of it. The Breeding Machines of Bolshevism. The father don’t seem to count. He gets nothing out of it—only the fun. And the State gets little soldiers for the Red Army. Breed like rabbits, that’s the system. Great guys, these. They’ve got the world beat.”

And perhaps they were right. Let the women have many children. Pension them for Multitudinous Motherhood. Honour them for their prolific prowess. Marriage doesn’t matter. Bastardy doesn’t matter. Make good Soviet Citizens. Press the button. We’ll do the rest.

After that, we stopped before an arena jammed tight with couples dancing to the music of two concertinas. They danced with difficulty on the dirt surface which, may have accounted for their lack of joyous abandon. They moved with a grave deliberation, like beginners, not quite sure of themselves.

“We have professors who give them free lessons,” said Sara. “But what we would like would be to create new Soviet dance forms.”

“Why not?” said the Drummer. “We have the Lambeth Walk. Why not the Caucasian Crawl? What’s wrong with the Russian Rumba? Don’t let the Greasers get away with it. You’re the greatest dancers on earth. Show them something.”

Maybe, but meantime the throng gyrated solemnly to the tune of *Bananas have no Bones* and seemed to love it. A drab multitude in a misty light, and two bandoleons grinding out American jazz. We left them solemnly tangoing to the *Isle of Capri*.

Suddenly the Drummer suggested that we have another go at Culture and proclaimed his continued interest in Phrenology. But Sara put her foot down. She was not going to have him vamped by a professor of such a dismal science, and I too vetoed the idea. The truth is I worried about Mrs. Newly-Wed. She was teetering on her toes, evidently in distress. She wobbled on her pin-heeled Pinets, but she was a good sport and tried to conceal it. Hubby was too interested in proletarian progress to notice, and Sara was unsympathetic. The Drummer was wistfully dreaming of his blond professor, so I said we’d better go home.

But before we did so we stopped to listen to some Community Singers. As an amateur song writer I thought I might get a line on some original tunes, so I was really interested. You see, I have a poor memory for music and when I try to

remember a melody it usually comes out so different as to be almost original. That's what makes me a composer.

On a platform was a young girl fair and pretty. She had a sweet voice and was unaffected and unafraid. As she sang she unrolled a strip of canvas on which words were stencilled. An audience of about a hundred sang in unison while she led them, beating time. It was very elementary, like a mistress teaching children. Again I realised that these were children. I have no doubt there was propaganda in the words and the melody was not worth my while stealing; but this, my final memory of the place, was a very pleasing one. The singers seemed to be loving it and the teacher was charming. It must be joy to inspire a crowd like that, just as it must be joy to those two youths to play their accordions and make that mob dance to their music. That to my mind is real happiness—to make others dance and sing. Lucky singer! Lucky players! They were to be envied by us who did nothing but buy and sell in the sordid markets of the world.

The basket ball players and the Community Singers were the bright spots of our visit. Sport and music, no one can come to much harm, if they stick to those. But as we came away the Drummer grumbled; "Park of Culture and Rest where there's no Culture and less Rest! In a corner of Coney Island there's more frolic than in this whole dump. And to think these guys pay good money to go in. Shows how they're starved for amusement. Why, but for that little blonde in the Phrenology Booth it's the punkest Carnival Park I ever saw."

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

### SOVIET SIDE SHOWS

The Drummer flirted his silk handkerchief, blew his nose sonorously and declared in a meaty voice: "I want a good day in the country. I won't let Intourist push me around. I'm fed up with factories and reformatories. Half of them are lousy anyway. Look at the Dental Department of the Hospital for the Truck Trust. It was dirty. No American worker would have entered it. And the hospitals—swarming with women doctors because the profession is so poorly paid men won't go into it."

"The doctoresses may be very capable."

"I wonder? I wouldn't call a woman doctor in the States if it was my last gasp, but here I've got to take the one the State assigns to me. I don't believe they are efficient."

"As efficient as in the free wards of most countries."

"That's it. No one pays for medical attention. I can afford to buy the best and I want the best."

"You want a private room when other poor devils are huddled in the public one. That's anti-social."

"Anti-social . . . hell! I'd hate to be sick in Soviet Russia. . . ."

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The result of the Drummer's rebellion was that Sara took us to the Palace of a Prince. An enthusiasm for historical monuments is not encouraged in the Red Realm as it detracts from the interest one ought to feel for the Five Year Plan. But certain relics of the past are preserved to be carefully lime-lit by the red radiance of propaganda . . . "See, children of the people, how the wicked nobles used to live in licentious splendour! They drank the life blood of your fathers; but now you have trampled them into the dust, and here, in the luxury of palaces they built at the cost of misery and death, you wander free, exulting because they are yours forever."

Sara told me of this Prince. He had forty thousand serfs and his attitude to them was paternal. To all with ability he gave the chance to develop it. Those who had artistic gifts were encouraged to give of their best. "But of course," said Sara, "it was all for his own glory. He wanted to make his palace the most splendid outside of the

Imperial ones. He wanted to be the greatest patron of art in all Russia.”

But it was in the realm of the theatre he chiefly sought to aggrandise himself. He combed the country for talent and carefully conserved it. His serfs did the decoration and the scene painting, also the production and playing of the pieces he presented. Everything in connection with his theatre—singing, dancing, acting—was the work of serfs, and some of them were artists famed all over Russia.

Among them was his leading lady, a peasant girl of beauty and talent, whose gifts he developed and who became his mistress. She had goodness and nobility and he loved her with devotion. For many years he wanted her to marry him, but because of their difference in stations she persisted in refusing. Finally he persuaded her and they were wedded. But she could not be received at Court and the nobility turned their backs on her. She felt that she had dragged him down. This so preyed on her mind that she became consumptive. To the end they were lovers and he mourned her for the rest of his days.

A pretty story with a feeling of drama. It gave me an advance interest in the Palace as we bowled through a forest country, sunny and peaceful. There were *datchas* in woody groves, and it was so dreamlike I would have liked to wander under the trees. The road was broad and arrow straight. Sara said that all the way to Minsk it was equally well cared for, but I had my doubts. I felt I would hate to trust it.

We stopped outside the gates of the Palace which was hidden by trees. The grounds were untidy, the building dilapidated. It was in the Chateau style—long and low, with terraces and lofty windows. There was a charge for the sandals one picked from a heap at the door and tied on over our shoes. “We’re at least getting a shoe shine for our fifty kopeks,” said the Drummer.

We must have looked funny shuffling round on the wax parquets. In every room ragged caretakers were busy polishing and dusting. The rooms were tiny compared with those of the Winter Palace, but the more interesting for that. One felt this place had been lived in and loved, and was haunted by the ghosts of the past. In its faded finery and delicate taste there was a vague melancholy, as if romance still lingered.

The Prince’s hobby was his theatre, for a great part of the Palace was devoted to it. It presented the aspect of a long, pillared hall, but when we touched the columns we found they were of *papier maché*. One end was taken up by the Royal Box, for even Czars used to come here. It was tapestried in crimson, with gold stars. Below was a limited space for what must have been a select audience. We saw the tiny rooms of the players, and the common room for the supers. In the Green Room the privileged male members of the audience used to hob-nob with the pretty

actresses. To me it was a charming echo of a bygone day, but Sara tried to dampen my sentiment. "He did it all for his own glorification. Instead of trying to improve the condition of the serfs he picked those among them capable of amusing him and exploited them artificially. The whole decoration of the place is the work of serfs. Some were great painters, some fine musicians, some brilliant playwrights: but he made them all contribute to his pomp and prestige. . . . Come and see a picture of his actress wife."

We entered a gallery off the Green Room. There were rows of paintings on the walls, mostly of actresses. Shining among them like a star was the Princess. Rarely had I seen a more beautiful woman. She was not perhaps so lovely as the Czarina, yet a quality of soul and sympathy looked out of her eyes, that the Czarina lacked. A haunting face—intelligent, charming, yet strangely tragic. I stood a long time trying to impress it on my memory. But it was elusive, as some faces are. Today I can recall the Czarina, but not the Princess.

"She had a son," said Sara, "and two grandsons. The son carried on the traditions of the family, but the Revolution overwhelmed the grandsons. One became a good Soviet citizen and a musician in the orchestra of the Opera; the other was a painter in Montparnasse who died in misery."

She said this with unctuous satisfaction, but my sympathy was with the painter. There was a fine looking old chap re-touching the fresco work on the walls. He was employed by the Government and looked as if he loved his job. Perhaps he was a descendant of the very men who did the original work. I wondered how much better off and happier he was. I wondered also if all Russian workers are not still serfs. The State is Master: are they not exploited to the glory of the State?

But the high light was left to the last. Near the door a small embrasure had been modelled as a peasant hut. There in a confined space was a family of serfs. They were depicted as living in misery. The man was spinning, the woman cooked some mess on the fire, while the children sprawled on the floor. Triumphant Sara paused before it. "There," she said. "Compare the hovel with the Palace. This misery made possible that luxury, this wretchedness that refinement. Thus lived the people, thus the Prince. See how the laughter of the one was based on the tears of the others, the joy bought at the price of woe and sorrow. . . ."

She was right, but I wish she had spared us that final dig of propaganda. However, the Drummer queered her pitch. "Say now," he said, "ain't that just the cutest little cabin? Minds me of home and Mom and Pop. Bet she's frying flapjacks. Well, Miss, you can have all your fancy boudoirs but just give me the cosy comfort of this little old log hut."

Sara was allergic to the Drummer. She was raven black and he had such a predilection for blondes she failed to interest him. Most of her conversation was addressed to me. On the way back to the car I asked her: "You have a new dress every day, and very pretty they are. Do you make them yourself or buy them ready-made?"

"Neither. I get them made to order. We don't like ready-made clothes."

"Then you have dressmakers and tailors?"

"Of course. They belong to the Corporations and the Corporations are under the control of the Government. There are some private dressmakers but they are taxed so heavily it is difficult for them to carry on. They cannot employ help for it is forbidden to exploit labour. Soon all the work will be done by the Unions."

"Do the Unions have the right to strike?" I asked. Sara became indignant. "Strike! Why should they? Wages are controlled according to the condition of the industry. A worker is paid the just reward of his labour."

"But he might not think the reward was just."

"Then he can appeal to the Labour Commission and his case will be given a hearing. If his wage is deemed insufficient it will be adjusted. If considered sufficient he will be censured and considered a disloyal subject. Strike indeed! Why, it would be blackmail against the State . . . Would you not be willing to sacrifice yourself for the common good?" she demanded of the Drummer.

He scratched his ear. "You mean if I had a big lot of land would I be willing to give it to guys who had none? Or if I had a million in the bank would I be glad to hand it to the poor? No, Ma'am. Because I know that if the peasants had the land nothing would make *them* give it to me. And if the poor got the money they would hang on to it like hell. I'd be a mug to do either. Nine out of ten Communists would be tickled to become capitalists, and no power on earth would pry them loose from their dough."

I felt sorry for Sara, so I switched the conversation to literature. I used to ask our guides what they read in the way of English, for they loved the language and were proud of their proficiency. The answer was always the same—the two Sinclairs, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, with the latter a long way behind. Among English authors Wells came first. Kipling the Imperialist was taboo, as was also Conrad, the Russian hater. Of Classics Dickens was tops.

I offered to send Sara one of my books but she looked uncomfortable. Nearly all foreign authors are *bourgeois*, and unless a book is impregnated with socialistic sentiment there is no health in it. Very few could win Soviet favour and Sara was afraid of mine.

“It’s like making contact with the Russian people,” said the Drummer. “I had a pal, a jazz band leader in New York. He came to Moscow and is here now conducting an orchestra. He is a Russian Jew. Well, he wrote to me that much as he would love to see me again he would prefer if I did not look him up. It might get him in bad with the authorities. They can’t be too careful. You can’t blame Sara if she turns you down.”

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The Café never opened till nine, so often I would come down too early for breakfast. On these occasions I would walk the streets. It was the only time of the day they were quiet, and one was grateful not to hear the strident blare of the loud speaker. Oh, the blessed peace of Moscow just before breakfast!

First I would see labourers going to work, many employed in digging the underground railway. Some would be women, but men and women looked alike, wearing high rubber boots, grey canvas trousers and canvas coats. As a concession to sex the women sported red handkerchiefs round their necks, but they were as mud-plastered as the men. Being so much underground their faces were of a mushroom pallor. They did the lighter work, pushing trucks, loading, cleaning up.

They were respected as much as female soldiers of the Red Army. Their task was voluntary and entitled them to a medal of merit. In Sovietland labour was rewarded according to its difficulty, danger and dirt. The workers in the bowels of the Metro have shorter hours and bigger pay than most labourers, and are looked on as patriots serving the national interest. Sara told me the bright idea was that drudge work should be shared by all; that a college professor should take his turn with a broom cleaning the streets. I believe I would rather sweep streets than lecture to students, and no doubt it would do most pundits good to clear gutters. But Sara thought the street cleaning should be done by labour conscripts from all walks of life. In the meantime it was done by bundles of rags wielding willow brooms.

It would be nice indeed, thought I, if all the nasty jobs could be spread over the community. But would it be economic? Personally I could empty a latrine with the next man, but I am afraid my friend the Poet next door might not be able to write a sonnet for a week if he had to share my chore. I cannot imagine Jones, the artist, doing a spell of coal-heaving; nor Brown, the composer, cleaning tripe in an *abattoir*. No, each to his job. Even in Soviet Russia the value of specialisation is recognised.

After the labourers, the clerks and shop-keepers went to their work. They corresponded to the white collar class with us, only no one wore collars. Except perhaps Commissars. But most of these indoor workers were women. The offices



were run by women, the shops were staffed by women. Where men got jobs I used to wonder. Perhaps they lived on the women. After all, shopkeeping and clerking are women's jobs. With the exception of the heads, the banks were staffed by women. Women ran the Government offices, including Intourist. Rarely I saw a male Intourist employé. But in Russia, just as in France, the women are more capable than the men. In the peasant woman is crystallised the virtue of the race. Already they had female Commissars; perhaps a female Stalin may some day preside over the Kremlin?

I would breakfast on the terrace of the café, and that was the most pleasant hour of my Moscow day. At first I had to wait half an hour to be served, but a little tip went a long way. Also a little chaff. I would ask the waitress, who usually knew some English or French or German, how to say: "I love you," in Russian, and she would giggle as I repeated the phrase with various intonations. We laughed a lot. I ordered tea, bread, butter, two eggs and fruit. Everything was quite good.

One day Sara said that a "must-see" was the canal which will make Moscow an inland port giving on five seas—the White, the Baltic, the Black, Azov and the Caspian. What we visited was the Moscow port of the canal that joins the Volga and the Don. It lay in pleasant quietness just outside the city. The building was more like a minor palace than a station. The Government had made a show place of it and there was much marble and mosaic, columned vistas and spacious reception rooms. There were also terraces, palm gardens, fountains with gilded statues—everything that can impress the proletariat and make him say: "How wonderful is this Dream Station! And to think it belongs to us, the Sovereign People. How good to us is Comrade Stalin and how grateful we should be to him!"

Well, for this really magnificent monument they should be grateful. One wanders about its emptiness admiringly. Maybe democratic countries could do better: but would they? There is a self-consciousness about its grandeur as if it was a splendid gesture, quite unnecessary except as a bit of hypnotic suggestion to convince the public they are the most favoured people on earth.

Climbing a stately staircase of marble one looks from the loggia of a terrace down on the shining waters of the great canal. It is placid and gentle, while beyond it rise dreamlike fields and woods a-shimmer in the autumn sunshine. There is a snowy quay with swan-white steamers. They have broad decks with awnings and sunny loafing space. It must be delightful to see Russia like that. I registered a vow that some day I would board a shiny steamer and sail to Odessa, or maybe voyage up the Baltic and so to England. Yes, this canal is a proud achievement. To make it, Sara told me, hundreds of villages were sacrificed and millions of peasants

expropriated. She did not tell me it was made by slave labour, by kulaks, political prisoners, convicts and class enemies of the regime, under conditions as bad as those in which Peter the Great built St. Petersburg. If that city was built on human bones, the Volga Canal was channelled by Human blood.

Said Sara sweetly: "Many of those who helped to make it were criminals of the worst type; but in doing their noble work they redeemed themselves and became worthy citizens." Maybe some of them did, but according to other accounts the majority gave their health and strength for nothing more than the right to die in the ditch they dug.

"It was a wonderful sight," said Sara, "to see the first flow of water. It was a day of rejoicing throughout Russia. Now in winter we skate on it. The winters in Moscow are better than the summers. The air is so dry and bracing. Everyone has rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes and feels so happy. We dance on the ice, and sleigh, and have all the winter sports. Oh, the winter is lovely!" . . . Perhaps for those who have furs and warm homes; but for the ragged women who sweep the streets and the drab multitude of the Great Unwashed I wonder if the appeal of winter is so wonderful. Unless I belonged to the Soviet *bourgeoisie* I do not think I would care to risk it.

Another day Sara took us to see a Mother's Rest Home in one of the chief Moscow railway stations. "They are installed in every station in Russia," she told us. "In *every* station?" we queried. "Well, in each according to its needs," she added. . . . I thought of those stations we had passed, the platforms a muddle of misery, of ragged women and children, waiting for days amidst their wretched goods and chattels. But Sara would have denied this misery, or would merely have said: "We are in transition. We cannot do everything at once." Still, to create those Mother's Rests even in big cities is a worthy achievement, so let's not be too critical.

The one we were taken to was probably star of them all. You can't blame people for showing you their best and wanting you to think they are all like that. And it's a mistake to say that on a visit to Russia you only see what they want you to see. They only *show* you what they want you to see, but you are free to see many things they would rather you didn't see. That is, comparatively free. Kindergartens are closed against you because your visit distracts the children. Also law courts, because the procedure might shock your sense of justice. But within limits you are free to wander about and use your eyes.

A plain but pleasant nurse gave us each a clean white duster to put over our clothes so that we could carry in no outside germs. Then, first of all, we were shown the crude material on which they worked, a waiting-room full of women and

children. "A nurse meets them at the arrival of the trains," said Sara, "and brings them here to be examined, registered and ticketed. Then they are led to a shower bath where they are given a hot douche. Their clothes are taken away to be disinfected and they are given clean bathrobes and conducted to the refectory. They are fed there, then the elder children go to the nursery, while the mothers take the babies up to the dormitory."

We saw a doctor and a nurse pinning tags on them like wounded in a war, while dozens of others awaited their turn. Many suckled babies, their huge white breasts frankly exposed. Others had groups of children at their skirts. All looked tired and wretched. The children were crying fretfully and were dirty and miserable after days in the train. We did not see them being douched but afterwards we were shown them in the Rest Room. It was comfortable with leather-padded armchairs and sofas. There was a table with picture papers and games. On some couches women were sleeping, while in the bedroom alongside several babies were lying. They were waxen and scarcely looked alive, but their attitudes were charming, and the peace of their sleep was beautiful. The sight of these babies made one bless those who conceived this Station Rest idea.

After that we were shown the nursery, and that too was charming. Soviet nurseries are equipped with playthings, many of them original to the country. There was a toboggan slide, swings, see-saws and a Punch and Judy show. This last was manipulated by two little girls whom I took to be the children of the nurses. They were expert and the other children watched the performance with real delight. The nurses seemed to radiate a spirit of joy. This is one of my nicest memories.

I was impressed, but the Drummer was inclined to carp, perhaps because Sara was so smug. "Can you imagine," he snorted, "any American mother letting herself be scrubbed and deloused like that? We are clean countries. Russia is dirty, otherwise these Rest Rooms would not be necessary. We have decent trains and our people are not wretched like these. They're mighty chesty about this idea and tell us it is something we haven't got, but we don't need it. The fact that these places exist is a testimony to the misery that prevails throughout the country."

"Well," I said, "the Czars would have let the people rot before they would have lifted a finger to save them. Now these homeless peasants are taken in and cared for as they never were in their lives. Can you wonder they go back to their village blessing Comrade Stalin and thinking he's a God. Do you remember that huge canvas of him before the Children's Theatre, cuddling a kid on his knee? It's a great idea to get at the young. Do everything for them in the name of Communism and the future is assured for the Kingdom of Karl Marx."

“What do you think of this Red Racket?” said the Drummer as we sat at dinner by the fish pond. I answered perhaps rather fatuously. “That part of me which is logical believes in a scientific organization of Society, in economic planning, in classless co-operation—all that stuff that sounds like claptrap. My mind approves of it but my heart hates it. I would loathe to be regimented and restricted. I only admire reform in other people.”

“That’s me,” said the Drummer. “When old man Reform comes knocking at my door I say: ‘For the love of Mike try the other fellow.’ Even if the Soviets succeeded in making a social paradise they can keep it as far as Little Willie is concerned. Give me the wide woolly spaces filled with the winds of freedom. But do you think these guys will make it stick?”

“If I were asinine enough to make a prediction I should say: totally, no. Scratch a Utopian and you find an Egotist. Self interest will win in the end. Instead of getting closer to pure Communism they will gravitate to a rational form of collectivism. Anyway they will be a Great People. Nothing can keep them back—not even Nitchevo.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

### PROSTITUTION

“There are no prostitutes in the Soviet Union,” said Sara, and I am inclined to take her word for it. In my nocturnal rambles in Moscow and Leningrad I was never importuned as I would have been in Piccadilly Circus or the Place de l’Opera. But then neither was I accosted in Copenhagen or Stockholm. Scandinavian cities are indecently moral and, as far as I could see, so are Soviet cities. In a way it makes them less interesting.

They say you cannot abolish vice—only drive it underground. I don’t think this is the case in Moscow. The housing condition makes prostitution difficult. The space allowed a woman to live does not give her much privacy, and any secret commerce of that kind would soon be discovered. Vice is not legalised as in France, nor sequestered as in the United States, so if it exists it must be unprofessional. Naturally the course of Free Love never does run smooth; but I think that love of the commercial brand is comparatively rare. However, it does exist.

I have said that the vestibule of the Metropole was a pleasant place and it grew on us. We spent much time there, sinking into fat armchairs and watching the crowd. There was always plenty of movement, outsiders going to the restaurant or visitors haunting the office of Intourist. We would talk to people we knew, or even to people we didn’t know, and sometimes after a meal we would go to sleep. So we got to recognise by sight many of the hangers-on of the hotel, and among them the Blonde in the Red Dress.

It was the Drummer who spotted her as she walked through the lobby. “Say, now, there’s a girl with a swell shape,” he said approvingly. I had to admit that she was a bit of all right, but as a married man old enough to be a grandfather she did not interest me. However, the Drummer was neither old nor married, so he awaited her next appearance with some excitement. Soon she came out of the dining room and as she passed us I saw her look at him with the flicker of a smile.

“Did you get that?” he said eagerly. “She gave me the glad eye. Say boy! she’s some baby. She’s the first classy dresser I’ve seen since we hit this burg. I wonder

who she is?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"Get out! A dame like that wouldn't talk to a guy like me without a proper knock-down."

"Suppose I give you one."

"But you don't know her."

"Well, with my paternal manner I might get to."

"Paternal my hat! We all know about that. No, if there's any introducing to be done it's to be on the level. That's a society girl. Must be the daughter of a Commissar at the least. Say, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll just take a stroll outside. See you later."

I dozed on a divan. I was rather comatose from the lunch I had eaten and I dismissed the Drummer from my mind, but he awoke me with some excitement.

"Say, I've done it!"

"Done what?"

"Got that introduction. She's the daughter of a General in the Red Army and she's going to Kiev tonight."

"Too bad."

"Yes, but she's coming to my room to say good-bye first. We just couldn't part like that."

"Very touching. You seem to have made a hit."

"Well," he admitted complacently, "she said she was crazy about Americans."

"Then she speaks English?"

"No, but the girl who was with her does. I mean the dark girl who introduced me to her."

"And how did you know the dark girl?"

"The blonde one introduced me. You see, I came on them going up Gorky Street and there was a crowd and I was walking on their heels, and once or twice I passed them, brushing her slightly—on account of the crowd, you know. Then suddenly I realised I was lost. So very politely I asked the blonde the nearest way to the Metropole. She answers me in French that she doesn't speak English, but her friend does. Then she introduces me to the friend as Mamselle Olga, and the friend comes right back and introduces the blonde as Mees Sonia. So there we were all fixed up. . . . Well, they said they would go part of the way back with me as it was so easy to get lost, and soon the dark girl faded away and left me with Miss Sonia. And we got quite friendly like. Of course we couldn't understand each other very well, but we got on all right. She kept saying 'chambre,' so I wrote down the

number of my room. Then she pointed to my watch and I pointed to four o'clock and she nodded. So it's all fixed up. I have a date with her at four in my room. . . . Then we talked a little more. She knew a few English words and made a lot of signs. For instance she pointed to a General who was passing and said 'Fazzer.' Then to midnight on my watch and said 'Kiev.'"

"I see. Well, in all countries the language of love is an Esperanto."

"Aw! there's no question of love! It's just a little innocent friendship."

"Sez you! . . . I suppose you know it's going to cost you money."

"Not a darned cent. She's not that sort. What do you take her for?"

"For a little hotel tart out for graft. Oh, she's all right. You'll get off easy for a hundred francs."

"She'll get nothing from me. I've no use for harlots."

"Oh, I don't say she's anything so awful as that. There are graduations in the demi-monde. She would probably prefer a present to money. She's a cocotte, a semi-professional, if you like. Anyhow, she's a phoney blonde."

"Bet you five bucks she's genuine."

"Righto! I'm on."

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That night he joined me in the café of the hotel. He looked subdued and I did not mention the matter of the blonde till he brought it up himself. "Say, you were right. That girl was a grafter."

"I hope she didn't get much out of you."

"Only a blue silk undervest and that sports tie you've admired, the one with the blue, red and yellow stripes. She took a fancy to it. You see, when she arrived she pointed to my wrist watch to show me she was on time. Then she said she wanted to try it on, so I let her. The next thing was she wanted to make me give it to her, but that watch set me back three hundred smackers, so I told her straight there was nothing doing. She refused to give it up and we had quite an argument about it. In the end I had to take it from her by force. She struggled and fought, but I got my watch back."

"You were lucky. What then?"

"She went to my bag which was open and started to look at my stuff. She admired everything and wanted me to give her everything, but I refused. She put on the blue silk vest and strutted up and down in front of the glass with it. She said she was an officer in the women's brigade of the Red Army, and went through some military drill with my umbrella. Then she spotted my old school tie and put that on too. Then she asked if she could have a bath and I heard her splashing about. I

waited half an hour and when she came out there was no sign of the blue silk undershirt or the old school tie. By this time I had locked everything away in my bag so there was nothing lying around she could grab. When she saw that she seemed to lose all interest in me and soon after she went away to catch her train to Kiev. We parted good friends.”

As we finished supper I happened to look over to the far end of the restaurant where a couple were having a snack supper. “Isn’t that your blonde?” I asked.

“By gosh! You’re right. Then she’s not gone to Kiev after all.”

“No, she’s with a young man, a good looking boy, too.”

“Looks like a gigolo to me. . . . And by gum! If the bastard isn’t wearing my old school tie! Well, of all the . . .”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ll bet dollars to doughnuts he’s wearing your blue silk undervest as well.”

For a moment the Drummer was speechless with rage, then a thought came to him and he laughed. “Well, anyway the S.O.B. ain’t wearing my wrist watch.”

“No, you’re a pretty fair retriever. But what about that bet?”

His answer was to grin sheepishly and hand me a green-back.

We had various adventures in Moscow. Here is a sample. . . . We were going to the opera and as usual had lost our way. Near us was a soft drink fountain, so I proposed we ask the girl in charge to direct us. “Opera?” I shouted interrogatively. She only gave me a blank stare, but the Drummer flipped his hands at her accusingly, as if she concealed the opera on her person and would not deliver it. “Opera?” he repeated even more loudly.

She only continued to stare in bewilderment, then she turned to serve what looked like a human scare crow with a drink. He was dressed in the height of Moscow fashion, that is to say, he wore a soiled black shirt, dirty grey cotton pants, no socks, and sandals. Yet what struck me was his youth. He was little more than a boy, his black hair cropped to the scalp, his face haggard and drawn, with wild, dark eyes. He looked like a gypsy who had strayed into the city and was having a tough time. To our surprise he turned to us and said in excellent New Yorkese: “That’s all right. I’ll show you the way to the Opera.”

We stared at him but we followed him gratefully. He peered around as if he were fearful of being shadowed. Then it was we noticed the hunted look in his eyes. “I’ve just come out of gaol,” he said, “and I expect to be arrested again at any moment.” We were speechless as he went on: “Don’t think this is an accidental encounter. I followed you gentlemen from the hotel for I felt you might be able to help me. I was determined to speak to you.”



Again he gave that fearful look about him, as if he was being watched. "Listen, I'll show you the way to the Opera, but I want to ask a small favour of you. It won't cost you anything and it may mean a lot to me. All I want you to do is to memorise a name in America. You are Americans, ain't you? Yes. Well, maybe you know New Jersey. That's where I come from—Trenton. My brother runs a grocery store there. I want to give you his address. If you can remember it and drop him a line when you go back it may be the means of saving my life."

"But are you not an American citizen?" I asked.

"I lost my American citizenship two years ago. I didn't renew it and now it's too late. I have no papers of any kind. They took them from me when they threw me into gaol. Now they've let me out for a bit but I don't know how long they'll leave me free. I'm in a hell of a fix."

He looked as if he was about to break down, then he got a grip on himself and continued: "Walk along beside me. Don't let anyone see me talking to you. Quick! Please memorise the name of my brother. . . ." He gave a name and address. The Drummer repeated it carefully.

"Please don't forget. Sure you have it all right?"

"Okay," said the Drummer. "I know Trenton well. I know the street and maybe the shop. As soon as I get back I'll see your brother."

"Thank God! Maybe he'll be able to do something to get me out of this cursed country. It's my only hope. I write letters but I never get any replies. Either the letters don't get out of Russia or I don't get the answers. . . . I don't know. I can't get into communication with anyone over there. I have lots of friends who would help me if they only knew."

"What did they put you in gaol for?"

"I got into a jam down in Odessa. I came over here a red-hot Communist, then when I saw what it was like I got to shooting off my face pretty freely—criticising and making a fool of myself. I was working in a machine shop and they accused me of sabotage. First thing I knew I was thrown into prison. They kept me six months, then let me go. But they may grab me at any moment and throw me back. I'm living in hell."

Again he cast that scared look about him. His eyes had the glare of a hunted animal's. "Don't let on you're talking to me. I'm just showing you the way to the Opera. But for God's sake try to memorise that name and address. It's my last hope. I thought I'd become a Soviet citizen so I let my passport lapse. Now, unless the United States Government can help me, I'm sunk."

"What about food?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm all right for that. I'm living with a Russian girl who helps me a lot. But it gets mighty cold in Moscow and I'm scared of the winter. I've only got the clothes I stand in, and a Bowery boot-black wouldn't be seen dead in them. But that's all right. If I can only get in touch with my friends in the States. . . ."

His voice trailed off, and I thought: Here's a bit of drama. If I could get the whole story out of him I might have something good. Perhaps I could fix up an appointment. But I had noticed the Drummer looking uncomfortable. Suddenly he took my arm firmly.

"Here's the Opera. Come on. We'll be late." Then he turned to the stranger. "Sorry, pal, you're in such trouble. I'll do my best for you. As soon as I get back I'll see your brother. Cheer up. You'll get out all right."

"You won't forget the name and address?" For a third time he repeated it hoarsely. "Don't write it down. Don't . . ." Then a look came into his face like a beast at bay. Sheer terror seemed to shout from his eyes. With a startled exclamation he turned like a flash and disappeared into the crowd. . . .

"Are such things possible?" I asked as we took our seats in the Opera. "Sure," said the Drummer. "All things are possible. There are Americans in jail right now and right here, and not all the efforts of Uncle Sam can free them. Maybe they'll never get out. There's nothing to be done about it."

"Why did you get so suddenly reserved with that poor boy?"

"I got scared to be seen talking to him. How do we know he was let out of prison? Perhaps he escaped. Maybe they're hunting him. We might be arrested for conniving at his evasion. I don't want to be in a Soviet jail, even for a few hours. It was dangerous to be seen in the company of that guy. We don't know what they nailed him for. Again he might be an *agent provocateur*. Conspiring against the Soviets! Get us in the clutches of the Gaypayoo! Oh no, I'm not taking any chances. All the time he was with us I had a feeling we were being watched. Anything like that might get us in bad. I'm mighty glad we're leaving tomorrow."

"Do you think he'll get away?"

"Hasn't a dog's chance. He's about as helpless as a beetle impaled on a pin. Well, let's forget him and enjoy *Boris Goudenov*."

But I could not forget him and all the time during the performance I had an uncomfortable feeling that sinister eyes were on us.

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As we walked home I stared at the twin stars of the Kremlin, crimson against the spangled blue of the sky. Lit from below the red flag rippled like a stream of blood. From the Moskva Hotel came the hoarse shrieking of the loud speaker. In an

embrasure of the hotel a dozen ragged boys were sleeping, their heads pillowed on one another. The surging crowds paid no attention to them. Looking towards the Red Square I thought of Lenin in his cold Tomb, of Stalin in his fiercely guarded palace. Moscow seemed a fantastic place, a city of unreality, full of weird shadows and dark imaginings.

And that night, after the usual orgy of a five course dinner I had a nightmare in which I saw Boris Goudenov and Comrade Stalin engaged in a death struggle on that circle of stone before St. Basil, from which Isaac the Terrible used to announce the names of those he had condemned to execution.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### IMPRISONED

The Drummer was stepping out of the lift into the lounge of the Metropole when I halted him. "We're dished," I said. "What d'ye mean?" said he.

"They won't get us tickets for the train tonight. It's some trouble about a blonde female spy and a gay young New Yorker. We're being detained. We can't go this evening."

His ruddy face paled. "But I've just finished packing my bag. . . ."

"Unpack it," I told him. "We're in the soup. God knows if we'll ever get out of this blasted country."

"But I must," he wailed. "I've got my passage booked on the *Normandie*. I've got to be back in New York in two weeks. They can't hold us."

"Can't they! They can do any old thing. They simply say: 'No tickets for tonight. None for tomorrow night.' After that . . . who knows?"

"Well, I'll soon know. I'll waken them up a bit. But I believe you're kidding me." After a little he came back looking crest-fallen. "It's as you say—nothing doing for today and tomorrow. We're in a jam all right." "It's that blonde of yours," I snarled. "You must have said something."

"I said nothing. We couldn't understand a word between us. We managed by signs."

"Then you managed only too well. I see Siberia ahead. Or the Lubianka prison, with a bullet in the nape of the neck. These Gaypayoo guys are capable of anything. You've heard of the torture where they hold your hands in water and bring it to the boil. Then they make a circular cut round your wrists and draw off the skin like a glove, nails included."

"Aw, cut it out! My visa expires in two days," he moaned. "So does mine," I groaned. "They'll refuse to renew it. They can get us tickets if they want to. Why can't you use your charm on those Intourist girls?"

"It don't work. They only smoke cigarettes and play dumb." Looking the picture of misery we slumped into big chairs, when along came Mrs. Tacoma and Mr.

Missouri. They were American tourists we had butted into from time to time. Mrs. Tacoma was slim, trim, prim. She wore a pince-nez and was crisply sure of herself. Why she had come to Russia I know not, for she had nothing but hate for the place and the people. She was the Queen of Knockers and the terror of guides. She treated them with an arrogance only equal to that with which they sometimes treated us. She would interrupt Sara in the midst of a harangue to tell us to look at the view from the window. She would turn her back contemptuously in the middle of some juicy propaganda. She would ask tactless and irrelevant questions.

Soviet guides have not the servile quality of those in other countries. They are Government servants and do not accept tips. Mrs. Tacoma refused to admit this, so there was continual friction between her and Sara. I think she lectured at Women's Clubs, and her idea in coming to Russia was to pose as an authority on the country. I can hear her shutting up an adversary with: "Oh, I've been there. You can't tell *me*." She took notes in cypher, was mysterious in her manner and imagined she was moving in an atmosphere of intrigue and danger. Otherwise, for a pretty woman, she was quite intelligent.

Mr. Missouri was one of the thinnest men I have ever known. He looked desiccated almost to a shadow. He had a drawling voice and a dry sense of humour. Unlike Mrs. Tacoma he did not hate Communists. He was simply indifferent to them. I think he was a retired storekeeper who had wisely decided to spend some of his elderly days in travel. I asked him what he liked best of the countries he had seen.

"Well, them feerds up in Norway was pretty nice. I kindo' liked it in Scotland, but it rained a lot. I went up to Iceland in a whaler. That was a fine trip. I don't know what I'll do next. I may take in the Nile and have a go at India." He spoke of his globe-trotting as he would of strolling round his garden. Some day he would go back to his native village, sit by the stove in the store, spit into the saw-dust, and of where he had been and what he had seen he would answer never a word. What joy he got out of travelling it was hard to say. He seemed bored with everything, yet his observations had a caustic humour that matched the wit of his travelling companion.

The first time I met him was outside the hotel in Moscow; but previously I had observed them in Leningrad, so I said politely. "I haven't seen your wife yet. I hope she's well." He rocked with laughter. "She ain't my wife," he gasped. "I ain't got no wife. We jest happen to be on the same program. I never saw her before we bumped into one another in Leningrad. But say, she's a good sport. In the sleeper to Moscow they put two Rooshuns in with us and she was game all right. Didn't make no fuss. Jest slept like a little lady."

"She was certainly well chaperoned," I remarked.

“Ya, there’s safety in numbers. But she sure hates them there Bolshies.”

These were the two who now accosted us. “What are you men crying about?” said Mrs. Tacoma. We told our tale of woe. She seemed to think it was funny and laughed a lot. She said: “I’ve got my ticket for tomorrow night. I just go in and abuse them. Make a fuss! You must never crawl to them. Bully them and you’ll get all you want.”

“I tell them I’ll write to Stalin about it,” added Mr. Missouri. “They think Joe’s a pal of mine and they eat out of my hand.”

“It’s no good,” I said. “We can’t get away for three days and we’ve only got two meal tickets between us.” Mr. Missouri doubled with laughter but took four coupons out of his pocket and handed them to us. “There! I’ve some left over. You can use these.” Thanking him heartily we felt cheered. Then Mrs. Tacoma further bucked us up. “Anyway you’ll see the Youth’s Parade . . . It’s worth waiting over a day to see that.” “Gee! I’m glad,” said the Drummer. “I sure would hate to miss that celebration. Maybe we’re lucky, after all.”

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Next morning I was up bright and early. Thought I, I’ll wander the streets and watch the preparations for the grand show. The evening before, I had seen them hanging the Red Square with bunting, while in seven languages on the fronts of the mansions opposite the Kremlin was blazoned “Workers of the World Unite.” Also on the façades of the big buildings around the hotel were giant mugs of Lenin, Stalin and Company. In the vestibule of the hotel everything was very quiet, and though it was nine o’clock few of the staff seemed awake. Going to the front door I found it locked. While I wondered the porter came to me: “No foreign visitors allowed to go out today,” he told me grimly.

“Do you mean to say we are shut in?”

“Yes, until the Celebration is over. By order of the Police.”

I could scarcely believe it but I went to the café and found the terrace closed, with the blinds down. It was forbidden even to look on the street.

As I sat down to breakfast the Drummer joined me. He was beaming. “Well, I’m darned glad now we didn’t get those tickets. I always wanted to see this parade.” “You jolly well won’t see it,” I told him. “We’re not allowed out. We’re prisoners in the hotel—orders of the Gaypayoo.”

At first he refused to believe it. Going to the door he tried it. He returned looking furious. “That’s right. We’re locked in. Well, now wouldn’t that cork you!”

“We’re corked all right. So you won’t see the parade after all.” But he refused to accept defeat. “I’ll go to the manager and ask if he won’t let us sneak out by a side

door. He's English. He'll be a sport about it."

But the manager was elaborately unhelpful. He was a wan man with a worried look. Originally coming over as a foreign expert he had married a Russian girl. No doubt he could have got a permit to return to England but it would have been refused for his wife and children. So he had decided to remain in the country and take out citizenship. Now he seemed quite Soviet in sympathy. Thus it looked like we were in a prison within a prison and there was nothing to do but kick our heels, while outside banners flared and bands blared to the glory of freedom. Over his cakes and coffee the Drummer gnashed his teeth. "I'm going to see that procession," he growled, "even if I have to drop from a window."

While we were brooding other visitors came down for breakfast. General consternation! We were being shut in like naughty children, and it was such a beautiful day. Then when things were seeming most melancholy Mrs. Tacoma came to our aid. "I have a front room that looks down on the street. The cortège passes under my window. I'm asking my boy friends to come up. So what?"

"We are so grateful we could embrace you," said the Drummer.

We had asked the manager to let us look out of a window and he had refused. Now we had the edge on him. . . . In her room we were joined by Mr. Missouri and Mr. Liquorice. The latter was an Englishman in business in Russia. He spoke the language and his knowledge of the country was enviable. His business was the exportation of liquorice root. He had the natives dig it up, dry it and sack it. He then sent it to England for its various uses.

Talk of the Romance of Commerce! Here was a man who spent his time dealing with the peasants in a hostile land, always working with difficulty and in danger. A quiet man with a thoughtful yet determined face, he had been through the Revolution and knew the country as few did. He was very discreet, yet he admitted that he lived in an atmosphere of suspicion. He walked warily, never sure that on the morrow he might not be thrown into prison.

Comfortably installed in the big bay window of Mrs. Tacoma's room we awaited events. "What about a snifter of Mountain Dew?" she said hospitably. "I smuggled it past the frontier and there's still a little left." "Madame," answered the Drummer, "I have not taken a drink of alcohol in ten years, but on such an occasion as this, and from such fair hands, how could I refuse? But I warn you if it goes to my head I shall make love to you." "That's all right with me," said the Lady; "as long as you don't try to go too far I'll take a chance." And the Drummer answered: "What man as is a man wouldn't try to go too far?" And Mrs. Tacoma said: "Well, I'll take a chance anyway."

So there we were sipping hooch from a silver flask and feeling foolishly happy. We were looking down a broad street flanked by old houses. The first thing that struck us was that it was empty of spectators. At intervals were stationed men with brassards guarding the route of the procession, while behind them paraded members of the Police. Otherwise the street was void of life. Once or twice I saw people emerge from houses, but they were immediately chased back.

Suddenly, at the height of the long street, we saw the first banners of the parade. They were sky-blue, and the girls who bore them wore sky-blue shirts and shorts. They were members of a Communist Youth Association. Then followed other groups of girls and young men, belonging to various sports clubs. All wore the colours of their organisations. Towards us they advanced, twenty abreast and in close formation. Every third person carried a banner bearing a likeness of Lenin or Stalin, and surmounting these were bigger banners of red, embroidered with hammer and sickle. Every hundred yards there was a band playing martial music.

Proudly they stepped down that fine street, a spectacle of enthusiasm and colour. The girls had bare thighs and bare heads, the lads swung proudly along. These serried masses of exultant youth pressing forward with bands and banners were an inspiring sight, and made us regret the banners were red and the bands were playing revolutionary airs. Impressed and depressed we watched. It was so strange to see them coming down that absolutely empty street. One would have expected cheering crowds, but there was not a soul to applaud. They were indifferent to applause. The public did not matter. All that counted was the Party; so relentlessly they came on, exultant in the bright sunshine. To me there was something terrible, even frightening, about it all.

"There's nothing doing," said Mrs. Tacoma. "They have the richest country in the world and the Youth trained to Communism. In another fifteen years every able-bodied citizen will be a born and bred Bolshevik. A hundred and fifty million Bolshies secure in their own country and ready to spread their doctrine all over the world. . . . Yes, they've got us all beat."

So for four hours they continued to march past. And shut in their houses the population peered furtively. Communist Youth, conquering and triumphant, marching on to the making of a new world. Shabby, poorly fed youth, yet inspired by an invincible Mysticism. Radiant youth, marching on . . . to what? To Armageddon or to a Golden Age?

Said Mr. Liquorice: "Let us face the fact. A new order has come to stay in Soviet Russia. Whether it will spread and become a world order is another question. At present it is an Ideal enshrined in the living heart of the young. It takes the place



of religion; it is a *living* gospel. It inspires and uplifts them, and if those who direct it do so wisely it will mould society into a shape in which body and soul the citizen will belong to the State, where there will be no freedom of opinion, no liberty of movement, and in which that jolly trinity—Marx, Lenin and Stalin—will live forever. . . .” Here he dropped his voice to a whisper: “Appalling menace! Let us fight against it or it will conquer the world.”

“Human nature will beat them in the end,” said the Drummer. “Selfishness is at the back of all things. We are individuals and we will always be.”

Said I: “Selfishness will not win entirely, nor will altruism. We will have a society collectivist in tendency yet leaving the individual free to live his own life.”

“I’d rather be dead than live in a socialised state,” said Mrs. Tacoma.

“Before it comes we *will* be dead,” said Mr. Missouri.

But Mr. Liquorice, who had a family of five children, shook his head. “I hope if the change comes,” he said, “it will be without bloodshed, suffering and ruin.”

And so with heavy hearts we watched that radiant river of rejoicing youth, yet not a single spectator in our sight. It was like a conquering horde marching through a city of the dead. And at the same time in Italy and Germany were other hosts of shining youth even finer and fitter all inspired with the same deathless devotion to an ideal. Only in dull democratic countries was there no urge, no drive in a single direction. What would be the end of it all? . . .

Then came the finish. The last stragglers drifted down and the police mingled with them. At once the street was alive again. In a twinkling it was swarming with its grey, grubby mob.

For another year the shining Parade of Youth was over.

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It was the day after the parade and we were still gloomy from the memory of that relentless manifestation of proletarian might. Its sinister import lay on us uneasily. Besides, the hectic atmosphere of Moscow was on our nerves. The city was always up on its toes. Continually brayed the hideous loudspeaker and our eyes were constantly afflicted by poisonous portraits of Dictators. Oh, how we longed to get away!

So all that day we took turns to park ourselves in the office of Intourist, looking at the staff reproachfully. These Intourist girls did not seem to mind, filing their scarlet nails, gossiping into the telephone, making up their faces. They treated us with an indifference that bordered on contempt. Yet they had bright smiles for other guests. They looked as if they were ready to hold hands with two Clydebank Communists, to sit in the laps of some socialists from Lavillette, to make dinner dates with

Bolshies from Brooklyn; but we bourgeois tourists seemed negligible. Or perhaps it was because we were due to leave. They would never see us again, and we meant nothing in their young lives. So I said to the Drummer:

"You see that blonde in the green silk dress . . . She's a nice bit of goods but at present we're invisible to her. Now if you were to go over and make her an offer of marriage, or even of concubinage, saying you would take her to New York, what do you suppose she would do?"

"I guess she would fall into my arms," he said. "Then why not try it?" I told him. "Maybe it might get us those tickets." "It's a good idea," he admitted.

He went over and began his attack. His technique was brutally obvious. He began by telling her she was by a long way the most beautiful baby he had seen in Moscow—nay, in all Russia. At that she showed her first sign of interest. He was, she thought, trying to seduce her and she felt thrilled, but she prepared to turn him down. However, instead of offering her pearls and rubies, the Drummer laid his heart and fortune at her feet. He was, he said, a very lonesome bachelor and he was crazy about her. What about it? Would she go with him to Manhattan Isle? As he talked I could see her smile. Presently he came back to me. "She's going to do her goddamndest about those tickets."

"Hearty cheers! But you'll have to go back and marry her." He grinned cheerfully. "Oh, we've that all fixed up. She's terribly keen to go to the States. She'll try to get a permit and meet me over there. She'll look swell on Broadway. I might do worse." "Do you mean to say you'll really wed the damsel?" I exclaimed. "To get those tickets and scam outa this damn burg I'd do most anything—even that," he said with a grin.

He was a fast worker and soon the blonde was pulling strings on our behalf. She kept the telephone busy but it was always the same story. She turned to him with a troubled frown. "All places are being held for Red Army officers. Come back again and I'll let you know if there's anything free." So passed the day. It was long, and we hated to go outside the hotel, for we loathed Moscow and all its works. Even a last visit to Lenin's Tomb did not tempt us. There we slumped in the well-worn armchairs of the Metropole and mooned and gloomed. Every hour the Drummer would tackle his blonde, only to come back more and more discouraged. "She tells me there's a Conference at Minsk and the places are reserved for delegates. But she says she'll keep on trying. I don't know . . . I believe I overdid it. I think she's fallen for me and now she doesn't *want* me to go. It's a helluva note."

It was five in the afternoon. The Intourist office closed at six. If we did not get the tickets by then we were ditched. There we sat drenched with despair. "I can't

stand any more of this,” I said. “I’ll try and forget my worries in food. I’m going into the dining room to use up my last coupon. Come on.” But he refused morosely. “Food would choke me the way I feel. No, I’ll hang around the office and make a last effort to convince the blonde that her future happiness depends on her getting us those tickets.”

I went in and ordered a copious meal. Lingeringly I ate it, yet never did I dine with less heart. I had a feeling of care with the caviare, melancholy with the bortsch, hopelessness with the fried stergel and deep despair with the ice-cream. I thought of trying a jolt of vodka to buck me up when suddenly I heard shouts of joy. It was the Drummer. He almost danced as he dodged between the tables and aloft he waved some slips of paper. “There!” he said, laughing like mad. “The tickets! Can you believe your eyes? Hey pal, pack up your old kit bag. In three hours we bid this joint good-bye.”

It seemed too good to be true. I had to examine the tickets myself. The Drummer was beaming. “I believe I’m the happiest man in Moscow because I’m leaving it. Now for a rare old feed. I’m going to get outside the biggest meal this hotel can provide. You watch me.” “I won’t,” I told him. “I’ll go out and dance a breakdown in the Red Square, and drop into the Tomb and say a last farewell to that old stiff Lenin. And for the love of Mike don’t lose those tickets.”

For the last time we drove through the crowded streets. “You know,” said the Drummer, “I almost feel as if I liked the old place. Funny how you feel about Russia. It seems worth while paying it a visit just for the sheer joy you get when you quit it at the frontier. I guess the train will be jammed and we’re in for an awful night.” “Never mind,” I told him. “I’m so happy I could stick anything now. I wouldn’t mind camping in the corridor. I suppose we’ll see the usual mob clamouring for places.”

To our amazement the platform was weird with loneliness. Yet . . . there was the train waiting. Compared with all we had seen in Russia it was unbelievably gorgeous, comparable to the Blue Train or the Golden Arrow. We could have sung with jubilation. No crowd, a European sleeper, the same discreet quiet, and the guard, so polite and subservient. Were we dreaming?

No, there were our places, nice compartments of two berths with hot running water and cushioned seats. And the train was so full of emptiness we seemed to be the only passengers. As that empty train pulled out of that empty station we wondered why there had been so much difficulty in getting us places. Maybe they had been playing a joke on us, but we were so idiotically happy we felt the joke was on them.

## *Chapter Thirty-Four*

### ESCAPE

Pensively we watched the last lights of the city. We sped past apartment houses, factories and a gloomy industrial district. Then into the open country. We felt the breath of the forest, the enveloping peace of the night. With all its memories we left Moscow behind.

“Some day,” I sighed sentimentally, “I’m going back.” Then the train jogged us into the darkness and we sought our excellent berths. We slept well but awoke to find we had run into a belt of rain. It was the first Russian rain we had seen and it seemed like any other, only wetter. It drenched the landscape, making everything very dreary. The forest dripped, the fields were dank. The peasants were drab and dirty; the villages slumped in apathy; the stations slovenly sidings with dismal sheds. Everything was slipshod and sordid. Minsk repelled us by its damp desolation. Discouraged citizens shivered in its rainswept weariness. We shuddered and sought the comfort of our compartment where we shut out the landscape and slept till we reached the frontier.

Once more the Customs inspection with its unique intensity. Going out was worse than going in. I slapped down my bag and threw it open defiantly. Again the lantern-jawed, peevish looking searchers went through it, lingering over every object as if they would like to confiscate it. They gave me half an hour of their valuable time, then abandoned me in despair. They slopped my belongings back into my bag and allowed me to pack it. It had been dead easy. These guys had nothing on me.

Not for all the others though. The Drummer with his two bags was having a devil of a time, and I must admit I rather enjoyed the comedy. Again he had to empty out his precious tin of Copenhagen candy, which they regarded enviously but refused to taste. Again they sifted suspiciously his soiled linen. They dragged his examination out for an hour before they decided they had nothing on him.

Then at one end of the examination hall I heard shouts. It was an American who bellowed like a bull. He was a representative of an engineering firm, and they had grabbed his order book. It was bound in leather, closed with a strap, so I supposed

it looked suspicious. They could not read it but evidently they thought it would be safer to confiscate it. A youth in uniform was strolling off with it when the owner vaulted over the counter. "That's mine," he shouted. "You give it to me. It's mine, mine." Suddenly he snatched it and rammed it into his pocket. "There! Now you try to take it from me if you dare. I tell you that book is MINE and I defy you to lay a hand on it." His bluff worked. As he snorted defiance they looked at him, talked among themselves, then told him to go. He had bullied them successfully.

Not so a Polish woman who was going out with a lot of baggage. She had a sewing machine which they took to pieces, a fur mantle whose seams they ripped. Every one of her seven bags were emptied on the counter. It was as if they were venting on her their discomfiture over the American. Here was one who dared not shout at them. Indeed she was speechless with fear. She was limp, impotent, only able to stare at them as they pawed over her belongings. Then suddenly they uttered shouts of joy. In a sack they had found two black fox skins. Exultantly they confiscated them. They let her pack up the rest of her stuff but these they took from her.

Another American who looked wealthy was standing near and said: "Gosh! I'm glad I didn't buy any furs for my family. I was offered some nice minks and ermine, but I turned them down. Now I'm thankful."

The prolonged examination of the Pole had kept us back. After a two hours' halt, again the train got under way. We saw armed guards looking under the wagons, ready to shoot any would-be escapers. Once more we passed a barbed wire barrier as broad as that of the Hindenburg line. Straight and sinister it ran through a wide lane cut in the forest. On each side of it were tall towers where Russian guards stared at Polish guards, night and day facing each other defiantly.

Then all at once the country seemed to change. It became gay and smiling. The peasants wore bright colours, the sun shone, our hearts beat high. As we steamed into a smart station a blue uniformed guard stood at the salute, and an international *Wagon Lit* was hitched to the train. . . . We had heard of the joy most travellers feel on leaving Soviet soil; now we realised it. We could have embraced the complacent Customs men. We gave the porters the rest of our rubbishy roubles; we laughed from sheer delight. We were free at last. . . . Thank Heaven! We were free.

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At the Polish border station I found myself once more projected into "tipping land." In Russia I had tipped because I took a sardonic pleasure in prostituting the proletariat. Ideology is skin deep but self-interest goes to the bone. My tips were unexpected and were received with double joy. But here I found that tipping was

almost a law of the land. Hands were held out before the obole was offered, and the extraction of the *pourboire* was developed to a fine art. Two porters took possession of my single valise. In Russia the guide had prevented me rewarding the wretched grey-beard who had tottered under it, but now two husky men waited with itching palms.

I had taken a sleeping compartment where I left a tip for the booking clerk, and now I tipped the conductor of the train. But there was another wearing a shabby uniform who explained he was the cleaner of the compartment. He pointed out how free from dust it was, and how meticulously he had done his job. He beamed at me expectantly and waited with a hopeful hand. But I kept him waiting, for I was fed up with flunkeyism. So for the half hour before the train started he stood at my heel pleading for recognition. I ignored him till he became indignant. He acted as if I were robbing him. He made me feel a bilk, but I would not give in. As the train left, the last thing I saw was his expression of outraged indignation.

To this day he haunts me and I am sorry I did not give the poor devil something. For he seems to me a symbol of Polish misery and subservience. Poor Poland! Child of an evil destiny. . . . In Sovietland scarecrow women station-masters had waved tattered red flags as the train left, but here a soldier in gorgeous uniform saluted our departure. I wondered how much of this ceremony was façade. What was behind this pretty pretence of power? Yet I did not want to question it. I was so glad to escape from a land of regimented happiness. Freedom is heaven, I thought, lack of it—hell.

The Drummer shared my idea. He was travelling in the regular coach because the price of the sleeper was prohibitive; but he joined me in my compartment. “What’s your summing of the Soviet set-up?” I asked him. “Now we’re well clear of the country we can express our feelings. The Russians may be better off economically than the Finns and the Poles, but they lack the greatest essential to happiness—Freedom.”

He said: “Naw, they don’t want freedom. They wouldn’t appreciate it if they had it. They don’t want the right to speak and worship and criticise as they please. They resign that right to the government. Besides, they don’t admit they’re not free. They’re free to be slaves and they prefer it that way. They are a race of serfs and they don’t mind State servitude. Maybe slavery self-imposed ceases to be. I don’t know . . . I come away with the impression that the bulk of the people are happy. And I think there’s something big under way, something portentous and maybe menacing for us all. . . .”

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I was going to Berlin for a few days. I wanted the Drummer to join me but with a sort of horror he refused. "No, they're not friendly to my race there," he said, and for the first time I realised he was a Jew. Yet he had nothing to distinguish him from the Gentile. Only by ancestry was he prescribed. He said he was going to Prague to avoid putting foot on German soil. Being British born I did not worry, yet I did not enjoy Berlin. I felt that I was disliked and tolerated. At the hotel I had no blankets on my bed, only a chunky feather quilt that was too warm and half covered me. Part of me was fevered, the rest frozen. The maids mocked me, the waiters were sour, the concierge contemptuous. It was a horrid hotel, just off the Frederickstrasse.

I stuck it out for a week, wandering over the city and failing to appreciate its Teutonic charm. Still, it was preferable to the prison atmosphere of Moscow. Here are some of the things I remember. . . . The Brandenburg Gate in the moonlight with two sentries posted there. Like statues they stood, with scarce the flicker of an eyelid to show they were alive. I was impressed by their impassivity, their iron discipline. "If there are a million like that," I thought, "God help us some day."

Then there was a big beer hall near the Potsdam Station where huge harlots leered at me, seemingly unconscious of their elaborate repulsiveness. Anyway, the beer was good, the band better, and even these unseductive sirens could not keep me away. . . . I had heard of the Hotel Adlon and wanted to venture in but the door porter discouraged me. So I went to the American Express Co. nearby and cashed a traveller's cheque simply that I might speak to an American. However, the official betrayed a lack of interest in me, though not in a fair fraulein who waited at my heels. During my stay in Berlin he was the only one I spoke English to. Feeling no end of an alien I sought the Tiergarten and the friendliness of trees, while I watched innocent children play military games.

The only German I ever liked was a girl. I admired her, but she told me she would only marry a soldier, so not being military-minded I resigned her to a pal who joined the volunteers in order to become her boy friend. Poor Frieda! The trouble was that she was a Jew as well as a German, and when she returned to her own country I hope she died before the Nazis got her. But there was one who did not escape, as I saw on the train that took me from Berlin to Paris. . . .

My compartment was crowded and I had to squeeze in uncomfortably. At the last moment a youth appeared with a porter carrying several valises. He looked around uncertainly for his numbered place and found it opposite me. Room was made for him, while with some difficulty space was found for his baggage. He was about sixteen, slim, with a waxy complexion, dark hair and indecisive features. But it was his clothes that intrigued me. He was dressed like a tailor's dummy, in the most

extravagant sports fashion. Everything was brand new, loud though not cheap—plus fours, golf coat of a violent check, tartan shirt, purple fedora. No greater caricature of a sportsman could be imagined and we all had a moment of amazement. He seemed unconscious of the sensation he was creating. Taking out a box of sickly looking candies he began to stuff himself with them. Then he produced a bag of hothouse grapes and ate copiously. We watched, never saying a word.

There were two American oculists who had been visiting Vienna, and their courier, a calm, efficient man who spoke many languages. There was also a French boy of fourteen who was in a spot of trouble. He was returning to his home in Paris and he only had enough money to pay his way to Belgium. He needed a hundred francs to complete his fare, so I said: "Look here, we wear the same old school tie so I'll stake him." But the conductor of the train intervened, offering to let him ride as far as Paris where his mother would meet him.

Then the courier told me about the German boy, with whom he had been speaking. He was a Jew and was being sent to New York, where he had wealthy relatives. His health was delicate and his family were anxious to get him to a place of safety. He had a passage booked for next day on the *Ile de France*. His parents had spared no expense in outfitting him. His clothes were the last word in Berlin smartness.

Talking in the corridor with the courier and my old school tie boy he became very animated, telling them with joy of the bright future that awaited him. Then we reached Aachen and the frontier police entered the compartment. They were big, fat fellows like green toads—surly and insolent. They searched us, pawed our passports, raped my valise, and satisfied themselves that I was an innocent passenger. I heaved a sigh of relief when it was over. The others were going through the same ordeal and all were finally passed. . . . All except the Jew boy.

He looked a little scared when, after examining his papers, they told him to follow them. He went without a word, leaving on his seat his box of candies and his grapes. The others went out to stretch their legs and I was left alone in the compartment. Then two green swine came and took away the baggage of the Jew boy. Then two others began to search the compartment. They felt under the cushion and in every nook and cranny that might be a place of concealment. Then one of the green pigs grunted at me, telling me to rise while he searched my place. From the corridor I looked at him as distastefully as I dared, but I kept my lips sewn tight.

It was a relief when the train was ready to start and we crowded into our compartment—all but the Jew boy. We waited anxiously for him. If he did not get to Paris that night he would miss his boat. Then the courier did a daring thing. He ran



back to the searching cellars below the station and returned just in time to jump on the moving train. He looked very glum. "Poor kid," he said. "When last I saw him he was stripped naked and bent over, while they searched his *anus* for hidden gems. He should have been blubbing but he was too paralysed by fear to utter a sound. I never saw such a picture of despair. What will happen to him in the hands of these devils God only knows. . . ." I told the other kid to eat the grapes and the candies but though he was famished he refused. I said he was foolish as their owner would never reclaim them. I must have convinced him for when we got to Paris both box and bag were gone.

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So ended my Russian Run-around and I found myself joyfully restored to my anxious people. We are a very devoted family. Even two days of separation mean much to us and I had been away two months. They were worried because I was an Old Codger with a conky heart and a craving for comfort. Well, I found it in my own home, and my divine Dream Haven welcomed me with more delight than ever. But the season was advanced; the sea of September, though bright and bracing, no longer invited lingering. So once more we loaded the old bus and started south.

Happy days! The autumn air was like wine as we headed for eternal sunshine. The same old itinerary, Tours with its delicious food, Royat with such a cordial welcome from old friends, Avignon with the same rooms in the same jolly hotel; then once again a triumphal return to the rue Dante, where our faithful maid had the soup on the table, and the house in apple pie order. There was my blue room, my books, my accordion, all ready to welcome me to my winter home.

I felt so joyful. And to think I could look forward to six months of happiness, to my walks in the high hills, my talks with Byron on café terraces, my visits to Peter in his swank villa; with just enough work to make me enjoy the careless rapture of the south. I lived in a state of exhilaration that nothing could dampen. Often I thought: how lucky I am with my gift for getting joy out of life, for finding compensation even in pain, for invincible optimism in a world of strife! To live radiantly—that was my dream, and on many a day with heart elate on the high hills I heard again my divine music—the *Harps of Heaven*. . . .

Then one day I found myself sitting before my typewriter staring at a blank page. By and by I found myself tapping:

#### FOUR BLIND MICE . . . *Chapter One.*

There! I had started a novel. It was to be an Escape Story and to have a

Russian setting. But by the time I had done ten thousand words I realised I did not know enough about the country to write a hundred thousand. Nothing for it but to return. So I wrote to Intourist and was inscribed for their most elaborate voyage. There! Again I was booked for Muscovy, but this time it was to be more Oppenheimish. . . . Well, so much the better. *Vive* the Adventure Trail.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

### THE POLISH TRAIN

Standing in the corridor of the Polish train bleakly I stared at the Polish plain. The sun blazed in a cloudless sky, and the blinds flapped in the fiery breeze. For the first time in years I had a headache, a bright steel pain in my right temple that had persisted from early morning. True, we'd passed a bitch of a night—tickets, passports, currency declarations; no sooner settled to sleep than routed up to be baited by bullies in uniform. Once we had been herded out at a sinister station to have our money checked. Groggy with sleep I spread out mine—twenty thousand francs in *milles* and got a receipt for it. Then stumbling to my seat I dozed till dawn.

Germany was the worst. Aachen of execrable memory! I entered it with foreboding and I left it with a heart that pounded all the way to Berlin. On the platform a band of children were singing the *Horst Wessel Song*, and they gave us the Nazi salute, shrilling: “*Heil Hitler!*” In fact, there was “heiling” all over the place, and fighting blood seemed to be high. These Hitler youths with their fervid enthusiasm gave me a cold chill, while the station porters grinned derisively at us as they shouted: “*Heil Hitler!*”

Then the green toads waddled along and began to examine our baggage: but this time they gave me a thorough going-over, emptying my stuff on the floor and leaving me to put it back. Particularly they looked at my books. They were joined by a youngish man who evidently understood English, for he lingered over the only volume I had brought with me besides my Testament, Nordau's *Conventional Lies of Civilisation*. I said: “Keep it if it interests you,” but he glared at me: “Written by a Jew—no!”

Then he told me to follow him to the cells under the station platform. There grim officials put me through a grim interrogation, examining my despatch case, poring over my passport, checking my cash. It wasn't so much what they did as the nasty way they did it. In that bare vault the air was charged with hostility. Only twice in my life have I heard my heart thud like that; first, when I was arrested as a spy: second, in the cellar with these men of the Gestapo. How glad was I when we pulled out of

the accursed place! The air was heavy with menace; one felt that War was round the corner.

In the Polish train I was awakened by that steel pain in my head. Soon the sun was flaming brazenly, and by noon the heat was a torment. The glare stung my eyes; nevertheless, I peered at the passing country. Narrow, fenceless fields ran back from the railway. The potatoes were thin, but there was no end of them. Little fear of starvation here, even if it came to War. How that word haunted me! Yet since I had entered Poland I had been conscious of a different atmosphere. No more Teutonic truculence. The Poles were smiling, yet I had a feeling they shivered under their skins.

It was a nice train. One half of the car was allotted to the First Class. It was upholstered in plush and absolutely empty; but when I sat on one of the crimson seats the guard made such a fuss I might have been desecrating a temple. The second class was crowded, except for our compartment where there were five besides myself. First there was the Jew from Pittsburg—dark, tall, thin. He had a hard face, with deep lines, a brittle voice, stony eyes. His name was Bronsky.

Then there were the Communist couple. Queer, they were. Both wore corduroy trousers. He had an orange shirt and mauve tie, she a mauve shirt and an orange tie. He was very small, with the face of a fierce monkey and a mane of hair. She was very tall, with a horse-like face and a close cropped head. He looked like a woman who looks like a man; she like a man who looks like a woman.

The fourth person was a mouse-like girl dressed in grey. She was so small she could curl up in her seat like a squirrel. She smoked cigarettes continually and scribbled in a note-book. I thought her face unfortunate, being large of mouth and blunt of nose. When she caught my eye she grinned; but I could not decide whether she was grinning to me or at me. Pert little hussy! . . . The fifth person was a Polish cadet—at least I called him a cadet because he wore a khaki mess jacket. He had a fox-like face and the furtive manner of a fox. Otherwise he was notably negligible.

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Tired of studying my fellow passengers I turned to the Polish prairie that baked in the merciless sun. The pain in my head was like a steel wedge. What a silly Old Codger I was, gallivanting in an uncouth land when I might have been basking on the beach at Dream Haven, with the wee wavelets lipping at my toes! I don't often use swear words. Profanity should be reserved for righteous occasions, but this seemed one of them. Savagely I erupted: "Damn it to bloody hell!" Then at my elbow I heard a small clear voice: "So you speak Russian."

I turned to see the little, grey girl looking at me innocently. "That's not Russian," I

said. "It's Wrath!"

"Sounds thrilling. I ought to know the words but you pronounce them different. What's biting you anyway? You look as sour as a Scotch Sabbath."

"My head's like to split."

"Oh, you poor man! Let me give you an asp. What's that you say? You don't hold with drugs. . . . Why, aspirin's not a drug. It's an aperient. Aspirin and tobacco—I live on 'em. Wait a moment."

She rushed off and returned with a tumbler of milky fluid. "Come now, drink this. If it don't do you any good it won't do you no harm. . . . There now! That's a brave laddie. But look out! You'll be losing your note-case from the pocket of your coat. The flap button's come off. Wait a moment. I'll sew it on."

From a zip-bag she produced a needle, thread and a button, which she sewed in place. "Fine," I said. "How can I thank you?" "Give me a cigarette," she said. "Sorry, I don't smoke," I told her. "What about a cocktail?" she suggested. "I don't drink," I answered. She stared at me. "Gee whiz! Is there anything else you *don't* do? Well, come on anyway. We'll have some tea."

She led the way to the next car which happened to be the restaurant. It was divided into two by a partition. Said she: "If you don't mind I'll have bread and butter with mine. I passed up lunch. I'm doing this trip on my hard-earned savings and every cent counts. Here, waiter!" She stopped the man and gave an order in a foreign tongue. "How many languages do you speak?" I asked her.

"Four at a pinch. German which you've just heard. French which you may hear anon. Italian and Spanish which you probably won't. They're a bit sticky anyway. Say, I'm assuming that you're going to Russia."

"Yes, down the Volga."

"What fun! We'll be travelling companions. What did you say your name was? Robert! How lovely. I'll call you Bobsky if I may. It's the Russian of it. My name's Rosebud, but in moments of emotion you may call me Buddy. By the way, how's your headache?"

"By gum! the pain's gone. Now, that's a perfect miracle."

"There, you should always listen to Mother. The tea will put the finishing touch. Here it comes, hot and strong."

My head had cleared as if by magic. As she served the tea and dug into the bread and butter I looked at her gratefully. How had I thought her ugly? She shook out a mop of fine brown hair that framed her piquant face. Her eyes had a nice depth of brown, her teeth were well-shaped and white. What if her mouth was big?—the better to show them. What if her nose was turned up?—it gave her an impudent

gaiety. She was so small she looked like a school girl. "What do you make of our travelling companions?" I asked.

"The Polish officer is probably a spy. He may be watching one or all of us. Bronsky is a Jew. He speaks Russian but keeps quiet about it. He may be on some special mission. The queer couple have strayed from the Montparnasse zoo. Carpet slipper Communists—Louis and Myra Gutzmann. Belong to the Communist party in New York and have introductions to the big-shot Bolshies. But tell me, why are you going to Russia?"

I lied cheerfully. "I have a commission to do a series of articles for an American magazine. . . . But why are *you*?"

She bent towards me with a strange intensity. "I'll trust you. I feel I must confide in someone, and you have a good honest face." She clutched my arm nervously; her voice dropped to a loud, thrilling whisper. "You ask me why I'm going to Russia. I'll tell you. . . . I'm going to *assassinate Stalin*. Don't look so horrified. It's true. I've a plan to crash the Kremlin. I know where his apartment is. I'll sneak in, hide myself, wait till he comes, then—bang! bang! Of course, I'll be blown to bits, but I don't mind so long as I get Joe. But I need help. I need a Man. He must be brave and ready to sacrifice his life for humanity. I've been looking for such and now I think I've found him. You, Bobsky, are that man. Together we'll assassinate Stalin."

I rose indignantly. "We bloody well won't. Listen, Miss. I'm a respectable *père de famille*, and I won't be mixed up in any such doings. If the salvation of humanity depends on me helping you to kill Stalin, then humanity can go to hell. The idea! I wouldn't even consider such a thing. But you're just kidding. How could you keep bombs on you?"

She touched her firm round breasts. "What do you think these are? I'm as flat chested as a boy. But I wear a brassière and under it, wrapped in cotton-wool are two small but efficient bombs. The Soviet officials never frisk you. I'll get by with them. Now do you believe me?"

What I would have answered I do not know, for from behind the partition against which we were sitting the Gutzmann couple emerged and, glaring at us, hurriedly left the restaurant.

"Well, now, ain't that just bloody?" said Rosebud. She sank back with a look of consternation, while I stared after their retreating backs. "Do you think they heard you?" I ventured.

"How could they help hearing that megaphone whisper? Bobsky, we're in the ruddy bortsch."

"They certainly gave us a dirty look."

"You mean they gave *me* one. If looks could kill, little Rosebud would at this moment be lying in your arms breathing her last sigh. Oh Bobsky, I can see the tears running down your rugged cheeks as you say in your cute Scotch accent: 'You're leaving me, wee lassie, just as I was beginning to love you!' The point is: they'll believe all that tripe. They have no sense of humour. Communists never have."

"Wasn't it true?"

"About Stalin and all that—not on your life. I was just stringing you. You have such a simple trusting face you ask for it. Why, I wouldn't harm a fly. And now I've let myself in for it; or rather, I've let us both in for it, for we'll be linked as conspirators from now on. They'll sick the Gaypayoo on to us. We're in bad right from the start. Oh hell! I must have a fag." She called the waiter and ordered cigarettes. She sat there brooding till he brought them. Feverishly she lit one and I watched the grey smoke descending from her nose. "Damn these Polish cigarettes," she said. "I wish I had a Camel. And I feel I need a cocktail after all that excitement. You need one too, old boy."

"I never drank a cocktail in my life."

"It's never too late to blend. Waiter, two Caucasian cocktails. . . . Now they're ordered you wouldn't be so ungallant as to have me drink both. Oh Gee! We're sure in a fix. When we get into Russia, God help us!"

"We can turn back."

"That's just it—we can't. Our papers and passports oblige us to go on even to our doom. We're shooting straight for Soviet soil and, believe me, for trouble. Well, here are the cocktails."

"In principle," I said cautiously, "I'm a total abstainer."

"Hoots mon, ye're hawering," said Rosebud. "The Lord gave us good liquor to be used, not to be abused. It's a poor fish who can't stop when he's had enough. The man who abstains on principle is a worm. Here's to us, and a happy issue out of all our miseries."

Thus admonished I blushed and drank. I had punished my share of hard liquor in my time, but for years scarcely a drop had passed my lips. Now I smacked them as I sipped. Whatever it might be it tasted fine. After all, I needed it and under the circumstances it was just like medicine. In a few minutes I began to feel a glow in my stomach and I said: "It's not hard to take. We'll have another. Waiter, encore two."

"Good sport, Bobsky. Call me Buddy, won't you? Have a cigarette. Come, light it from mine." I did so and sipped at the second cocktail. I was beginning to feel quite a lad. "Buddy," I said, "let's have the sober truth. Why is it you're going to Russia?"

"I only tell the sober truth when I'm drunk. However, here goes. . . ." Into her eyes had come a dreamy look and when she spoke her voice was grave. "You must never breathe to a soul what I tell you. I'm not a Miss, I'm a married woman. I'm married to a Russian. His name is Boris Boscovich, and he's a Volga boatman. It's a long story. He was a White Russian who was with Deniken. He escaped massacre in the Crimea and after a host of adventures made his way to New York. I met him when he was working as chauffeur of a taxi and we were secretly married. I kept my maiden name for if they knew my real one they would never let me enter the country."

"What became of him?"

"I don't know. His people were murdered by the Bolsheviks, all but his old mother. It was to try to find her he left me. He managed to get in on a forged passport. Then I got a letter telling me she had died of starvation and he had but one thought—revenge. He had a job on one of the river steamers on the Volga and his plan is to blow up one of their bridges. In the event of war it would bother them a lot. Now I'm going to join him."

"But it will be dangerous."

"Terribly dangerous, but for one's faith one must be prepared to die. By marriage I'm a White Russian, and I'm going to help hubby blow up these Volga bridges. And now, let's put one more back. Waiter, two more of the same."

I had got to the stage when I did not care what happened, and when the drinks were brought we clicked glasses. "Here's destruction to the Bolsheviks," she said, and I echoed: "Destruction to the Bolsheviks . . . hicks!" Then valiantly I tossed down my cocktail. "You're a grand girl," I said. "You're a good old sport," she told me. "If I wasn't old enough to be your daughter I would kiss you. Well, come on. We'll face the gang in the drawing-room."

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We were nearing the Russian frontier and I rasped a bristly chin. Maybe a shave would do me good. Oh, what atrocious heat! For the hundredth time I tapped my pockets to see that everything was safe. That was one drawback to this travel business—worry about losing passport, tickets, money. I was always tapping myself apprehensively. I was wearing Old Whiskers, the jacket Byron loathed so much. Now I took it off and from the inside pocket (the one Rosebud had sewn) I took my wallet. Yes, my tickets and coupons were safe. I counted my money, twenty crisp bills of a thousand each. Better split them and put half in another hiding place. True, I would not need them in Russia but I liked to have a feeling of security. . . . What a fool I had been to take those drinks! My head was going round and round. As I put



the notes away I saw the Polish cadet watching me.

My Gladstone bag was topsy-turvy; but I found my shaving outfit and laden with it I went off to the lavatory. I was lathered up when suddenly I missed my jacket. I must have left it in the compartment so, wiping off the soap, I rushed back. To my relief it was just as I had left it. Yes, my wallet was there, carefully buttoned in. What a fool I was to be so careless! All the fault of those cocktails. Rosebud was curled up in her corner sleeping soundly while the Polish cadet was staring out of the window.

Careless of the many assaults on the door I spent a long time in the lavatory. I spruced up thoroughly and felt like a new man. As the train stopped at the Polish frontier station among those descending was the Polish cadet. Then some officials got on the train. They had lovely uniforms and their manners were polite. After admiring them I went back to our compartment. Scrunched up on the seat Rosebud slept like a child. She looked like one, too, all except her breasts which were well developed. Almost too well. Suddenly suspicion seized me. What if she really had bombs concealed under her *brassière*? It was fantastic, but then so much on that train seemed fantastic. Being still a little fuddled I felt that I must convince myself that what I saw was what it was supposed to be. There was no one in the compartment. Why not?

So, cautiously bending forward, I gingerly poked my finger at the nearest of those pear-shaped protuberances and greatly to my relief, it yielded to my pressure. I was withdrawing my finger when with a cry she grabbed my hand. Indignantly she glared at me. "What d'ye think you're playing at?"

"I was just seeing if they were the real thing," I stammered.

"What did you think they were?"

"Bombs for Boris," I answered. She stared with some bewilderment. Then she laughed. "You're either an awful fool or you take me for one. But I'm through with you now. In future we never speak as we pass by. So please go away and let me sleep."

She turned her back and curled up like a squirrel, while I rose woefully and stood in the corridor. What an ass I had made of myself! And as I stood there two officials approached me. "Polish certificate. Show money," said one.

I understood. They wanted to verify my currency. So I took out my wallet. There was the paper showing that I had entered Poland with twenty thousand francs. They should be in the inner section. I looked. It was empty. There were my tickets, my coupons, my passport, but—no money. I hunted frantically through my pockets. Again I stared with stupefaction at my wallet.

“I’m not taking any money out of your country,” I said. “I haven’t any to take. Not a bloody cent. I’ve been robbed.”

### THE SOVIET TRAIN

The train had reached the Russian frontier, but I was too stunned to care. It was not losing the money I minded; it was the feeling that I had been a mug. I couldn't blame whoever had taken it—that poor devil of a Pole, no doubt, who had never seen so much wealth in his life before. There was no one else I could suspect, or perhaps everyone I could suspect—the train conductor, passengers, even Bronsky. . . . No, I wouldn't wrong anyone by baseless suspicion. I was sure none of these people could have done it; yet . . . there was my wallet empty where bills had been. By what sleight of hand had they been extracted? Again I searched my clothes, my baggage, the railway carriage, hoping that in my alcoholic obfuscation I had mislaid them. Nothing!

Despair, chagrin, fear assailed me, for there was the future to face. I would be all right as long as I remained on Soviet soil, because my coupons covered expenses. Beyond that, how was I going to get home without a penny? I would have to sell something. Well, time enough to worry when the crisis came. I tried to be happy-go-lucky, but it was a sorry attempt, and from then on my plight was always at the back of my mind.

The train had stopped on the border. On both sides the forest had been cleared, forming a lane a hundred yards wide. In the middle was the usual barbed wire entanglement, like a spider's web in its grey ugliness. On either side soared towers of trestle work, and on the top Polish and Russians sentinels faced one another. As I looked Bronsky joined me. "Is it to keep the Poles out or the Russians in?" I asked.

"You won't find Poles trying to crash that barrier," he said. "But if they were allowed, half the population of Russia would stampede across the frontier."

"I shouldn't think they would get past that wire easily."

"That's the least of their troubles. For a hundred miles beyond the frontier the country is patrolled by Red Guards. It's mighty difficult to escape from the Proletariat Paradise. They don't know I speak Russian and I'm not telling any more than I have to; but say, Pal, you don't mind if I give you a word of warning—don't

let them get you with your pants down. We're going into a country where they hate us. If you travel third class and you're badly dressed they are less suspicious, and if you have a Communist card they receive you like a brother. But look out for the spy and the *agent provocateur*. Why, even I might be one of them. I'm not though. I'm what they call a Silver Sausage."

He laughed bitterly, then went on: "I'm a Jew and I got out of Russia in the early days of the Revolution. Most of my family have been liquidated—some shot, some killed themselves, some perished of cold and hunger. Only remains my Dad. Once he had a big store on the Nevsky Prospect. His partners died in prison, but he accepted the Bolshies and was tolerated. He was banished to a village where he lives in misery. He's over eighty now. I send him American dollars in letters but half the time he doesn't get them. For long I've been trying to get him out of the country, but there's nothing doing. Now they've thrown him into gaol and put his ransom at two thousand bucks. That's why I'm going—to pay the ransom and maybe take him back with me."

"I hope you'll get him away."

"I dunno. He doesn't want me to pay the dough. Says it's no good. He'd just as soon die. He just wants to go on living in his village, content with any comfort my money can buy. One thing I do when I visit him is to take him half a dozen suits of my old clothes. He sells them for big money. Commissars will pay any price for American suits. I don't suppose you'll see a Soviet citizen as well dressed as we are. It would be anti-social. Say, I've told you a lot. I hope you're not a Soviet spy. What are you anyway?"

"A writer looking for copy."

"Well, give the bastards hell. From now on I zipper my mug. Soon we'll be on Soviet soil."

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Strange things were happening on the Polish train. First, the guard came round closing all windows; then the train men divested themselves of their uniforms. They became mere passengers and, retiring into an empty compartment, produced chicken, fruit, wine. Then after much hesitation, very slowly the train crossed the frontier.

"We're in Russia now," said Bronsky. "Here comes the Red Army." There were a dozen of them. They climbed on the train, looking sourly at the laughing trainmen. All had peevish, pasty faces, shoddy uniforms, surly manners. A grim officer relieved me of my passport and I was not to see it again till we reached Moscow. Then for a long time the train seemed to die. There was a wait full of suspense before once

again we moved stealthily forward. As I peered through the blinds I saw a space of scrubby wood, then small clearings. Here the potato patches were thinner, the cabins meaner than in Poland. Suddenly the track was banked with mangy sward set with beds of cheap flowers. Geraniums represented the Crimson Star, purples and yellow anemones formed the hammer and sickle. "Say it with flowers," said Soviet Propaganda. Slowly, silently we sneaked into the station.

The platform was deserted but in the doorway of a large, grey building lounged a group of Red Guards. The building was chiefly remarkable for its emptiness, yet it had a dignity that impressed me until Bronsky remarked: "Window dressing. The real station is further along. There you'll see a siding and lousy hordes camping hopefully with their bedding. This is a station *de luxe* for a train *de luxe*. As Krupskaya used to say: 'Why should we show our backsides to the world?' But don't let 'em fool you. . . . Here come the porters. We don't have to pay 'em."

"Do ordinary travellers?"

"Sure, there's a regular tariff. Besides, they get a hundred roubles a month from the Government. They've no kick coming."

More than ever I thought them pitiable. A white armlet was all their uniform, otherwise they were dressed in rags. They looked wan and hungry, and all had a grey bristle of beard. An old man seized my Gladstone bag, signing to me to follow. Apprehensively I watched the decrepit figure totter under the heavy burden. Unfair, I thought; still, part of the system.

Entering the grey station we were confronted by a huge plaster statue of Lenin and Stalin, each about twice life size. The two were sitting like cronies, clasping hands and beaming on one another. Lenin had a sinister geniality, Stalin a bluff joviality. On the walls behind were huge canvasses of nine prominent members of the Government, big stencilled heads on cheap cotton.

Past the stares of these contumelious Commissars, once more I entered the Chamber of the Inquisition. The porter dropped my bag on the counter and two employees seized it. A third barked at me: "Money!" I shook my head. "Money!" again roared the man. I tried to tell him I had none. Assuming that I refused to show my money an interpreter was called. He was a Jewish youth to whom I explained the situation, showing my empty wallet. Everyone seemed delighted I had been robbed on the Polish train. I had entered the country with no money and therefore was not entitled to leave it with any.

In the meantime two examiners had opened my bag, and systematically arranged my effects in two piles. The smaller of these contained my books and papers. They were callow youths in khaki, who began by a meticulous inspection of my valise,

probing, tapping, measuring the thickness for false sides. Then very deliberately they made a careful examination of my effects. They seemed envious of my toilet set. My safety razor they looked at admiringly. There was disillusion and disgust as they put down these articles, the qualities of which their countries could not produce. Here was a profiteer, a grinder of the proletariat. Sourly they allowed me to put everything back.

Now came the pile comprising my books and papers, and these they went through with a scrutiny that made me feel an object of suspicion. They dropped my Gideon Testament as if it were red-hot. They emptied my card case, and pondered over some pencilled addresses, reading them upside down with head scratchings. But what intrigued them most were my Intourist booklets, describing the charms of Russia. These they gazed at with childish eagerness. In flaming colours the brochures of Tiflis, Batoum and Yalta held them spellbound. So long did they look I realised they were more interested in Southern Russia than in the inspection of my baggage. There was such starved longing in their gaze I would have liked to ask them to keep the literature. However, with a sigh one of them relinquished it and indicated I could repack my bag. I was exonerated.

Not so the others. They were still in the hands of the inquisitors. The Gutzmann pair had shown the interpreter membership cards of an American Communist society, but for some reason this seemed to make the search more severe. Their letters of introduction were opened and scrutinised, sometimes upside down. Their books were searched page by page, and a bluff made to read their contents. A sealed package containing a birthday present was broken into, and found to contain a cigarette lighter. This was regarded with the suspicion of a deadly weapon. Their films were confiscated and the inner lining of a fur coat explored. In fact, the examination was so microscopic it lasted almost an hour, and left them in a state of nervous irritation. As they closed their bags they were a pair of very disgruntled Reds. "Ignominious and indelicate," fumed Louis Gutzmann. "Stupid, arrogant and superfluous," snapped Myra. "We'll report to Moscow."

At last the search was over, but we were not allowed to leave the station building. No snooping around. We were locked in until the train was ready to depart. So I took my bag over to a bench and sat down. I felt tired and lonely. Rosebud and Bronsky were having an animated conversation, frequently looking my way. Were they talking about me? I felt like butting in when she came and squatted beside me. "Have a cigarette, Bobsky," she said with her vivid smile.

I didn't mind her familiarity. Indeed I rather liked it. American girls were like that—so flip and friendly. Better than the stiff English, the punctilious Scotch. I surprised

myself by taking the cigarette she offered, perhaps because its form appealed to my Scotch mind. About two thirds of it was cardboard tube, so that you could smoke it down to the last grain. "How did you get on with the searching gang?" she asked.

"Not so bad. They dropped my wee Testament as if it was pollution."

"Yet its hero was the greatest Communist of them all. Well, I'd quite a lively time. They weighed my fur coat, gave me a certificate for my jewels and nearly ripped my grip to pieces. They took away an undeveloped film with two shots of that barbed wire barrier. They'll be peeved when they develop it. I should have kept it in my jeans. Otherwise everything's okay. But let's go to the restaurant. You can buy me a Narzan."

The restaurant was as bare as it was spacious. At one end was a buffet and glass cases, both meagrely provisioned. Two waitresses were talking to three Red armyists. Their waved hair was dyed golden, their nails and lips were vermilion. They were haughty and indifferent in the best barmaid fashion. At Rosebud's request one of them brought a bottle of Narzan, but for some reason refused my coupon. "Never mind," said Rosebud. "There's a money changing office outside. You can buy a few roubles. You'll need them anyway. Change a pound."

"I haven't got a pound, or even a penny," I said. "I was robbed on that train. Twenty thousand francs, I think it was the Polish officer who got them."

"Good God! He was such a neat man. Well, he did a neat job." She was very thoughtful, then she said. "But I, too, was in that compartment. You have a right to suspect me."

"Oh please! I wouldn't have mentioned the matter if I could have helped it."

"Look here, Bobsky, I feel under a cloud. You must admit I might have taken it. Well, you saw my baggage being searched and there was nothing there. Shall I strip off to show you I have nothing on my person? . . ." But I cut her short. "Don't be a damned little fool. Come on—they're letting us board the train."

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Lying on a couchette in the "soft" section of the Soviet train I continued to feel sorry for myself. An emaciated conductor showed me to my place. He was dressed in cotton khaki, much stained and creased. Beside me he left a paper bag containing sheets, a pillow case, a towel, all of the coarsest kind. Presently Bronsky came along and flopped on the couchette opposite. "I'm travelling 'hard,'" he said. "Fewer pillow pigeons. Well, how are you, Pal?"

"A bit tired. I'm not so young as I used to be. I tried to have a wash-up, but found half the Red Army waiting to get into the place."

"You're lucky you didn't get in. Your one desire would be to get out again. Oh

Boy, you just wait! If you want to have a shave you gotta get up in the middle of the night when everyone's hitting the hay. But if you want a real wash there's only one way recognised in the best Soviet circles. You get a bottle of Narzan, take a mouthful, spirt it into the hollow of your hands, then quickly apply it to your face. By the time you've finished the bottle you're pretty clean. It's good for the skin, too. The art of travelling is to adapt yourself to all possible and (in Russia) impossible conditions. But now I see the feed wagon's functioning. Let us get our heads in the trough with the other pigs."

It was quite a job getting to the restaurant. We climbed Alps of baggage and passed a hundred Muscovites who stared at us with sour looks. The dining room was jammed, but like an oasis at the end was the table reserved for Intourist passengers. It was notable for its comparative cleanliness. As I sat down, feeling a little mean to be so privileged, a waitress took a chair beside me. She was a dumpy elderly woman dressed like a scullery maid. Putting an arm round my neck she held a big menu card before my eyes. Looking at me in the friendliest way she pointed with sealing-wax nails to certain items.

I let Bronsky order the conventional Russian dinner—caviare, bortsch, sturgeon, ice-cream. There was some difficulty about the caviare. It was only allowed to those travelling "soft" and Bronsky was not in the caviare class. I fixed things by giving a tea ticket, picked at a black mountain of Beluga, and plunged into a mess of rich soup, replete with sausage, beef and bacon. There was no sturgeon, so I elected for chicken. After a long wait in which I had time to get up a fresh appetite, I was served a half chicken, a salad of cucumber, tomato and onion, compote of fruit and ice-cream. The affectionately hovering waitress brought me a cup of tea. It was hay colour and tasted like hay, and beside it on the saucer were two cubes of what looked like white stucco and took almost as long a time to melt.

During the meal the loud speaker never ceased to bray. The restaurant, decorated with red bunting, had a very gay aspect. Every table was occupied but only ours had serviettes and a reasonably clean table cloth. Half of the diners were soldiers of the Red Army, the others men wearing clothes that might have been picked out of a decent dustbin. Most were coatless, with shirts open at the necks and none too clean. A number wore huge watches on their wrists. Some heads were shaven, some shaggy. Many were flat of feature with putty coloured skins. Nearly all were happy looking, and all seemed to have rolls of roubles. It was these wads of green bills that set me wondering. Could it be that one of the chief industries of the Soviets was printing paper currency?

As we sat there Rosebud joined us, and Bronsky bought a bottle of some clear



liquor which looked innocent but could not have been lacking in authority; for though we drank it in thimble-like glasses, after the third I have a hazy recollection of events. I vaguely remember climbing Grampians of baggage and stumbling over sleeping forms. I felt overjoyed to find sheets on my bed, but right opposite my door a loudspeaker was blaring. The heat was stifling, the air fetid. Three Red Army officers occupied the other berths. They slept nearly naked and paid no attention to me, talking and smoking till midnight. But it was long after that when I dozed off, with the radio going full blast and the open door of the compartment framing a stream of passengers.

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I awoke about five with a head heavy as a chunk of lead, and a mouth that tasted as if I had been chewing bed-bugs. I thought I would have a shave, but though the toilet was free the stench of it defeated me. Feeling my gorge rise I returned to my couchette, where the officers snored stertorously and the air was foul. So dressing I went into the corridor and tried to open a window, but it seemed as if they were sealed to prevent the entry of fresh air. The glass was opaque with dust, the blinds and curtains looked as if they had not been cleaned since the days of the Czars—which probably they hadn't. Yet in the first class there was running water in each compartment. These, however, seemed to be reserved for high officers of the Red Army. Three distinct classes in a country that prided itself on having abolished class was something I could not understand. It was like the ragged clothes and the rolls of roubles.

At last I managed to get a window open. Oh, the pure air of the morning! At once I felt my head clearing. The narrow fields of Poland had given way to vast areas cultivated by tractors, while in the far distance was the prison-like building of a collective farm. Emerging from it I saw a truck laden with female workers going to their toil. They looked like convicts being conveyed to forced labour. I thought: there is freedom in Russia, freedom to obey. As long as you do everything you are told to do you'll be all right.

Then the whole aspect of the country changed. It became rolling and wooded, with little lakes now and then. This broken land had escaped the tentacles of collectivism. It was nature fresh and unchanged as it had been for ages. What a relief this green disorder after the brown efficiency of the collective farms! In a space of silver birches by a clear pond a band of children were playing. They were naked and full of sylvan joy. There were old type villages, grassy streets lined with grey cabins. The people looked brown, well fed, happy. In the lazy peace of those primitive hamlets life was going on as it had in the Czarist days. It was the old, the true, the

eternal Russia, uncontaminated by Communism.

The passengers were waking up now and a long line of Red soldiers stood outside the offensive toilet. There they would wait with that patience that is one of the assets of the Russian character. The compartment was empty, and presently the conductor came along with a glass of hot tea. I took a mouthful, spirted it on my hands, rubbing till they were comparatively clean. Following the same system with my face, I polished it with a towel. There! I felt refreshed, and drank what was left of my tea. I was resuming my window gazing when Rosebud breezed along. She was looking far from her best, but hailed me cheerily. "Hullo, Uncle Bobsky! How's the old bean?"

"Not so bad, considering. And how's yourself?"

"Feeling like hell. Expect I look it. After you passed out early in the game I happed you in your little cot and went back to join the gang. Bronsky bought another bottle and we played Gin Rummy till three A.M. Oh, what a thirst I've got! You haven't by any chance a slab of old Glenlivet in your hip flask? Gee! I could put one back where it belongs. . . . Well, come along anyway and we'll see if the restaurant's open."

It was. In spite of the fact that she had only had three hours' sleep the grey-haired waitress greeted me affectionately. She brought me two fried eggs, black bread and butter, and a glass of tea. Rosebud looked at the food with loathing. "God! You're lucky you can eat. There's no hangover like a vodka one. I could drink the Volga dry, but I'll try to make out on two bottles of Narzan. The old girl's pretty sweet on you. You've got something, you know. I think those Russian dames are going to fall for you right along."

I sniffed. Sometimes I wondered if Rosebud was really a *nice* girl. Even if she wasn't I liked her. Perhaps more so. With a sense of intimacy I watched her making up her face, till soon it glistened as freshly as a lily of the field. . . . Huge slabs of Russia were sweeping past the window. They were very pleasant, with a cloying sameness—silver birch groves, log cabins, patches of potatoes, gardens of sunflowers, the primitive villages of old time Russia. We passed dingy stations with dilapidated freight sheds where swarms of patient peasants squatted amid their bedding. In Poland the stations had been so fresh and trim, and always a soldier in a blue uniform had stood at the salute as the train passed. Here a haggard scarecrow of a woman waved a red flag at us.

We passed gangs of women railway workers. They were clad in sacking, with tarry hands and brutish faces. They were grading with pick and shovel. Most of them were barefooted with handkerchiefs round their heads. "The Proletariat Paradise,"

said Rosebud, indicating a band of them carrying a heavy rail. "I wish I could take a photo, but I'd get into trouble. They're so sensitive. . . . Well, by the look of things we're nearing Moscow and soon the time must come to part. Say, I've been thinking of all that dough you lost, and if fifty good American bucks would be of any use to you I can spare them. Please let me."

Poor Rosebud! She blushed as she tried to push a greenback into my hand, but I had the pride to refuse. "Thanks a lot," I said. "I'll never forget your kindness, but I'll get along somehow. By the way, what did you say your last name was?"

"Petrovich."

"I thought you said Boscovich!"

"That's right. Petrovich Boscovich. We Russians have a lot of names. And now, Tovarich, if you'll excuse me I'll pack my bag, for I can see the smoke of Moscow."

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

GORKI

Moscow was *en fete*. Bands greeted us; the station was bright with bunting. In the brilliant sunshine the throngs were buoyant with happiness. . . . At least, this was how I saw it. Moscow was welcoming the world to the Great Russian Exhibition, and its cordiality was extended to my censorious self. So I determined to shut my eyes to the bad and see only the good. As Bronsky might have put it: "Give the bastards a break. At least they're *white*."

In this elate atmosphere my heart went out to them and their city. After all, I *had* enjoyed a good time there. I liked the old place and it seemed to be suddenly friendly. I resolved to have a good time again. I would forget my money loss, not let worry get me down. Things would work out all right. As we walked down the station I felt relatively happy.

What an admirable institution Intourist was! A guide called me by name, a car was waiting, a porter seemed to enjoy carrying my baggage. Everyone smilingly welcomed me to their city. As we drove through streets of weaving colour they rang with cheer. I had put on my rose glasses again, and in Russia one needs them. I was disappointed we did not go to the Metropole, but to the more modern Hotel National. I loved the Metropole, ramshackle old ruin though it was. However, I got a nice room, had a bath, changed and felt like a million dollars—even though I hadn't a cent. Then I went down to a lunch of chicken soup, stergel and ice-cream, wrote up my notes and sallied forth to pay my respects to the Tomb.

From my hotel I could see a line serpentine down from the Red Square, and round the garden of the Kremlin. I walked along it, staring curiously at the patient crowd of Lenin worshippers. I saw many women, some barefooted and some with high boots. There were Cossacks, Mongols, Georgians, Tartars. Men with little round caps and others with cone-like hats of Persian lamb; cloaks of gay stripes and coats of dyed sheep-skin; pilgrims from Armenia and peasants from the Ukraine. Last, but not least, a Scotch Highlander in a tartan kilt.

That evening I went out and roamed wherever fancy took me. I walked the

packed streets till my feet ached. At midnight shops were open and business brisk. In the dress of the people I noticed a big change. The women wore gay prints, while the men were neat in white cotton shirts, khaki slacks and sandals. There were tourists galore; swarms of Swedish socialists, crowds of Communists from the Clyde, mobs of Reds from Menilmontant. Never was Moscow so teeming with strangers, and up on her toes to tell the world of Soviet progress. I was impressed. As I went to bed my last thought was: If war does not balk her Russia is going to bulk big in world affairs. And even if war comes—who knows? . . .

Next day I visited the Exhibition. Through wide streets we drove for miles. In the car was a honeymoon couple from California, barely out of their teens. They wore shorts and suggested Hollywood. There was also a South African who only ten days before had been in Cape Town. These people had open minds and seemed to have come to Russia out of curiosity.

As we strolled the grounds a Jew boy from Baltimore attached himself to us. He had become a Soviet subject and was studying in the research department of the University. He was enthusiastic about his work, but seemed pathetically glad to be with Americans. In the States he had been a boot-black, and he kept bragging of the blessings he now enjoyed. But the clothes he wore would have been disdained by any decent hobo, while he did not look over nourished. "Do you not miss the freedom of the U.S.?" I asked, and he answered: "I have as much freedom here. I am free to tell you guys it's a grand country and I love it."

I reflected: In the States he could have worked his way through University, worn better clothes, been better fed and had a future equally assured. However, nothing could convince those people that conditions elsewhere were better than in their Soviet Union. Theirs was the mystic of the idealist which nothing could defeat. Directed to aims of good or to ends of evil this spiritual uplift was to be reckoned with. Had these national fanatics the edge on us? Would they swamp us in the end?

But with war just round the corner here was a great Exhibition. And it was really beautiful. There were fifty-three pavilions, each contrasting in design and characteristic of the province they represented. On the first day I visited three, for most of my time was spent enjoying the spectacle of strange peoples. All the rancid races of Mongolia had been brought to be impressed by Soviet might. Never was a scene more colourful, more vital; and dominating those garden grounds with their proud pavilions was a statue to Lenin. Mounted on a column a hundred feet high, it was gigantic in size. It was there for these people to worship, the god who was responsible for their blessings.

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I got back to the hotel at three when lunch was just beginning. For a change we had roast grouse instead of chicken. I wanted to rest after, but alas? Intourist had planned a trip for me. There were two others in the party, an old English Jew with a Don Juan complex, who began by telling the pretty blonde girl guide that she had to be very good to him. There was also a homely American woman with a Paris hat gay as a *perroquet*. She told me that in the night she had caught her first Russian bed-bug. I told her that in all my visits to the country I had never seen one. It was true, but I did not tell her that my visits had been confined to a two months' trip the previous summer. Note the charlatan in me. To those cheechakos I spoke as if I were a Soviet Sourdough. "Oh, I come every year," I would say nonchalantly. "Of course the more you see of this country the less you know of it. Naturally I don't pretend to be an authority. . . ." And so on. And I got away with it, for people were impressed.

Now I watched this senile Jew making passes at the blonde guide, and registered a disgust to which he paid no attention. Dammit! even if I was an Old Codger I knew how to behave myself. Yes, sir, I treated those girls with respect, knowing there is no fool like an old fool. This old fool paid no attention to the sights the guide was showing him, being too busy appreciating her charms. But when I saw him trying to pinch her behind I butted in, saying in French to her: "*Il est ridicule, ce vieux satire.*" She understood and grinned back. "*Il n'y a rien a faire.*" The old chap hadn't reckoned on Russian virtue. Of course, if he had been tall, dark and handsome I would not have vouched so strongly for the virtue part, but I willingly took her word for it.

Of our drive I remember little, except that it was pleasantly uninformative. We saw an apartment building which had been put up in three weeks, and a stadium capable of holding a hundred thousand. These Intourist trips usually are a bit of a bore, but guides are peeved if you refuse to go through with their program, and expect you to go into raptures over all they show you. They suppose they are educating you; and perhaps they are, although not in the way they intend.

In the days that followed I made many visits to the Exhibition. Conscientiously I did the fifty-three pavilions, glad there were not fifty-four. However, there was a model school where the Directress asked me to write an eulogy in her visitor's book. I made a good job of it that ran to five hundred words, with a girl guide at my elbow telling me in agitated accents that we were going to miss the last bus. We caught it after a wild rush that gave me palpitation. In the bus was a man who spoke good American and told me he was head of the guides. We had an interesting talk. In winter, he informed me, they had snug quarters and were well fed, while they

were free to study for one of the professions.

In the evening the Exhibition was at its best for the illuminations were wonderful; particularly the statue of Lenin, standing out in silver glory against the star powdered sky. It dominated that fairy scene, and as I gazed I felt a sense of awe. Communist or no, it was something that caught at the heart and moved one with a strange emotion. Suddenly I would feel sympathetic to these people; then I would go into a nearby pavilion where some graphic frescoes showed the liquidation of the *kulaks*. I knew them to be victims of Soviet savagery, but I would not suggest such a thought to my guide, and would stand glumly by when she told me they were bad people and deserved to be exterminated.

After a day in the Exhibition it was nice to get back to the city and have dinner at the Metropole. We would begin about ten o'clock and finish at midnight. The food was good, and the show was good and the dawdling service did not matter. I would usually dine with the Californians and the South African. We were a gay and happy band, but often I thought of Rosebud and how she would have pepped up the party. I had seen nothing of her since our arrival in Moscow; but perhaps she feared to compromise me and had avoided me. A queer kid! . . . Well, I will never forget those dinners at the Metropole and how tired I went to bed.

But my Moscow visit was drawing to a close, so one evening I found myself packing up and ready to move on. I had been two weeks in the city where despite the atrocious heat I had passed a marvellous time. Perhaps it was due to the Exhibition, but it had been so different from the previous year. There had been a sense of prideful welcome. If the city kept on in that way it would rival any other capital in attractiveness. Some day I would return to see a free, resplendent Moscow, challenging in elegance the highest standards of civilisation.

As I waited for the car to take me to the station I felt very lonely. I cheered a little when I found my guide was French-speaking and we talked of Paris, which she had an ardent desire to visit. But only for a short stay. Oh no, not to remain there. Life in Russia was too wonderful, the future too rich with promise. I thought her ideas might change after a spell of the Luxembourg Gardens and the Champs Elysées, but it would have been tactless to do anything but agree with her. So we parted affably at the train and she bade me *bon voyage*.

The station presented the usual packed confusion, sleeping families, swarms of squalid children, much misery. I shared my compartment with a soldier who smoked most of the night, and a young man who coughed consumptively. I slept but little, and got up at six, though no one else was stirring. Standing at a window of the corridor I enjoyed the beauty of the morning and the freshness of the air. The country was

lovely—birch and pine woods, willow glades and ponds, placid rivers mirroring the sky. There were sleeping villages, with broad, grass-grown streets, yellow painted log cabins with thatched roofs, geraniums in windows and gardens of sunflowers. How lucky I was to have this picture of peace while others slumbered brutally!

Then after passing several gangs of railway women we drew into Gorki, where Intourist met me with a brand new car and drove me over the Volga by a brand new bridge. I think it is fitting that one's first sight of a famous river should be a great moment. The Yukon, the Mississippi, the Amazon—each should arouse their appropriate emotion. One should stare hungrily and gasp, and gaze and gaze. This is what I did, with back-turning head as we took the cobbled road to the crowded main street of the city. So this was the famous Nijni-Novgorod. What a pity to re-christen it after a second-grade writer! But that's the Soviet of it. Destroy all historic names and call a town after some wretched Commissar whom no one knows.

However, they pride themselves on their new Intourist hotels, and that of Gorki won my admiration. It was really lovely—simple but in excellent taste, with telephones and modern bathrooms to every room. So I shaved, bathed and was enjoying breakfast when a blonde girl guide came to tell me that I was due to go sight-seeing. There was no respite for me. The car was waiting, the program was set, and she was at my bidding, or rather, I was at hers. She spoke with a pretty English accent and told me that later she hoped to be promoted to Moscow. Now she accompanied bands of tourists down the Volga: yes, if there were only one solitary passenger Intourist provided him with a guide. I hoped I would be the only one and she would be my guide, but I was to be disappointed. . . .

They did not give us the showy reception car, but one of a lighter type that bumped over the rough streets and dodged tram-cars, crowded as I have never seen them before. Our first visit was to the State Bank which had been built in the old days by the merchants of Novgorod. It was High German in inspiration, with carvings, frescoes, brass and iron-work, mural paintings and stained glass windows. Altogether a thing of joy and comfort in a utilitarian world. As usual I was more interested in the human side and watched the gaping crowds of peasants, some in straw shoes with cloth-swathed legs. But even *they* could not destroy the dignity and charm of that old world building.

Once more we jolted through crowded streets in the heat and the glare; past tasteless stores with milling crowds of shabby citizens—on to the birthplace of Gorki, the star sight of the city. Being myself in the writing game I took a special interest in this museum and prepared to photograph it on my memory. On a sloping side street was a log building painted a dull red. Everything had been preserved so



as to convey a picture of the past. In the low living room was the punishment bench with its rods in pickle. The top of the big stove was a sleeping place piled with bedding. On the table were candlesticks and snuffers, on the walls icons. There were two samovars, a crockery cupboard with a wooden bowl full of wooden spoons, while in a corner stood a squat pendulum clock.

Then we went to grandfather's room, where no children were allowed. There was a small sofa, and a round table with a few books; two pictures of Czarist generals, a glass case with household treasures, including a money box which was used for locking up the sugar, for the old man was avaricious. There was his Bible, for he was also religious. I tried on his steel-rimmed spectacles. From the rafters hung his kaftan, his fancy waistcoat, his felt slippers. . . . Then came grandmother's room—lace-work, distaff, old photos, dresses of silk and satin; the bed, short and stuffy; beside it pin-cushion and thimbles, and a wooden barrier studded with nails to keep out the family who slept on the stove-top or the floor. Such the Gorki mansion, religiously preserved.

Because of its human interest I enjoyed this visit, but what followed was more or less of a bore. We crossed the river to the industrial part of the city. For the most part one bank of the Volga consists of a high bluff and the other a level flat. The old towns are built on the bluffs, while the modern industrial sections spread out on the plains. At Gorki across the river was a vast area studded with factories. My girl guide reeled off impressive figures which went in at my right ear and out at my left, for I was too busy admiring her to be interested in truck works and milling factories. In Russia pretty girls are rather rare, and Lydia—for this was her name—was notably attractive. Her hair was squirrel brown, her complexion English, her eyes Scandinavian. All told she made a hit with me from the start.

However, I did manage to absorb some information. There were huge blocks of apartment buildings of brick construction, covered with plaster to look like stone. These had courts and consisted of units of two to three rooms, the rents of which were rated according to the wage of the worker. This struck me as an excellent idea but only possible where one's landlord was the State. For instance, if your salary was four hundred roubles you would pay about fourteen in rent, but if you were a street sweeper earning the lowest wage of one-hundred-and-seventy-five roubles you might pay only five roubles for the same accommodation. There were thirty-eight schools in this area and many free cinemas. Altogether I was impressed by the care the State took of its army of labour, and the scientific exploitation of its man power. Here was a lesson I hope we will never be obliged to learn—the organised State, ordered economy, planned production.

It was pleasant to leave this worker's paradise and return to the high town with its bumpy roads and magnificent views. Thank God, I thought, for the Old and to the devil with the New. With reservations, of course. I was glad enough to get back to the hotel and fell in love with it afresh—my bedroom with a big divan and a radio, writing desk with supplies, and bathroom with nickelled fixtures. After another bath I had dinner of noodle soup, chicken and ice-cream, and then took the car for the boat. I was tired but pleasantly excited. Rarely have I anticipated a voyage with such eagerness. There would be infinite variety, beauty, serenity and unfailing interest. Also there would be comfort, good food and, I hoped, pleasant companions.

As I speculated on the last Lydia told me: "There are five other passengers. The Buntings from Brooklyn and the Gutzmanns from Greenwich Village." At the last name I started. Hell! Couldn't I get away from that poisonous team? I felt they were going to spoil my trip. Then Lydia took me to the landing where badly clad Russians waited with piles of bundles. Ruthlessly she pushed them aside like so much scum. Three steamers were moored together and we took the outer, climbing to the saloon deck. She gave me a key to my state-room, telling me not to lose it as there was no duplicate, and *always to lock my door*.

As I looked round my cabin my spirits rose. It had a wash basin, mirror, a big berth, grey-painted walls, with strips of wood to give a panelled effect, a small table, a big blanket, two towels and a life belt. I gazed happily about me, resolving to enjoy this comfort to the full. Then I went on deck and had my last look at Gorki, the huddled town, the white walled Kremlin with its grey towers, the white monastery in the trees. A gracious sight if one could only blot out that spread of industrial blight that Lydia pointed to with such pride.

That evening we had a late supper and she introduced me to the Bunting family. At once they appealed to me. Pop Bunting was a regular Babbit, Ma a matronly Daughter of the Revolution, while their son, a big gangling boy whom I christened Babe, was majoring in Political Economy and quite a serious student. I think it was really for his sake they had come on this trip, for he was to write a college thesis on Soviet Russia. He was short sighted, but keen after knowledge, and took notes with determination. I decided to like the Buntings, and so auspiciously began my Volga trip which I will try to follow as I put it down in my diary.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

### VOLGA DIARY

First Day. Supper was over, a constrained and cautious supper in which we seemed to be sizing each other up. I slipped away from the others, for I wanted to be alone to savour my solitude. As I sought the upper deck, standing solitary in the still evening, a surge of joy came over me. At that moment I felt the glamour and mystery of the scene, and that sense of Russia that one feels most exquisitely on the bosom of its mightiest river. Vastitude, majesty, poetic dignity—that is what I conceive to be the spirit of Russia, and here in a serenity of gladness poignantly it came home to me. In the shadow of the bank the wash of the boat was like watered silk, while on the other hand was mirrored a sunset sky of rose, amber and pearl. The corrugated bluffs were of ocre and orange, and their bold outlines stencilled the sky. . . . Sing, ye Harps of Heaven! I sighed, for I felt very happy.

It was a fine boat, this Queen of the Volga fleet; square-built, screw driven and of small draft. Yellow silken curtains fluttered in the open window of the cabin. The decoration was Empire and there was a canary-coloured piano on which a Red soldier was playing Chopin. Walking the promenade deck I heard a Polonaise exquisitely rendered. . . . Where the channel was narrow we often stopped to let other boats pass. Our loud whistle warned of our approach. Sometimes it was a scow laden with bales of hay and towed by a tug, while a dozen skiffs, painted black and pointed at both ends, would be hitched behind. Once I saw a solitary boat going upstream with a dozen passengers. Four women were rowing with a steady, powerful stroke. As they surged forward I heard exultant shouts, saw laughing faces. Thought I: if I had to live in Russia let me be a Volga boatman.

We passed many small paddle steamers, getting an idea of the busy traffic of this great water-way. Then darkness fell and the channel was defined by floating lamps. The evening was calm, the air fresh; but suddenly it chilled, and with a craving for society I sought the *salon*. Lydia welcomed me. Assured by my paternal manner she became quite confiding. "I've been married," she told me. "But I did not like my husband so I left him. Now I have only my mother, who is very old and does not like

Communists. She has her religion. I do not believe in God and we have disputes. My religion is Humanity, a heaven here and now, and in Soviet Russia we are realising that. I like Americans, but if one asked me to marry him I would only do so if I could remain in Russia, for here it is so wonderful. Only give us a chance and we will lead the world.”

She spoke with a fervour that convinced me she would have died for her cause; but for some reason she did not like Myra Gutzmann, while she developed quite an affection for placid Ma Bunting. Myra was intellectual and high-hatted her, while Ma spoke of domestic problems and took her to a capacious bosom. Lydia thought Myra was “phoney” and resented her being rich. Also she took a shine to young Babe, whom she called by his first name, Wilbur. I wondered what she would say if Babe asked her to marry him. He was susceptible, and the Volga voyage must be responsible for many a romance.

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*Second Day.* I rose early and spent a solitary hour on deck. On the left hand were high bluffs, citron in colour; on the other, verdant flats running back from a sandy shore. We passed a floating wharf, and houses on piles, then came to a village. The shore was piled with logs, while big saw-mills were islanded in yards of stacked lumber. The banks were smoothly swarded and crowned with trees. From wooded valleys grassy slopes ran down to the olive-brown water. For the most part the channel was defined by buoys, bearing lanterns. We passed huge rafts with houses on them, worming their way with difficulty in that narrow, congested channel.

I had a nice breakfast of Russian toast and quince jam. I was alone, because none of the others were early risers, so I went on deck again. But soon I had to return to the cabin for we were passing under the Kazan bridge. I could only admire that magnificent span from a distance, for going under it we were all kept prisoners in the cabin. These guys were taking no chances. They even drew the blinds and told us not to look out. I could imagine myself tossing a bomb on that bridge and blowing it to Hades. The thought minded me of Rosebud and I wondered what had happened to her. As Bronsky would have said: “That baby sure acted cute. . . .”<sup>[1]</sup> When I went out again I saw a hillside holed to extract lime, boats on the beach and a grey village in a small valley. The other bank was pleasantly green with low trees running back to prairies of harvest fields whose stacked grain stretched as far as the eye could see. Lumber and wheat in quantity, yet a few years ago this had been a starvation area.

I was interrupted in my musing by the usual call of nature, so I sought the men’s toilet. I was met by Babe. “I regret to destroy your optimism,” said he, “but you are

in for a shock.” As I entered the water closet the stench took me by the throat and I nearly threw up my Russian toast. The toilet did not flush and it was full to the seat with the evacuations of previous visitors. Impossible to sit down. One had to do the job standing. But the main trouble was that there was no toilet paper. Everyone brought their own, and after being used it was deposited in a wicker basket. This was now full and spilling over on the floor. You may imagine me, ruefully standing there, surveying that disgusting scene. And every day it was to be the same, till one’s trip to the toilet came to be an ordeal dreaded and abhorred.

The fresh air on deck restored me to a sense of cleanliness, and I watched Babe and Lydia who seemed greatly interested in each other. Ma Bunting was watching them, too, but rather uneasily, for Babe was so animated and enthusiastic. Pop Bunting sat by me, but I refused the big cigar he offered. Pop had not wanted to make this Volga trip and crabbed everything. His pet peeve was the beer which he was accustomed to drink in quantity, but here it was like liquorice water, faintly aerated. Only once did I try it and did not finish my glass. But Pop persevered till pessimism got him down for good. From then on his knocker worked overtime. Our waiter particularly annoyed him. The poor devil had a shirt that opened almost to the navel, showing a shaggy maquis of black bristles. When he disappeared, as he often did for a good ten minutes, Pop would growl: “There’s that waiter bastard gone to comb the hair on his chest.”

“Maybe a small tooth comb,” I suggested. Pop agreed enthusiastically. “You’ve said it. That guy’s a walking cootie garage.” Babe blushed and looked at Lydia, while Ma said: “Oh Elmer, don’t exaggerate.” The Gutzmanns kept conspicuously aloof. They were a bit scared of Pop who was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican and detested the New Deal. He also used rough language when he was roused. In my Old Codger character I chuckled over the situation.

That afternoon, despite the protestation of Lydia, I descended to the steerage. Guides do not like us to see the seamy side of the Soviet scene, and here about two hundred people were lying on the floor of the lower deck. Mostly women and children, they looked like the dead in their attitudes of immobility. One saw bundles of rags, with protruding limbs of children. Some were sleeping upright, others with their faces resting on the deck. The odour was appalling, and above their laboured breathing was the rattle of the engines and the bray of the radio.

As I gazed at that compost of humanity Lydia joined me. “Come away,” said she. “You must not judge us by this. These people are wearing their oldest clothes to travel, and it is a Russian custom to take all the family when one makes a voyage. These are *Kolhoz* workers. They have enough money to pay for a berth, but they

are too stingy to spend it. They are really quite happy.” And in truth they did not seem to mind tramping on one another’s faces. A child of six, in nothing but a chemise, was holding a baby that coughed continuously. A girl with braids of blond hair was sleeping with her face buried in her hands. A bearded *moujik* his head in the gutter of the galley, his legs swathed in clouts, snored serenely. As I picked my way across limbs and bodies there was no curiosity, no resentment.

For dinner we had the invariable salad of sliced cucumber and tomato, soup, stergel and semolina pudding. Then I walked the deck till dark in a chill wind. Slowly our boat weaved between the light beacons. Soon, Lydia told me, they were to be lit by electricity generated by the current; now guardians in tiny huts tended the oil lamps. I saw many lights of passing steamers and we stopped at a floating wharf. Nearby a dredger was at work. What a vital artery of commerce this mighty river was! Much impressed I went to bed and felt the beginning of a sore throat. It was the classic Volga cold which few escape.

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*Third Day.* Got up to greet a rose-pink and lily-gold dawn. As I ate breakfast of raspberries and Russian toast the ripple of the river played on the orange silk curtains of the open windows. My throat felt as if lined with broken glass, and a visit to that dreadful lavatory did not improve it. On deck it was bright but very cold, so I gave my key to the slatternly chambermaid, who did my room then returned it to me. Lydia had warned me never to leave the window of my stateroom open on account of thieves. Curse that Volga cold! It was to cling to me for the rest of the trip.

So, feeling discouraged, I slept till lunch. We had cabbage soup, pickled sturgeon and apple compote. Ma Bunting and Myra Gutzmann had both caught the Volga cold, but did not commiserate each other. Pop blasted everything and wished he was back in Brooklyn. Myra retreated and plunged into a book which, judging from the cover, was not Red propaganda. A soporific calm invaded the cabin and our boat seemed to drift, with many delays owing to the narrow channel. Once we touched bottom but backed off easily. Watched anxiously by Ma, Babe and Lydia talked economics in a cosy corner. It was too chilly to sit on deck, so I wrote up my notes till tea.

We were being held up just outside of Kazan, which we were supposed to visit. Perhaps they didn’t want us to go ashore, for supper passed and we were still immobile. It was eleven o’clock when we docked, and Lydia told us the boat would sail in half an hour. Kazan was forty minutes from the landing. We were being gyped out of our visit. Pop blasted and blistered, as he wanted to stretch his legs. No sight-seeing this night. The boat, it seemed, was twelve hours late. I was not

sorry to miss the trip ashore for I was throat conscious. So I went to sleep, and when I woke up in the morning . . . we were still at Kazan landing.

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*Fourth Day.* Rose at eight and had breakfast of loganberries and Russian toast. It was very cold outside. The radio had been going night and day, and there were many amateurs for the canary-coloured piano. I took advantage of an available moment, and keeping my foot on the soft pedal, I mulled over a song that was in my mind. It was to be called *Caviare*, and incidentally I remembered that here, floating on the home of the sturgeon, I had never been offered that delectable dainty. Then I surrendered the piano to a shaggy-haired Professor who pounded out Rachmaninoff while I retired again to my cabin. As it was too cold on deck I watched the passing panorama from my window.

We went our dilatory way, now stopping at a small village on a very high bluff of reddish clay. Precipitous trails led to it, also a zig-zag stairway where burdened people kept going up and down like black ants. Beyond the bluff top were the grey roofs of a Tartar town with an unpronounceable name; while squatting on the foreshore were a group of men around a smoky fire in the drizzling rain. A dreary scene! I was glad to lie down and bury my head in the blankets. I was not enjoying this voyage as much as I expected. I was bored. I wanted something to happen.

But now the passengers seemed to be peacefully settling down for the trip. Women were embroidering, as wool was too dear for knitting. Men were playing draughts and chess, but the favourite game was dominoes. In the second class there was dancing, and some girls looked at Babe invitingly, but he was too occupied with Lydia. Myra Gutzmann was so deeply immersed in her mysterious book that I judged it must be Red propaganda after all. That meek little man, her husband, wandered round like a bewildered rabbit and avoided Pop Bunting, who pugnaciously puffed a big cigar. A banal picture one need not come to the Volga to see: so once again I sought the steerage.

My bet was a good one for it was now dominated by a tribe of gypsies who had got on during the night. They were dirty but picturesque. The women had long black braids and bright skirts. Some smoked pipes. A girl nursed a baby wrapped like a papoose. The chief was distinguished by a long beard. They were just like Romanies all over the world and my heart went out to them. But again Lydia was reprovingly at my elbow. "Dirty, dishonest people. Bad citizens. They are lazy and will not settle on the land. Besides, they have too many babies." She did not suggest that they should be liquidated. Stout Sovietist though she was, I could never believe that Lydia could be so ruthless. In her heart I believe she pitied them.

There they were sleeping with wax-like immobility, inseparable from the rags in which they lay. The chief watched over them paternally, covering a child and cuffing aside a small white mongrel. A woman's sleeping face was quite beautiful, but her bare feet were dirt-encrusted. The children wore nothing but short shirts, unbelievably filthy, but they did not seem conscious of their misery. Exposed to the glaring light, the roar of the engines and the fierce draught the gypsies slept calmly, though I noticed there were no old among them. . . . More power to them, I thought, because they would not knuckle under to the Soviet regime. To hell with regimentation and tyrannical totalitarianism. To the devil with the dictature of the proletariat. The State was made for the individual, not the individual for the State. To all of which the Lovely Lydia would have devoutly disagreed.

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*Fifth Day.* Woke to find the boat stationary off a small village. It was a study in grey, a grey foreshore, grey wood huts and a grey, onion-towered Russian church. Beyond stretched the smooth grey steppes, dry and dust-whirled. On the shore was a big herd of grey goats. A huge scow was anchored, with doss houses on board and a wharf built from it. Piles of coal briquettes contrasted with heaps of dazzling lime. On the flat beyond were bands of horses and cattle. The opposite shore was a sand belt, then bright green bush masking the prairie beyond.

For breakfast, preserved cherries and Russian toast. Being the only early riser I ate alone. I profited to work on my song at the piano and had just got it to click when Myra Gutzmann appeared hugging her mysterious volume. She disconcerted me so I retired to the saloon where I bumped into Babe. "Don't go into the men's lavatory," he told me tragically. "It's too foul for words. I'm going to warn father." He took things too seriously, I thought; a shy, studious lad, perhaps over sensitive. But in this case he was right, for it was so incredibly foul it staggered imagination. I was sorry I did not suffer from constipation.

That morning we visited Samara, now called something else. "If the S.O.B.'s get a pretty name," grumbled Pop Bunting, "they have to change it and call it after one of their lousy Commissars. Well, I'm going ashore just to see if I can't find a men's comfort cabin." "Put me next," I told him, "if you spot a Service Station with a retiring room for males." So with this fond hope we climbed a steep stairway of wood that led to a cobbled street, raised high above the wooden side-walk.

There were few people about. Despite the early hour groups of women, their heads muffled in *babushkas*, stared at us strenuously. The side-walk was very worn and there were steps every few yards to take the edge off the grade. The rough street humped like the back of an elephant and up it came a fat donkey, pulling a



huge load. Four men pushed behind it as it zig-zagged uphill. Other fat donkeys came down hill, laden with sacks from which grain spilled. Being Government grain it didn't matter. It was emptied into a chute that deposited it on the wharf.

Soon we arrived at the main street which was agreeably level. Pop was panting, yet clutched in his hand was something I only could guess. His eyes were anxious. . . . In a big blue letter box I posted a letter to my family which (incidentally) arrived at my home only a few weeks after I did. Then I studied the main street. The houses were irregular, some old, some modern. Beside a big grey Government building that looked like a pork packing factory there was a villa Tolstoi had occupied. There was a theatre and a Home of Culture, the one too ornate, the other too simple. In the square was a spirited statue to commemorate the Revolution. There was also a red Gothic church, now empty; but alas! no Service Station. Pop's face was a picture of gloom as he pocketed a wad of toilet paper.

I wanted to sympathise with him, but Lydia was talking about marriage. She told me a man gets a divorce the first time for fifty roubles, the second for a hundred, and so on up. He must pay fifteen per cent of his income for the first child and thirty if there are two. A big family comes high. There is no way of getting out of it, for he is registered and tabs are kept on him wherever he goes. A wife is not supposed to obey her husband, Lydia told me complacently. I complimented her on her teeth and she said her sister was a dentist. Dentists and doctors got the same pay as guides, she informed me, four hundred roubles a month.

On our return to the boat she got us an early lunch of potatoes, with whipped cream, pancakes and broiled stergel. The regular meal hours were; lunch, three to eight; dinner, eight to three; but the table was always running. Serge, our hairy waiter, was running too. He sprinted and sweated on the job. After lunch I dozed on deck, for the weather was becoming perceptibly warmer. We threaded our way through a narrow channel and had to stop frequently to allow upgoing boats to pass. Let no one think that the Volga is a lonely river. I believe it is one of the busiest riparian highways in the world. I was impressed. Russia is bound to go forward, for there is no space for her to go backward.

I looked around the deck. Pop was smoking his cigar with a disgruntled look. Next to him was Ma working on some embroidery. In a remote corner Babe and Lydia were engaged in an animated discussion. Myra was reading her book with the crimson cover, while her husband (whom Rosebud had called Louey the Blood) was hovering near. I was going to retire when Ma beckoned me over. "I like the cut of that coat of yours," she said, "but it's fringing out. Let me trim it off a little." While she worked on Old Whiskers with her scissors, she whispered: "I'm kind of worried

about Wilbur and Lydia. I think she's trying to convert him to Communism. Fortunately his father doesn't see it or he would make a dreadful fuss. Already he's fed up with Reds and hates them like poison. Dear me, I wish this voyage was over."

Bored with my own crowd I went down to see my gypsies. I admired their chief—a handsome, hawk-nosed man with a dark brown beard and a tawny moustache. The children were so naked there was no doubt of their sex. The men cuffed them like dogs and they in turn cuffed some wretched puppies back from a sticky mess they themselves were eating. In contrast with their grimy little paws their fingers were slickly clean where they sucked them. Yet one saw tenderness. A mother arranged her two tots on a narrow mattress and lay down on the bare floor beside them. In the glare of the light and the blare of the radio they slept with weird immobility.

But I ceased to regard them for we stopped at a wharf where over five hundred peasants were waiting to embark. Where they came from I know not, for I only saw a high bluff on one bank and a sand-bank on the other. Yet there they were, with bundles, babies, boxes, trying to jam into that narrow gangway. Never did I see such frantic confusion, shouting, shrieking; and all were carrying zebra striped water melons. At last they were embarked and installed on the middle deck where they were soon asleep in abandoned attitudes. Yet compared to the gypsies they were conspicuously clean.

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*Sixth Day.* I woke to see the sun peering over the left bank. In a dream of golden placidity we drifted downstream, with a sense of vastness and a promise of heat. The banks were dust grey, dust grey the struggling villages with their Tartar towers. Yet if there was a notable absence of colour there was great evidence of industry. Cement works, clay pits, lumber mills—exploitation everywhere. Russia marches on. Let the world beware. Armageddon will not be between nations but between Communism and its enemies. Thank God I shall be dead by then. So reflecting gloomily I tackled a breakfast of cantaloupe and Russian toast.

In the forenoon we visited Saratov. There was the usual steep climb up to a cobbled street. Pop preceded me, resolution in his eyes and toilet paper in his hand. Near the centre of the town was the Gorki Garden, an unkempt wilderness of weeds and bushes. Already crowds were waiting in front of stores that opened only at ten o'clock. Their interiors looked mean and sordid, but peasants with rolls of roubles were waiting to buy anything offered for sale. The restaurant windows were full of flies, the Hotel Astoria dingy and dirty. Groups of apartment courts, smugly geometrical, contrasted with degraded buildings whose sagging and unpainted woodwork suggested apathy and indifference. There was the same indifference in

the faces of the people, and an absence of curiosity that piqued me.

I visited the market, thinking it might give me a more cheerful impression of debilitated Saratov. It was nearly empty. A woman sat on the ground selling a dozen eggs. Another had a score of dark, ragged-skinned potatoes. There were a few bottles of milk, labelled with the ticket of the inspector. Meat of all kinds except mutton, melons in quantity and good black bread. Yet despite these last I came away with a sense of bareness and poverty. Saratov, once the centre of the great famine area, was still recovering from the heritage of its past.

I saw apartment buildings that had four families to one apartment. They hoped to build others in the near future in which only two families would make home happy. In an effort to mitigate the greyness were poplar trees, their trunks painted a dingy white; also poisonous plots of weedy verdure. There was a shabby street car with the sign: *Watch your pockets*, so that you looked at your neighbour invidiously. Saratov to my eyes was a mean and depressing city whose people were the personification of drab poverty. Yet, as I quitted this saturnine scene, I had one vision of triumphant cheer—Pop Bunting. His step was light, his face radiant and he looked like an Excelsior who had triumphantly planted his banner. Then I knew, for he waved his hands and I saw they were empty. Pop had found that Service Station, or its Soviet equivalent.

Ma Bunting was a stay-putter and had not accompanied us ashore, but on my return she wanted to know how my visit had panned out. Particularly, where were Babe and Lydia? The boy was becoming more and more Marxist-minded, and now talked of returning to Russia as soon as he took his degree. The proselytising fervour of Lydia seemed to be effective; or was it her blue eyes and sweet lips? I said to Ma: "If you ask me, I think Wilbur has a crush on Lydia, but he'll soon get over it. When he gets back to Brooklyn have some pretty co-ed console him and drive the Communist contagion out of his system."

Said Ma: "I only hope they won't get engaged, or something silly. They've been a long time away. I wonder what they're doing." Said I: "Don't worry. Lydia's no vamp. She's been married and she's five years older than your boy. Besides, on this trip she's had offers from other Americans and turned them down. She will never quit her precious Russia. Free love, maybe, but marriage—no, not even with a millionaire." Nevertheless, I felt a little anxious till I saw the pair returning. They had not eloped, and I assumed they had not, in the short time at their disposal, consummated matrimonial relations. But Ma sighed: "I'll be so glad when our voyage is over. There's an atmosphere about this boat I don't like."

I agreed with her, and that very afternoon I had a brush with an individual I still

believe was an agent of the Gaypayoo. He was a young-old man, with a prim, smug face and an air of pompous authority. But what distinguished him most in a collarless land was a very high starched choker of the double variety I had worn in my youth. I had not seen one for years. It circled his scraggy neck like a plaster column. I first saw him with Myra Gutzmann, and both were staring at me fixedly.

Presently he came over. I was sitting on one of the cabin sofas which was protected by a dingy cover of cheap cotton and my left foot was doubled under me. It rested ever so lightly on the divan, and he pointed to the contact angrily. "Soviet property. No clean. Take foot away." I rose, pretending to misunderstand him. "That's all right," I said, pointing to the cover. "It isn't very clean, is it. Thanks for telling me." Then with a grimace of disgust I dusted myself elaborately. He glared at me, wanted to say something, but his limited English failed him, and he stalked away. There, thought I, I've insulted a Soviet citizen, probably one of the secret police. What's going to happen to me?

For the moment nothing did happen, but I had a little spot of trouble with Myra which did not seem to improve matters. She left her book with the crimson cover on her deck chair and idly I took it up. Opening it I read the title: *Confessions of a Nymphomaniac*. Then I ventured to dip into it. I was appalled, for it was a pool of sheer filth. It purported to be written by a woman, who put down her erotic experiences with a frankness of detail that left nothing unsaid. *Fanny Hill* and *Seven Nights in a Turkish Harem* were Sunday School primers compared to it. Every page was packed with prurience, presented in the language of the gutter. I was dropping it as I would a bit of *ordure* when Myra anticipated me. She suddenly appeared and grabbed it from my hand. Her face was suffused by either anger or shame, and as she flounced away I knew she was my enemy.

And that evening after dinner something happened that made me, too, feel that I would be glad when this trip was over. I found that the Buntings were musically inclined. Babe played the piano accordion, while Pop strummed the guitar. So I told them about the song I had composed, and waiting for a quiet interval when Lydia was well out of the way, I offered to try it out. Quietly I sang with my foot on the soft pedal, but Pop was enthusiastic and soon was ringing out the chorus. Curiously he had a high tenor voice while Babe had a bass. Babe tried to check him with apprehensive looks about us but Pop had steam up and Babe could not help joining in. . . . Let me print the first verse:

## *The Song of the Soviet Soldier*

Soldiers we of the Red Armee,  
And ferocious chaps we are;  
If you ask us why we will all reply  
That we're fed on Caviare.

### *Chorus:*

Oh Caviare, Oh Caviare,  
You're just the nicest eats wot are:  
On Caviare the Crimson Star  
Sweeps on to Victoree.

As Pop and Babe were adepts in barber-shop harmony the effect was easy to listen to, or so I thought; when I saw Myra, who was at the other end of the cabin, rise as if to protest, then disappear. We were now at the second verse which went something like this:

Each of us is a daring cuss,  
And if some Commissar  
Should think it means that we're full of beans  
We will shout: No, CAVIARE.

"Oh Caviare!" Pop was roaring, when I looked round. Myra had returned with the Gaypayoo chap and both were listening intently. Then Myra came forward: "I consider that song detrimental to the dignity of the Red Army," she said, and with that White Collar deliberately interposed. Firmly he closed the piano and locked it. I wilted on my stool. Well, that was that. The two went grimly away while I ruefully reflected once again that Communists had no sense of humour.

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*Seventh and last day.* It had now become very hot and we realised we were far south. The boat was crowded, chiefly with Red Armyists and their families. The dining room was always full and Serge, our waiter, perspired so that his shirt under his arms was soppy. Had it not been for Lydia we would have fared badly, but she mothered us all. The last morning was of unlimited loveliness, yet I looked forward to the end of the trip. I had a feeling that something disagreeable was going to happen. Well, it did. . . .

I was going to pack when I encountered Lydia and Myra followed by Louey. To my horror Lydia was carrying the *Confessions*. "See this nice book Mrs. Gutzmann gave me," she said. I took it from her. "This book is not for you to read," I told her firmly. "It's vile, it's perverted. It should never have been printed. Mr. Gutzmann, would you let your wife read this book?"

"She gave it to me for a birthday present," said Louey. "Madame," said I, "you surprise me. Were you aware of its contents?" "Sure," said Myra. "I consider it constructive, therefore it has social value." Said I: "I insist that its influence is destructive. I repeat it has no social value and the authoress is an enemy of society."

"The woman who wrote that book," broke in Louey, "is an experimentalist. She is frank, daring, honest. The hypersensitivity of the senses is integrated in a remarkable way. I would be glad to embrace her."

"As a comrade, of course," said Myra. "And I agree with you. Her work is a gesture of revolt against capitalistic convention. In Soviet society she would be regarded as a pioneer of art and thought. I want Lydia here to translate this book into Russian and have it published in Moscow."

At that I felt a strange buzzing in my head. I am no Paladin but I could not bear to think of Lydia even dipping into that poisonous book. Bless her innocent mind! At any cost I would save her from this vile contamination. Belligerently I confronted Louey. "Look here," I said, "the female who wrote this book, if indeed it was a woman, is a depraved hussy and a dishonour to her sex. But maybe you are right. Perhaps it might serve as a Soviet school text-book. Well, to my mind it would make decent toilet paper blush for shame and there is only one destination for it . . . There! I regret that it must pollute the waters of the Volga." And at that, with a grand gesture, I flung it into the river.

There was a tense silence. I thought Myra was going into action. For the second time I saw myself in the rôle of *The Man Who Was Slapped*, but Lydia stood before me protectively. Then Louey said: "Only your grey hairs protect you. If you were not old enough to be my grandfather I would chastise you as you deserve."

"To hell with my grey hairs!" I shouted. "Come on, you little punk!"

What might have happened I can only guess, had not Pop and Babe appeared on the scene. They hustled Louey away and Myra followed him. "Fascist!" she called out, just before she disappeared. "Capitalist spy! You'll never get out of Russia. It's the Lubyanka Gaol for you."

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[1] By a picture in a Hollywood paper three years later I identified

her as a fairly well-known short story writer.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

### ROSTOV

Stalingrad. We went ashore in a jostling mob; men packing trunks on their backs, women with huge bundles and bawling brats. It was horribly hot as we took a car to the central square, where we were received, though hardly welcomed, in a semi-modern hotel. It had been restored since the Revolution, but I found the old vastly superior to the new. I admired its brasswork, carvings and glass cabinets, its bearskin rugs and grand piano. Then I visited the city, which was the biggest since Moscow. In the heat my feet sank into the asphalt of the main street, yet the guide told me it was a cool day. I thought it a furnace and sought the shade of some sickly acacias that were trying to protect an unkempt garden of shabby flowers.

Off the main streets the roads were rugged. There was a zoo with pictures of the animals outside, and Communist headquarters, with pictures of the Commissars outside. There was a kindergarten with tiny tots waving red flags. The Russian women are not good homemakers for they have no homes to make. They send their babies to a *crèche*, yet they love children. When the State tried to destroy the family it failed because of the affection of parents for their little ones. Nature triumphs over reason; sentiment defies common sense, at least of the Communist brand.

Here were apartment buildings assigned to the different trades. The tinkers dwelt next door to the tailors, and so on. I was induced to visit the Institute of Pioneers, which had been built for the Czar's visit but destroyed during the Revolution. It had now been restored, and by the original builders. Among the many classrooms were those devoted to ballet, sculpture, radio and aviation, also a puppet theatre where pupils learned to manipulate grotesque dolls called Capitalists, who were ignominiously frustrated. In another room a pupil was reading a radio script, while the class listened intently. But what interested me most was a circus. Many Soviet cities have one, and indeed there is a training college where aspirants are trained for their profession. Like grown-up children Russians love a circus, for do they not prove it by living in one!

I had a lunch of bouillon, cucumber and tomato salad, and ice-cream. Then after



a sleep I again sallied forth. Oh, that oven-like heat! The houses seemed to radiate it and the asphalt yielded under the tread. Round the square were many strollers, the men in white shirts, the women wearing print dresses. Again I was piqued because no one gave me a second glance. Was it indifference, politeness or resentment? They were very proletarian. Though I was wearing Old Whiskers, beside them I looked a toff. Perhaps that is why they looked through me. The stores were half empty, and everywhere there was a rash of portraits of Commissars.

I said good-bye to Lydia, who sadly refused to accept a silk necktie, the like of which there was not in all Russia. I bade farewell to Pop and Ma Bunting with regret, promising to visit them in Brooklyn; then going to my room I lay down to await my train for Rostov. As I dozed Babe came to me. With some embarrassment he asked: "What do you think of Lydia?" "A nice girl," I said. "She is mighty easy to look at. But her Communist complaint is incurable. If I were a young man I might fall in love with her yet I would never marry her. She has too much intelligence to make a good wife." He seemed disappointed but accompanied me to the station. His last act was to press some roubles into my hand, saying: "We're leaving for home tomorrow and I have no more use for them. Take them to tip with." I saw his point and gratefully accepted them.

So here I was, once more travelling alone, and I was glad to find my compartment had only two berths. All the same there were three of us, or rather two and a quarter, for the third was a child of about four years. The kid coughed incessantly, so I gave the father a box of cough drops and the effect was almost miraculous. In a few minutes the boy stopped barking and was soundly asleep. I was tickled at this triumph of American medicine, while the father, a peasant, regarded the box almost with awe. When I told him he could keep it he was overcome with gratitude. I stood in the corridor to allow them to undress, and when I myself retired they were in the raw and snuggled up together. I wish I could have slumbered half as well, for the train bounced me up and down so violently that half of the time I must have slept in the air.

With smiles and handshakes the father and son departed in the early sunshine of a country station. And here I was conscious of a new type of Russian. In the cities they had been sullen or indifferent or resentful; here amid the peasantry I recognised friendliness, respect, goodwill. It was cheerful, and I responded by liking them. The stalwart farmer and his handsome boy were the advance guard of many I was to meet with cordial regard. But then I take to simple people wherever they are, and the more grown-ups resemble children the more I appreciate them. Yet for the moment I was glad to be alone, for I could dress in privacy and enjoy my breakfast.

Intourist had provided me with a basket of provisions, brought to the train by the porter of the hotel. I must hand it to these people. They don't do things by half.

It was a most complete outfit—knife, fork, spoon, plate and glass. For “eats” there was excellent bread and butter, a half chicken, cheese, three boiled eggs, apples, tomatoes, grapes, two bottles of Narzan, salt, tea, sugar. So I ate tranquilly and watched the scenery. We stopped every fifteen minutes at some wayside station, often a mere platform, but always crowded. There were peasant women selling melons and boiled eggs, wearing white napkins over their heads, and in the near distance villages of thatch and clay. Beyond were the rolling steppes, which reminded me of the Canadian prairies. The soil was black and heaps of grain, golden stubble and stacks of straw attested that the harvest had been gathered.

I saw no one working on the land, though occasional trucks bumped over the rutty trails taking outfits of workers, mostly women, to distant camps. At the crowded stations I had to lie down to prevent my place being taken, so that I could only peep out at the bustle and excitement. I saw wagons loaded with melons waiting to be shipped. Fields of corn and sunflowers, starred with pumpkins and squashes, were close to the track, but otherwise the farms seemed given over to grain. I had a sense of tremendous activity and productive wealth.

Soon my aloneness was shattered by a fat woman whose son hoisted her on the upper berth opposite me. As I lay there, something struck me on the eye. I scratched, then something landed in my left ear. Looking up with alarm I saw the old girl was eating sunflower seeds and spitting the husks in my direction. I rose when with apologies she offered me a handful so, like her, I lay and cracked the seeds, finding the kernels pleasant to the taste. After that we got on nicely, though we could only express our mutual appreciation by smiling and spitting husks at each other. She, being the more expert, scored a bull's eye every time. It was a gay game.

This was the real Russia. At the station peasants were bargaining over melons and many greeted me with hearty gestures. “American!” they hailed me, and I grinned my acquiescence. It got rapidly hotter as the day advanced, till at last the outside air was like a furnace. On the open prairie there was no shade and the people seemed burnt up by the sun. I got some air from the corridor windows, but the flies were dreadful. I could not sleep; could not even read, for they crawled over my glasses. Finally I tried some mosquito lotion and became less popular.

I had lunch of cheese, bread, tomatoes and grapes, prolonging it, for the time passed slowly. There were so many stops. At one the old lady got out, and her place was taken by a youth with the biggest watermelon I ever saw. He insisted on cutting me a huge chunk, and in return I gave him a boiled egg. He was a bright boy, who

tried to talk to me, so that we soon established pleasant relations. He knew some words of English and was proud to air them. But I could only answer with a wry grin, for I was so uncomfortable. Having had no toilet that morning I felt filthy. My hair and skin were dry, and as I ate that foot-wide wedge of melon I became so sticky I had to do something about it. So I made a toilet with half a bottle of Narzan, spirting it into my hollowed hands and splashing it on my face. . . . Oh, the tedium of that trip! Every time the train stopped I looked wearily at my watch. Always the same scene—platforms crowded with peasants chewing sunflower seeds, grain sheds, grey villages, sand and dust—the Steppes.

Towards afternoon the plains ceased but the sun swung round to blaze into my compartment. The sweat and dust increased and the youth departed. He was succeeded by an old man who told me he had been a shoemaker and asked to look at my shoes. I took one off to show him, and he was full of admiration. Meticulously he examined it, relinquishing it with a sigh of regret. Then he stood in the window singing in a minor key, till I gave him an apple to stop his singing. . . . And now the landscape changed. There were trees and valleys, and the stations were more urban. Feeling bored beyond words I dozed a little, but was awakened by the old man. Rostov! What joy! Already we were in the suburbs. As I prepared to leave he eagerly took my place and, to his amazed delight, I gave him my food basket.

I had been twenty hours on that train. I was tired and nervous, but as I stood on the station platform I saw a guide searching for me. She called my name and conducted me to a car while a porter grabbed my bag. How nice it was to drive through crowded streets to a fine hotel, to be given a sunny room, to stand under a shower. What if the door was warped and the bath plugless—these were trifles as, shaved and spruced, I descended a carpeted stair to a big dining room. There I dined on the terrace where there were some special tables marked *Reserved*. Many tried to crash them but the uniformed door keeper fended them off. They were for privileged diners such as Commissars and myself. I felt mean as I saw so many eyeing me enviously, but for the most part my distinction as Intourist was meekly accepted.

There were, however, some rather truculent individuals swaggering about in dirty, sleeveless shirts, their pockets bulging with greasy roubles. Stackhanovites, I suppose. One smeary ruffian who looked like a car cleaner in a garage, harangued me in Russian. I imagine he was reproving me, but I cried: “Tovarich!” and shook his grimy paw. Mollified he went away, shaking hands with both the leader of the orchestra and the door keeper. My further worry was the flying cockroaches that landed on my table. The dinner, served by a waiter who was cleanly shaved, was a

fine one and ended with excellent ice-cream. Rostov makes the best ice-cream in Russia, some eighteen varieties being produced in the Government factory. As I left the dining room the door keeper took off his cap to me, which set me back a rouble.

I had found Saratov listless and forlorn, still haunted by its tragic past; I had found Stalingrad flat and depressed, as if the city already envisaged the tragic fate that awaited it; but I found Rostov living exultantly in the gay and giddy present. It was a pleasure to see a city enjoying itself so whole-heartedly. I went down streets swarming with happy people hell-bent on fun, lining up before cinemas, crowding into ice-cream parlours, dancing with gleeful effervescence. Everyone seemed in holiday spirit. The shops were open, liquor and grocery stores doing a rushing trade. Until midnight there was no abatement of the animation, and perhaps not even then; for I retired to my room and despite a narrow bed, a jazz orchestra, and the din from the street, I slept steadily. My last thought as I hit the hay was: "I like Rostov."

I kept on liking it, for next morning I had a lovely breakfast on the terrace overlooking the main street. There was compote, five kinds of fruit, an omelette, toast and tea. The waiter smoked a cigarette as he served me, but I was so pleased I gave him a rouble. How tips greased the way here! He asked me if I wanted anything more and jokingly I answered: "Some vanilla ice-cream." To my surprise he put a great heap of it before me and as I dawdled over this delicious dish I watched the traffic in the street below. Boys naked but for loin slips, ragged old men, dingy artisans, office workers—difference in dress seemed to indicate difference in class. Very few women wore hats but when they did it always seemed to be the same hat.

As I idly watched a fine car draw up a woman got out who was mighty easy on the eyes. She could have qualified for a glamour contest anywhere and had her picture in *Life*. She was as elaborately artificial as a movie queen. Her complexion was delicately done, her lashes curled, her mouth lip-sticked to a cupid's bow. Who, I wondered, was this bit of orchidacious loveliness? Cosmopolitan, no doubt; maybe an artiste of the stage. Much as a beggar may look at a begum timidly I watched her, when suddenly she walked up to me and announced herself—MY GUIDE.

I almost wilted. But did I recover! Oh Boy! When she asked me to accompany her to the waiting car I was there with bells. She was certainly the most beautiful woman I had seen in all Russia, and for this day at least she was all mine (in a guide way, of course), to show me the sights of Rostov. So we took our seats in the loveliest of cars and there was no dashing young Adonis to remind me I was only an Old Codger after all. Meekly I sat at one corner of the wide seat while she held down the other, chain-smoked cigarettes and strove to conceal her boredom.

It must have been rather a nuisance to have to waste her sweetness on my silver

hair, and I felt like asking her to cut out the instructive dope and go for a joy ride; but she was, I sensed, a martyr to duty, so I listened to her with respect. She spoke with a refined accent, and for the hundredth time I hand it out to Intourist for the training they give those girls. They talk better English than the English themselves. And in this case, as pickers of pulchritude, they had struck a winner. True, she was not like our little Lydia, simple and unspoiled. Her charms were artfully enhanced, but—well, I must admit that all the information I carried away about Rostov I could almost write on a postage stamp—though she took half a day to tell it.

For instance: there was a theatre in the shape of an army tank—social realism, she explained. There were apartment houses, jerry built of brick construction faced with plaster; but as she proudly told me, only one family per apartment. Teachers had special buildings allotted to them; and one, whose walls were sound-proof, was occupied by musical professors. They formed guilds, with a manager appointed by the Soviet Housing Section. Of course there were no Trade Unions, no fixed wages and hours of labour, no strikes. If a worker wanted to make more money he had only to work harder for it—which I thought was good common sense. Russians have a very realistic conception of social obligation. Practice and theory don't always go hand in hand.

I must say that as a conscientious conveyor of useful information my guide was a failure, for I contrived to avoid instructional knowledge; and though we visited hospitals, kindergartens and model factories my memory of them is blank. But it is still haunted by that gracious vision of perfumed pulchritude. Though I did not care to touch her crimson-tipped fingers, I caught her stifling many a yawn with them. Yet I still hail her as the most glamorous guide in all the Russias. Perhaps that is why I still announce Rostov as the pick of Soviet cities.

When I took the train next day, my glamour guide accompanied me to the station and reproved me because I tried to slip one of my corrupting roubles to the small boy who carried my valise. How she admired that bag, though its pigskin purity was marred by hotel labels! She told me life was dreadful on the Steppes, and spoke longingly of Paris and New York. Maybe if Babe had fallen for her (as he surely would) instead of Lydia there might have been a different end to love's young dream. Poor Babe! Though he wrote to her he would never change Lydia's staunch Sovietism, but I think he could have persuaded Miss Rostov to pack her panties in his trunk.

We had a long wait for the train, which was an improvised one, because of an accident on the line. Just my bad luck. It proved to be the world's worst, lighted by candles stuck in bottles. As I tried to open the windows the curtains came down

about my ears. The berths suggested bugs and bed-ticks. I shared my compartment with three women and hoped with some trepidation that they would not try to sleep in the raw. On the contrary, two of them had quite naughty nighties, while the third displayed red silk pyjamas, near silk stockings and high-heeled satin slippers. My three graces undressed inside the linen envelopes that served us for a sheet and with many a twist and wriggle I did likewise. I wanted to sleep in the Russian fashion, naked as a new caught trout, but as usual my sense of decency frustrated my comfort.

I was first awake and made the toilet before it became too nauseating. I waited a long time in the corridor to allow the ladies to dress, watching the scenery pass expansively. A hilly country, with groves of trees, white cottages with roofs red-tiled, vast cornfields with huge hay-stacks in the distance. The masonry of the villages was old Russian in character and sordid in suggestion. The Sovietists are very tactful. They fear to rouse our envy by exhibiting their wonderful factories, Government farms and apartment houses, so we have to take them for granted. These marvels of Communist enterprise continued to exist in my imagination, for I was never shown any of them.

Back in my compartment my three beauties were dolled up for the day. In cheap and gaudy finery they awaited my return and silently we took stock of each other. The woman opposite me was spectacled, corsetless and read Gorki. From time to time we stared solemnly at each other but did not utter a word. Then we moved into the corridor as a female attendant in blue cotton overalls cleaned the apartment. She dabbed here and there with a filthy rag, spat mouthfuls of water on the carpet and brushed them dry. She even wiped the bottles in which the candles had guttered away. But I was grateful to her, for she brought me a glass of hot tea. After that I sat mutely before my Gorki reader for over three hours, longing for the journey to be over. Oh, these long Russian train trips—how I came to dread them! In despair I again sought the corridor, for the forbidding silence of the woman opposite me got on my nerves.

The day was cool but the roads were defined by clouds of dust. The corn grew close to the track with huge ears, and the sunflowers spread gigantically. There was a suggestion in the air of unbounded fertility that was reflected in the happy insouciance of the farm workers. An easy climate makes for easy living, and here the people lived largely in the sun. . . . We were just getting into the station when suddenly the Gorki reader addressed me in perfect French. She had studied at the Sorbonne and was a Professor of Literature. She told me this in a breath, then with an utterly charming smile she went away. I was chagrined. She might have spoken

before and helped to pass that wearisome journey. But no—she was afraid to be seen talking to a foreigner. The others might have reported her. Besides, it simply wasn't done. Again Soviet secrecy, silence, distrust of the travelling stranger.

## Chapter Forty

### THE GEORGIAN HIGHWAY

Orginikidzi. Why did these silly Sovietists curse a town with such a name? Well, it was a miserable place, hardly worthy of better. Two story houses lined drab streets leading to a shabby hotel. My room was lofty and gracious, but it was dirty and neglected. The floor was marble, but the bed had broken springs. The wash basin was plugless, and the water came so reluctantly I had difficulty in washing down two cockroaches. The bath was out of commission. In a sticky heat I slopped myself with tepid water then with a feeling of discouragement descended to lunch. As I ate an omelette and some compote along came my guide, a mere boy of sixteen. His name was Boris and he was as good looking as he was intelligent.

In the off season he was a student in Leningrad. He loathed this mouldy town with its muddy river, its rank vegetation, its rugged cobbled streets. He hated those run-down houses, this damp and heavy climate of rain and mountain gloom. He had little to show me—an anti-religious mosque, a museum with maps of revolutionary campaigns and enlarged photographs of proletarian patriots. I listened politely and from the chaff of information picked up a few grains that interested me. For instance: the natives of the province who live in thatched huts suffer much from eye disease due to their smoke fires; there are men working on the co-operative farms who are over a hundred and still active; the place was re-named after a Bolshevik general, but was more famous for being the home of Kiroff who might have succeeded Lenin if he had not been stickily bumped off. . . . Such human snippets interested me mildly, but not the Park of Culture and Rest, which was about as cheerful as a graveyard, with sickly flowers apologising that they were obliged to form the design of the Hammer and Sickle.

I had supper with Boris—chicken, cucumber, compote, coffee, conversation. The latter was the most sustaining. I had prepared a list of questions which he answered with spirit. Let me record a few of them:—

*Myself:* Whom do you consider the greater—Karl Marx or Jesus Christ?

*Boris:* Karl Marx, because his doctrines are aggressive while those of Christ are



passive and non-militant.

*Myself:* Do you acknowledge Soviet lack of order, efficiency and cleanliness?

*Boris:* Yes, but it is a heritage of the old *régime* and we are doing our best to overcome it. See us twenty years from now and you will find we equal, if not excel, the capitalist countries in these respects.

*Myself:* Will you ever arrive at democratic freedom?

*Boris:* We do not want to. We have something finer and higher—Communicistic freedom. We have the freedom to sacrifice freedom for the glory of the State.

*Myself:* What is the attitude of the people towards the tourist?

*Boris:* Most tourists make a bad impression. They are obviously not comrades and often antagonistic to the *régime*. We tolerate them because some of them are at least understanding, and they all bring us foreign currency. But mostly they are vulgar and patronising, and few take an intelligent interest in our aims and inspirations.

*Myself:* What about window dressing? Do you not show tourists the good and carefully conceal the bad?

*Boris:* Does not everyone in every country? We all want to look our best and make a good impression. If you want to show a visitor your house you will not usher him into the latrine.

*Myself:* What about Dictatorship? Is not Stalin a Dictator?

*Boris:* Stalin, excuse me, I mean *Comrade* Stalin, is no dictator. He is the father of his people. He holds his power through the will of the people, and could be thrown out by that same will.

*Myself:* By the people you mean the Government?

*Boris:* The Government *is* the people. The State *is* the people. There is no dictatorship. What control we have we *will* to have. We glory in serving the State.

*Myself:* Is there much grafting?

*Boris:* There are evil citizens in every country. Here we punish anti-social individuals more severely than in capitalistic countries. Even with death.

*Myself:* Is the Bible used as literature in your Universities?

*Boris:* No, we have no need of it. We have Dickens, Shakespeare and Sinclair Lewis.

*Myself:* Does the moral standard in the Soviet Republic rank as high (or as low) as it is in France?

*Boris:* (very stiffly) I am not familiar with the moral standard of France.

I asked Boris: "How much do you make as a guide for your season here, and what will you do with your salary?" He answered: "As soon as my season in this filthy hole is over I will return to my home in Leningrad where my father is a Doctor.

The first thing I do will be to buy myself the best suit of clothes I can find in the market. As you see, the one I am wearing is shoddy and ill fitting. Before all, I want to be well dressed. That is what we envy you tourists the most—your tailor-made clothes. That is why we want to buy them from you at fantastic prices. We have not the textiles, but we will have. Just give us time.”

I liked the kid, and in a Savile Row suit he would have been as handsome as a matinee idol. I was wearing Old Whiskers which he looked at avidly. If I would only sell it? I almost let him have it as a gift but something restrained me. Instead, I made a silk shirt up into a parcel and asked the landlord of the hotel to give it to him after I had gone. I hope the man did so. . . . I asked Boris, as a member of the white collar class, what his attitude was to the vulgarity of the proletariat. He told me he was full of gratitude to the workers who provided him, a non-producer, with a fine education. He was proud of the humble toilers whose labour kept him at the University. It was his ambition to prove himself worthy of them. He quoted the slogan: “From each according to his power; to each according to his need.” The community came before the individual. The children were taught to work for the common good, not for their personal profit. Each for all and all for each.

Boris tried to convert me to Communism but only increased my loathing for it. Where everything belonged to everybody, it seemed to me nothing belonged to anybody. The boy wrote poetry, he told me, and I promised I would send him one of my books. That really seemed to touch him. He told me I was the only English-speaking tourist who had talked intelligently to him. I have a nice memory of the lad and hope he succeeded. Both in looks, manner and taste he was a born aristocrat.

Due to insects and a heavy heat the night was uneasy. The town is hemmed in by heavy mountains and the rainfall is high. In the morning there were more cockroaches in my wash basin, but this time no water to drown them. How I would have revelled in a shower bath! After a mean breakfast I went into a drab street and was met by two processions. The first was a company of Red Armyists, marching proudly and singing like one man. It was very inspiring. The second was a band of proletarians, also singing. They were poor, ugly, shabby, but they were equally inspiring.

So it went. A people who can sing exultantly, despite poverty and sordid surroundings, are to be reckoned with. Their shops might be niggardly, their goods shoddy, they were not discouraged. Even the coarse mugs of their big Commissars did not depress them. Undaunted they were going forward . . . to what? “Each for all and all for each,” they cried triumphantly. Marxist-minded they hated us as Mammon-minded. In the coming convulsion of the world, would they prevail? In the

clash between the will to individual freedom and a planned order of society would they win out? Even in this mean, mouldy town there seemed to be forces that could not be contained or denied.

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*The Georgian Road.* At the hotel a car awaited me. It was old and battered, and the chauffeur seemed to be tinkering with it anxiously. He had deep-set eyes with a humorous mouth, and inspired me with confidence. If anyone could coax this old buggy over the Caucasus Mountains I reckoned he could. The landlord saw that I had the best seat and called after me: "Remember us to the proletariat workers of America." I said: "Sure," and smiled as I had a life-size photo of me doing just that. Then after a seat squabble we started. There were six of us, all notably undistinguished. In the pale sunshine, Boris in his shoddy suit looked a patrician and waved us good-bye. So we started bravely; but I kept my fingers crossed, as I did all that day. However we only had two blow-outs, and our car was unexpectedly powerful, as gallantly it took us from one dizzy mountain top to another.

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Leaving the ragged edges of the mean town we charged a barrier of misty mountain that threw out sullen bastions to balk us. The road was brutally rough, and followed the bed of a brawly river. On one side was the rocky rise of the mountain, on the other a sheer drop to the muddy torrent below. Where the road crumbled dangerously we hugged the cliff, for a side-slip would have been fatal. I was glad the ground was dry. In greasy weather the trip must be hair-raising. As we were carrying the mail other cars gave way to us, but we met few, mostly lorries packed with peasants.

In one stupendous gorge, wooded to half way up, we met a brigandish looking man in a hat of astrakan, with knives in his belt—a study in damascened daggers and dirt. He was guarding a flock of fat tailed sheep. Another picture was a pair of donkeys, drawing a cart with their baby son running alongside. They were cute, but we had a lot of trouble to pass them. Also blocking the way were sows with young, long-snouted and hairy, as they ate the roadside grass. It was amazing how the road threaded its way through these mountain barriers, muffled mistily so far above us, and all the time skirting that sheer drop to the rapids in the gorge below.

We got out to let the car cross a flimsy bridge which was considered unsafe, and after giving it water we attacked the road anew. Rocks bulged over it, while to the river side it broke away precipitously. Looking back it was like a gash in the mountain so that I marvelled how we had made it. Now we laboured up and up, crawling on low gear with radiator steaming. In a mountain amphitheatre of green

slopes slashed by slate-grey ravines, we climbed painfully. Now we were in a naked valley sentinelled by saw-edged peaks where we came to an ignoble village and a filthy inn. I did not eat there but stole away to watch a flock of sheep whose tails seemed bigger than the rest of their bodies. In a corral were a score of goats with a woman shearing them, while in huts of slaty stone were dirty children blocking the doorways, as their mothers searched their heads for lice.

At last our driver told me to get on the car and we continued our climb. The mountains were now smooth, grassy, undulating. Clay-grey villages clung in crevices, while sheep grazed precipitously, climbing rocks like goats. It was a rude and dizzy land. Ragged children flung offal at our passing car, and their mothers squatted in the entries of the low, stone-roofed houses, hiding their squalid interiors. Yet in a wretched village square, like an ugly deity, was a rough stone image of Lenin.

We were up very high now, and in a scene of unimaginable sublimity. Slate-grey gorges swept down to a dim river; snow-capped peaks saw-toothed the sky. The way was so uneven sometimes I thought the car would overturn. As it snaked up the mountainside the road lifted steeply and bent abruptly. And at last we came to the ultimate desolation which formed the Georgian Pass. We saw the fortifications which had guarded it for ages. Watch towers, black bastions, fantastic ruins—fiercely they endured, defiant symbols of an ancient jeopardy.

As we had reached the summit the chauffeur got out and tightened his brakes. I felt relieved. Once more the old bus had made the trip. Now with motor cut off we were coasting down hill, and Oh, the joy of that descent! I had not eaten since our start and was ravenously hungry; but my heart exulted, for we were dropping to a land of milk and honey. Far below we could see the road worming through green pastures and golden orchards. In spite of repeated hairpin bends we soon reached the river level where the car sped joyously to its goal. Houses and peasants were frequent now, and how good the women were to look at! The girls had rosy cheeks, Grecian features, braids of dark hair. They ran out, holding shawls for sale, throwing flowers, offering fruit. Their oval faces had an expression of candid serenity. What a contrast with the harsh mountain women, huddling in their sheep-skins, only an hour's drive away. As I looked at these girls with their appetising air I thought that life in Georgia must have much to commend it.

Then the road descended into the bed of the stream and we had a terrible time. I had to hang on to avoid being thrown out of the car. We threaded our way among boulders and once we plunged so deep in the water I thought we would be swamped. It was a grave-yard for cars. We saw many stalled, while naked drivers sweated to dig them out of holes and whirlpools. I heaved a sigh of relief when we

finally got through, and the road ran level amid the meadows of a green and smiling valley. Here was nature with wealth and warmth to welcome us, and girls offering us flowers and fruit. The roadside cottages were bathed in verdure while in the stream naked boys were douching the bullocks fresh from the fields. A laughing land. Peasants were threshing the grain and trees were laden with apricots and pears. These people were happy with the opulence of easy living.

What a drive it had been, so full of change and interest and even danger! This Old Codger was nearly exhausted. Ten hours on that rugged road and not a bite to eat. For once Intourist had slipped up, or perhaps I was supposed to grub at that filthy mountain kahn. Anyway I was never so glad as when in the twilight we rolled into the suburbs of Tiflis.

## *Chapter Forty-One*

### THE NUDIST BEACH

Tiflis. Installed in a big hotel in a bedroom with a high ceiling I was conscious of the overwhelming heat and enjoyed a cold bath as seldom before. I had supper with a French Jew who was sorry for himself because he had been bug-bitten and arrested for carrying a camera. But like many of his race he was interested in the commercial angle of his voyaging and suggested we should sell some of our possessions in the black market. So I went with him to a shop in a side street where for thirty roubles I parted with the tie Lydia had refused so regretfully. I could have sold other stuff at fantastic prices, but as I was nearing the end of my trip I did not want to have money I could not take out of the country. I could see nothing I wished to buy, even as a souvenir, so I used my remaining roubles to show my appreciation for services cheerfully rendered.

In Russia the better classes don't talk to strangers, and the French Jew complained bitterly of the rebuffs he had suffered. He was fed up with everything, especially after his detention in the Police Station. He was worried about the war situation, too, and his one desire was to get home as quickly as possible. I told him that if he was sensitive to bed-bugs he had better go in a first-class sleeper, so he took my tip, paying the extra from the price of a shirt he sold. As he bade me goodbye he looked miserable and apprehensive. That night, despite the heat and the street racket, I slept soundly from sheer exhaustion.

Next morning at breakfast my guide introduced herself. She was a monosyllabic maid with bare legs and ruby-stained toe-nails. As her English was indifferent, we talked in French, though our conversation was neither nimble nor bright. In fact, we were both rather bored, and in that listless heat I would rather have loafed round the hotel. However, it was her duty to show me all Tiflis had to offer in the way of interest and it was mine to humbly submit. So we taxied from the Palace of the Soviets to the Lenin Institute and then to the Karl Marx University. I was more interested in the blue-jawed Georgian men who looked as if they shaved twice a day, and some Red Armyists whose chief function seemed to be singing. The city

was mostly suburbs, the people shabbily dressed, the shops incredibly empty. My lunch was poor; the ice-cream watery, the fruit wormy. The best place in Tiflis, I decided, was the railway station that took me out.

I dreaded those Russian railway trips and was glad to travel by night so that I could escape something of their *ennui*. I slept most of the way to Batoum, but rose with the dawn so that I could stake first claim to the toilet seat. We passed through fields of maize with wooden bungalows nestling in the verdure. Sluggish rivers mirrored the sunny sky. The corn was ripe, with huge ears, and amid it pigs, geese and turkeys were foraging. A rich country—lush, green, with orchards, cattle, and gardens gay with flowers. The hills were wooded to the summits, while beyond were the Caucasus mountains. I saw four men bearing a coffin, and among the women mourners two bearing unborn children. A land of fecundity, where nature was lavish and the people lazy.

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I find in my diary that I arrived in Batoum feeling very happy. I am glad of that record, for on this stage of my wanderings I was experiencing happiness only in patches. I had heard no news for long; and I, too, was worrying about the war situation. I must get out of Russia before the cloudburst. I felt the crisis coming; it might be nip and tuck. But maybe it was better to remain in ignorance of events and enjoy the moment.

The hotel at Batoum was old. It had no running water, but it was close to the harbour and full of animation. I was glad to be so near to the sea again and liked our guide, who was very pro-American. He plied me with questions and was the only Intourist man who admitted he would like to live in the New World. After an omelette breakfast we went sight-seeing when I found the town mildly interesting on account of its oriental atmosphere. It was comforting to see mosques, with signs of Arab culture—an escape from the crude stuff of Sovietism for which I began to have a sense of nausea. To hell with their planned society! I prefer disorder and dirt to order and—more dirt.

So I thought as we drove into the country, climbing hills amid plantations of grapefruit and avocado trees, till we came to a tea plantation. Among the low bushes peasants were picking busily, filling huge baskets with the leaves, which were dried in a nearby factory. It was the only factory in Russia I enjoyed visiting, for I am a tea lover and the air was pleasantly perfumed. Most Russian tea comes from Georgia, I was told. There were in all thirty-seven factories, and this one employed eight hundred people who worked in three eight-hour shifts. But such information bores me so I pass it on.

Even more boring were the Botanical Gardens which we visited after the tea garden. To me its only object of interest was the Laquer Tree. It was surrounded by a fence of barbed wire and various notices warned that it was deadly poison. Even our guide was earnest about it. To touch it, he said, might be to drop dead on the spot. This was too much for me. Stepping forward with an air of Ajax defying the lightning, boldly I laid my hand on the bark. Then I turned to the rest of the party: "There," said I, "I dare you to do likewise." No one took up my challenge. They thought me a showoff and a fool. But in spite of the baleful warnings I showed no sign of evil contamination; though when no one was looking I carefully spat on my hand and rubbed it on the seat of my pants.

That afternoon I went bathing. The water was full of proletarians all properly costumed. In that warm and sticky sea they frisked and frolicked, but I got no kick out of it. Where my real thrill came was at a private beach further along. There I happened on nudist bathing in full flower. All of the bathers were women, about fifty of them, and some had sweet shapes. Indifferent to my admiring gaze they posed and reposed in absolute nudity. I imagine they belonged to the *élite* of Batoum, and that only the common people wore costumes. It seemed to be considered unsophisticated to conceal sex, for though I was only a score of yards away they gave me no attention. Of course the sight of so much naked pulchritude shocked me, and I would have retreated had I not forced myself to look at it from an *aesthetic* angle. Indeed, had not the boat sailed that afternoon I think I might have continued my studies.

In Russia trains and boats are loaded to three times their capacity. The Soviet steamer on the Black Sea easily exceeded this, for the passengers seemed piled in layers on its decks. In spite of this, a black mob on the wharf still clamoured to go on board; but at the waving of Intourist's wand they parted to allow me to mount majestically the steep gangway. It was grand to be assured of space and comfort where all was crowded confusion; in a classless society to be assured of the privileges of class. I had a dainty and spacious cabin all to myself. There were two berths but the occupier of the lower preferred to remain with his wife and daughter in their cabin, resigning to me his place.

He was a Polish Prince, the military attaché of his embassy in Moscow. His second name was as unpronounceable as if I shut my eyes and struck a dozen letters at random on my typewriter; but his front name was Stanislav, so I will call him that. He was a slender, fastidious man, stemming from the old aristocracy and proud of his patrician birth. His wife was as stout as he was slim, yet I won her heart by giving her a small box of gas tablets. I always assume that fat, middle-aged women who



complain of heart trouble are really suffering from flatulence, and they readily respond to my understanding sympathy. Some say it with flowers, some with music; I say it with gas tablets.

They had a young daughter who was stout like her mother, but both were rank conscious. They shrank with disgust from the mob about them, and loathed the Russian proletariat with an intensity only Poles could achieve. They spoke French, so we confided our various woes in that language. The Prince was worried about the congested state of the boat. He whispered: "I dare not tell my wife; but there are three thousand on board, and we have only boats to save sixty." As it was, she was in a state of nerves; for we were in the midst of a summer storm, and there were frequent blazes of sheet lightning on the horizon.

So she retired to her cabin, complaining of a headache and grumbling generally. "She had been like that all the trip," said the Prince. "I thought it would be nice to take this voyage for our holiday, but she wanted to go to Paris, and so she has been difficult. As for me, I find the trip tedious. They tell you all is changed, but nothing is changed." When I said something about the sloppiness of the Slav he checked me with some asperity. "We Poles," he said, "are Slavs and a fine people; the Russians are Mongols."

Back in the roomy comfort of my cabin I felt guilty to see the deck outside my window so huddled with bodies it was impassable. Out there in the open people were preparing to sleep for the night. Tidily dressed folks for the most part, lying closely packed under the lowering sky. Fortunately the sea was calm, and though the thunder growled, no rain fell; while, as if to cheer them, a loud speaker brayed brazenly. I tried to leave my cabin, but at once found myself wedged in a dense crowd. There were Russian girls, strong and lumpish, and sailors slim and smart. There was much laughter, singing, general hilarity. The crowded condition of the boat seemed to be taken for granted and worried no one. I gave up all idea of getting supper and went to bed. But I could not sleep. The thunder rumbled, the radio blared, the air was hot and heavy.

I got up at about seven and made my way to the dining room. At that early hour it was already crowded; however, there was a table reserved for Intourist and I was puzzling over the menu when the Prince and his family joined me. They, too, had slept badly. The lady was already fanning herself in the humid heat and grumbling over the wretched breakfast. I felt sorry for the Prince. He looked worried, but he did his best to order for all of us. Our waiter had been drunk the night before, and now he was obviously suffering from a hangover. He was grumpy and disagreeable.

At the other tables the people were mostly of the bourgeois type, the women

largely bare-legged with painted toe-nails. There were no manners, for the Prince had hardly finished reading the menu when a man from the next table took it from his hand but did not return it. Then we witnessed a dispute between a proletarian and a waitress. He accused her of slackness, and announced his intention of complaining to the Committee who would have her demoted to the dishwashing gang. She wept bitterly, but he showed a vindictive spirit. No doubt his exposure of her would be a feather in his cap as a Soviet citizen. In the midst of this sordid turmoil the Princess rose with disgust and retired to her cabin, while I went on deck, feeling only half fed.

We were cruising close to shore with a bonny blue sea and sandy beaches rising to wooded hills. We stopped at a woe-begone watering-place and a sickly sanatorium. There was a pavilion on the pier but no gleam of gaiety. At Norossorisk many went ashore and that afternoon at four I managed to get a fair lunch that included bortsch and ice-cream. The Pole family talked furtively of the last purge and how terrible it had been. The bourgeois class had been nearly eliminated, but a new one was arising that in turn would be liquidated. Spying still prevailed; trunks were searched, strangers trailed. Those who spoke to visitors were questioned. All power was held by people of proletariat origin. The masses were docile, not Marxist-minded. They were indifferent to all but eating, drinking and the elementary comforts of living. Was I writing a diary? Then I must be careful not to mention names, especially theirs. Needless warning—it was so utterly unspellable . . . So spoke the Prince with a bitter hatred of the country to which he was assigned as a military attaché.

That evening we reached Theodosia and went ashore for a few hours. The old town consisted of slums and smells, the new of crowds and cafés. Said the Prince: "Russia is unlimited lousiness, punctuated by pictures of Lenin." Said the Princess: "Excuse me—sardines repeat so." Other remarks were drowned in the din, for at midnight the main streets were ablaze with light and thronged with pleasure seekers. As I strolled with my Polish friends they invited me to visit them in their castle in the Carpathians. They told me how wonderful was the Polish Army, especially the cavalry, and how they would sweep the Soviet hordes before them. I hoped he was right, but I could not see horses, however gallant, confronting tanks. The Russian soldiers, he said, were badly trained but long-suffering.

I could not help thinking that this slim military aristocrat with his contempt for the mob was amazingly behind the times. Somehow his very pride and confidence terrified me. As he spoke of the might of Polish arms and their preparedness for war a fear was born in me that never left me. The very Russians he hated so virulently were his source of safety. It seemed certain that Russia feared Germany and would

never allow Poland to be taken by the Huns. . . . So thinking I returned to the boat and tried to rustle a bit of supper, but all that was available was Narzan, bread and compote. The food on that boat was abominable. The dining room was muddle and confusion. One had to wait an hour, to be served with fruit that had been condemned by the ship's doctor. Tired of the bedlam I went to bed and when I awoke we were in Yalta.

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While the proletarian mob melted on the pier a lordly car met this Intourist stranger and bore him to Yalta's proudest hotel. I will not say that it was palatial, but it was bang on the sea-front and my room had a grand view. It also had a buckled bed and a door with a broken lock. No bathroom of course, but there was the spacious sea to bathe in. And in the raw, too, for Yalta was famous for its nudist beaches. They told me that was one of the sights of Russia, almost worth coming all this way to see. Perhaps that was why I had come. I began to wonder. Anyway I went down to breakfast full of pleasant anticipation.

Breakfast was a crazy business. Although it was after ten the waitresses were busy waking up. They blinked at me with protesting eyes, and brought me food when I began to think they had forgotten my existence. They appeared on the scene after a long interval in which I sat in the leafy court before an unstable table with a soiled cover. Casually they sauntered in, as if it was quite natural for a guest to wait an hour to be served, and he was damn lucky at that. They dumped on my table some wormy fruit, tasteless tea and to my surprise a plate of French pastry of the kind called *mille feuilles*. They were fairly fresh, so I washed two of them down with my tea.

Incidentally, if you don't like Russian tea just try their coffee, then . . . you'll like their tea. But sketchy though the meal was it was pleasant under the laurel roses and the acacias. Languidly I watched the flitting butterflies and the arriving tourists, when among them to my surprise I saw Myra and Louis Gutzmann. By now they looked hard-bitten travellers, wearing knitted skull-caps and peasant blouses. We were distant and disdainful as became a Soviet sour-puss and two rabid Russophiles.

Now for the nudist beach. Cheerfully I started out, carrying in my hand a pair of bathing trunks. I hoped I would be allowed to wear them, for I am the modest kind who slinks surreptitiously into a comfort-cot and the idea of integral nudity was unthinkable to me. Even in my remote Brittany cove I would not want my Maker to see me in the altogether. Now it seemed to me that everyone was heading for the beach and I joined the crowd entering the men's section. For the sands were divided into two by a flimsy barrier of willow-fence four feet high. Paying forty kopecks for

my entry I descended to a stretch of dark sand, where hundreds of benches were lined up above high tide mark. A sweet old lady allotted me one of these and I undressed and donned my trunks. As I did so, many cast curious glances at me. What were they thinking? Was I abnormal? Was I a reactionary? Or was I just a swanking stranger?

To tell the truth I felt more indecent wearing trunks in that crowd of some five hundred naked males than if I had been trunkless amid five hundred decorously clad. Indeed at that moment my very modesty seemed immodesty. As I stretched on my bench I was conscious of the combined sneer of the whole beach. All around me were men copper-coloured and athletic; while young women attendants went among them, supplying them with towels and chatting affably as they sat on the edges of the benches. The old lady had a bottle of iodine with which she anointed the men who suffered from scratches, for the gravel often caused abrasions. Besides the fit men were fat men and furry men; but all seemed proud to display their sexual virility. As I watched the scene I saw Louey Gutzmann come down to the beach and I wondered if he too would wear trunks. Then I went splashing into the short waves and swam some distance.

The water was most agreeable and so was the view: for from where I floated I had a close-up of the women's section. There must have been half a thousand dames in that compound and not enough cover among them to hide a mole mark. Here was nudity so frank it ceased to be shocking. It was not exhibitionism but honest unconsciousness of sex. These people saw no indecency in the human form and openly advertised their conception of innocence. Perhaps they were right. Modesty is a grafted quality and anti-Soviet. They had risen above old-fashioned conventions of Capitalism and, if in no other way, they could flaunt their freedom in this. *Vive* Soviet society! *Vive* nudism! But what I saw was not altogether pretty. True, there were slim, nut-brown maids, but there were also matrons grotesque in their fat and mottled ugliness; women deformed and shapeless, with fallen breasts and risen bellies, and stenographer's spread, and wobbly hips and knobby knees and piebald torsos. . . .

And as I gazed with something like wonder at this welter of womanly flesh who should descend into it but Myra Gutzmann. *And she, too, wore her birthday suit.* Yes, I saw the fair Myra as naked as the day she was born, and she saw me gazing goggle-eyed at her. Then, showing that convention is not so easy to conquer after all, Myra gave a gasp of dismay and backed into the bathing house. And from there, though I waited a long, long time she did not reappear. Then I knew she was ashamed; perhaps because she had been cowardly and gone back on her professed

principles; or perhaps because she had not gone back and put on a brassiere and a G string. Yet to have done that would have aroused the resentment of these naked Amazons and might have caused a riot. Even *I* did something very brave when I donned trunks. I should have received a decoration for protesting against the nudism about me. (To tell the truth I rather envied them their freedom!) But Myra—that was different. She would have insulted them by donning even a fig leaf.

Oh, Myra, you broke my heart that day! Who would have thought you had so fair a form? For of all these hundreds on the beach in curve and colour you were Queen! Why did you shrink from my admiring gaze? Why so studiously avoid me when we returned to the hotel? Was it possible that your defiance of convention was only skin deep, and at heart you were a philistine? I hope so; and that now you are a model mother, and read the *Ladies Home Journal*, and have forgotten the Old Codger who gave you that long lascivious look on the Soviet beach so many years ago. Ah Myra! I hand it to you. You had all it takes. . . .

That evening I had dinner with the Polish family whom I told of my experiences on the bathing beach. His eyes gleamed but hers were gloomy. “On no account, Stanislav, would I allow you to go there,” she told him severely, and he meekly answered: “On no account would I want to. When I can gaze on your beautiful form, how do you think it would be possible for me to look on another?” Then *he* became gloomy, but that was because he had tried to get places on the plane for Moscow, and for some reason his transportation was blocked. It was strange, he told me. He did not like the trend of political events. Danzig worried him a lot. “Of course the ‘Alleymands’ will never attack us as long as Russia is behind us; and the Russians fear and hate them as much as we do.” His great comfort was the backing of Russia, though he loathed the Soviets as only a Polish Prince can. I could see he was nervous and anxious to get back to his Embassy, but . . . “They don’t seem to want me,” he wailed. “There’s something in the wind.”

That night I slept badly; there was an odour in my shabby room, the sea was pounding, my bed had a broken spring. But morning came with sunshine and grapes for breakfast. Already the air was rent with radio and crowds cluttered the promenade. “Let’s get away from this proletariat ordure,” said the Polish Prince. “I will take you for a drive into the country. Perhaps when we get back they will have my tickets for Moscow.”

So he hired a fine car and the four of us started out. He sat in front with me, yet bent back continually to kiss his wife’s hand so that you would have thought they had been married only yesterday, instead of having a daughter of sixteen. But perhaps he was trying to allay her anxiety. He spoke to me in muffled tones because he believed

the chauffeur was a spy and understood French. He also kept looking back to where a car was following us. "It's a police car," he said. "They have orders not to let us get out of their sight." This may have been so, but I think he was just jittery. In any case we did not shake off the trailing car till late in the afternoon.

It was a wonderful drive. We took the coast road which reminded me of the Esterel, only the sea was grey instead of blue, and the verdure lush instead of piny. We passed palaces of Grand Dukes, now used as sanatoriums. But the finest was the residence of a Prince, turned into an anti-bourgeois museum. This Prince was said to have had twenty palaces and to have owned fifty thousand serfs. So at least the guide was telling the party of proletariats she was conducting. The building had a grey, gothic front and a cyprus-shaded terrace. There was a Fountain of Tears, consisting of a Christ from whose eyes water dripped eternally. There was a stately library, with thousands of volumes, all classics and bound in leather also life-sized portraits of the Prince and his lovely Princess. Between them was a statue of the Duke of Wellington. Yet the heritor of all this escaped by the Black Sea and died in misery. What struck me, however, was how English everything was, for the Prince had been a great admirer of my country. What also impressed me was how everything was preserved with jealous care. The Soviet authorities do not destroy beautiful relics like this. They use them as propaganda and tell the people: "This once belonged to one man; now it belongs to YOU."

So this courtyard, which might have been in Surrey, was filled with trucks carrying factory workers on their paid holiday. The men were bare to the waist, with tawny torsos; full of Russian wine and singing songs of the Revolution. "Let's get away from this scum," said Stanislav in disgust. So we took the car again on a road that climbed through vines to a great height. There were castles perched precariously; overhanging cliffs; a church turned into a beer-hall. Then a magnificent escarpment of orange and purple, and at its top the green, rolling steppes and the road to Sebastopol. But we must go no further. Our way was blocked by sailors bare to the waist, who fiercely turned us back.

On the way home Stanislav was silent and we were all subdued, but that may have been because we were tired. Yet I had a feeling that something sinister was in the air. The Prince kept patting his wife's hand reassuringly, and when we reached the hotel he hurried to the office. When he returned he looked upset. "I have a telegram from Moscow," he said, "recalling me immediately. Something serious is happening, and I cannot get back. Not only is there no space on the air-liner but I cannot get reservations on the train. I don't like it." I was little inclined to agree with him for I thought he was fussy and exaggerated trifles. All this talk of spies and

surveillance was “baloney.” However, I showed a proper sympathy and that evening we dined together. As I was leaving early in the morning I bade them rather a sad good-bye and again I was conscious of a strange foreboding. But little did I realise what a situation of danger they were in, and I often wondered to what tragic doom these three Polish aristocrats were blindly drifting.

## Chapter Forty-Two

### THE BLOW FALLS

That evening alone I prowled the mob-packed promenade. No one looked at me, but many looked at Old Whiskers that bore itself gallantly after seven years of service. You can't beat Savile Row and the spinning mills of Yorkshire. There were queues in front of the food shops, and crowds around the drink stores. There were long lines before the newspaper kiosks, eagerly buying the latest edition of *Isvestia*. The soft drink sellers could not handle all their customers; the restaurants were packed with patient patrons. It was a holiday horde out to squeeze the last drop of enjoyment from the day.

The barber shops were thronged and there was a lot of nail-enamelling and perm-modelling. In tentative approach to bourgeois fashion the women were beginning to fuzz their hair behind. They wore cheap but gay prints; the men ducks and open shirts. Most were sunbronzed, but they were a sober crowd. There was no glad-eyeing, no girls on the make or men to make them. A sad business, with over it all the shadow of Lenin from the huge statue on the promenade. These paid holiday makers seemed dazed and aimless, like peasants at a fair. One felt they had no political sense, no militancy; just a docile acceptance of existence, an animal search for enjoyment. A crazy country, a crazy people, going God knows where . . . and He probably didn't care for they didn't believe in Him anyway. But they *were* going—and that was probably all they asked.

I was pleased to leave my shabby, stinking room with its buckled bed and broken lock. In a drizzle of rain that made Yalta look funereal I was glad to get on the steamer and proceed with my tour. I would be happy when it was all over, for I was getting tired now. But the crowd on board promised me no respite from weariness. I shared a cabin with a shaggy Muscovite whose only baggage was a musk melon. Our stateroom had no curtains and a mangy mat, but it was a blessed sanctuary free from the milling mob. As I watched the seething crowd on the quay I wondered where they could all pack themselves. Then the rain came down and summer dresses were soppy rags. Men stripped off their shirts, standing with



bronzed torsos in the streaming downpour. Yet no one but myself seemed depressed.

Thinking breakfast might cheer me I chose optimistically, but all I could get was tea and black bread. Then a woman with a big bust seated herself opposite me and proceeded to order. She began with sweet buns and honey and went on to a huge hamburger with potatoes, peas and tomatoes. At the next table a spectacled female ordered for her husband and small son. They had veal cutlets garnished with vegetables. All this at eight in the morning. Everyone seemed to be eating meat, and as I chewed my stale bread and washed it down with dishwater tea I felt rather a sap. So in that humid heat, with the radio raving, I watched them sourly. Many were devouring the morning paper with their food and seemed to find it exciting. What was in it, I wondered, that ruffled their Russian placidity? Frustrated I returned to my room which was empty but for a moment when my Muscovite returned to retrieve his melon.

In the afternoon the rain ceased and cheerfulness prevailed. We stopped at Eupatoria as the setting sun gilded the mosques and the beach glowed with fairy fire. In the steerage some sailors organised a concert on the main hatch. Neat, noisy lads in the pink of condition they danced and sang while the audience ate grapes in an atmosphere of sunset serenity. When dark fell, I found a chair on the upper deck and sat there lonely but tranquil. I was not worried, though I had no money to take me home; but I wished this long voyage would come to an end. I thought of Dream Haven in September, the Indian summer, the kelp harvest, the threshing. Soon the life I loved would be mine again. And so dreaming I watched the sinister grey shapes of warships sneaking past, and search-lights, long and strong, pencilling the sky.

I supped skimpily as usual. They seemed to be out of everything. A woman speaking a little French helped me to order, but I had the classic cucumber and tomato salad, stale French pastry and lemonade. Then I slipped away to my room where my partner was already asleep. He was in the raw so I stripped off and dozed until we reached Odessa. There we had a long wait, for crowds with chests and bundles were congesting the dizzy gangway. Then I saw my guide hunting for me, and a car was waiting to take me to the Hotel de Londres.

It was a fine old place of five stories, dating from the old regime. Everything beautiful in Russia seems to be a relic of Czarist days. Here were rooms with tapestry on the walls and high-backed chairs of carved oak. But most of the furniture was shrouded with Soviet calico, except the mugs of the big shots and I wished they had been shrouded too. Here there was a noble vestibule and a spacious stairway with a fine carpet. The brass rods of the carpet were bright, and you have no idea

how those twinkling rods cheered me. I turned to a dining-room that was like a banquet hall. It had dignity, even majesty; so sitting down I sipped a glass of Narzan till a sense of peace came over me . . . Then just as suddenly it vanished; for there, two tables away, was the Gaypayoo man of the Volga. From that column-like collar his young-old face protruded as he transfixed me with a basilisk gaze. There was so much severity and suspicion in his eyes that I wilted in my seat. Yet I gave him a blank look as if I had never seen him before, and deliberately finishing my drink I went up to my room.

That at least was cheering. There was a huge stone cell of a douche bath and, Oh Joy! a private toilet. I was glad of that, for I had a sudden purge; maybe due to too much Narzan, maybe to the sudden apparition of that Soviet sleuth. However, I had a cold douche, followed by a breakfast of omelette and compote in the garden court of the hotel. So, feeling comfortably sustained, I sallied forth to see the town. . . . Its most notable exhibit was a grand stairway leading to the port. There were broad, bright streets, old houses, a sense of room and freedom. The air was cool and pleasant. A nice town, I thought; shabby and worn yet easy to live in. But I had no wish to live in it. All I wanted was to get away as soon as Intourist allowed me. Then, as I stood at the head of that grandiose stairway that sloped to the grey sea, I had a distinct shock.

It was Louey Gutzmann who conveyed it. He approached me with a grin you could see a block away. "You've heard the news?" he yelled. "It's wonderful! It's grand! Gosh! I feel bucked about it. Hitler and Stalin have shaken hands. Ribbentrop and Molotov have signed a peace pact and sworn eternal friendship. The Germans and the Russians have teamed up, and Oh, what a team! Now we'll see something doing!"

As a German-American Communist I could see his point. It jarred me horribly. For a moment I stood gasping and staring at him, then I began to curse. Oaths I had not used for years ripped out of me. I cursed Hitler and Stalin and their pact of iniquity. I cursed the Soviets as double-crossing bastards. I cursed the Communists with all their works. Louey got furious and he began to befoul Britain. We had a row right there and I nearly slammed the little runt down the grand stairway. As we raged, people stared at us curiously and I realised I had better break away or I would get into trouble. So abruptly I left him in the middle of a tirade against British Imperialism.

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My first thought was: What about Poland? This pact spelt her doom. Germany was now free to do her fell worst without interference from Russia. The fat was in

the fire. My poor Polish friends, what would become of them? I understood why they had been stranded at Yalta and wondered would they ever get away. I have often wondered since. Did they escape, or were they caught in the coming storm? I will never know, but I like to think of them in their castle in Silesia, living the simple life aloof from politics.

As I walked back to the hotel worry gripped me, and my excitement was reflected in the faces of the people who lined up in front of the newspaper kiosks. But the tentacles of Intourist were on me, and I was whisked off on a sight-seeing tour. I was gleefully shown cannon taken from the English in the Crimean War, then conducted to a home for the children of Spanish refugees. It was an old convent with mouldy walls and weedy garden. Two directors, one fat, as the other thin, guided us round as we pretended to gush over everything. It seemed nauseating and, in a way, pathetic, because these people believed in themselves and were proud of what they showed us. Yet there was no getting away from it—to Western eyes the place was depressing, the children ugly, the refectory smelly and the scum of Communism overlay all.

Then we went to the Park of Culture and Rest, which had the usual lack of refinement and absence of repose. But I found the guide, an elderly Jewess from the Bronx, volubly informative. She told me that a divorced man with four children paid sixty per cent of his salary to the State for their support, and he had no means of evading the charge. But though there might be divorced duties there were no death duties. There was no compulsion to work, only the alternative of starvation. There was no limit to the amount a man might save, but a limit to what he might buy. There was no interference with the institution of the family, but freedom for the child to choose between Church teaching and Communist teaching, and in this choice there must be no parental interference. All of which sounds reasonable to me—horribly reasonable.

That night Odessa was blacked out, and sinister with probing search-lights. I slept badly, for my dreams were evil, and next day like a lost soul I wandered the streets. Suddenly I loathed the place, longing for the moment I might leave it. For now I had the wind up. Colossally over me hung the spectre of War and I shivered in my Old Codger shoes. Oh, to be home in safety and comfort! To launch the canoe from the sandy cove of Dream Haven with Coco swimming alongside and trying to climb aboard. Just then all that seemed a bit of heaven. . . . However, eleven o'clock in the evening arrived and with it the car that was to take me to the station. Through tenebrous streets we drove to the muddle of misery that marks a Soviet terminus, and threading the confusion I found my place in the congested train.

In the morning, by rising before anyone else, I grabbed some scrambled eggs, then stood in the corridor watching the scenery. In the autumn sunshine it was almost idyllic. The huge fields were stooked with grain that was being threshed and herds of fat cattle were browsing in the stubble. There were peaked straw-stacks and long hay-stacks, and ploughing gangs and *kolhoz* buildings. There were bare footed women workers with white handkerchiefs on their heads. Then to vary the scene; pleasant forests with silver glades of birch and little lakes that mirrored the sunrise. But there were also gangs of grimy women working on the railway. Women workers everywhere; for, no doubt, the men were in the Red Army. Yet it was a soothing trip with a suggestion of bucolic peace.

We made Kiev about half-past one and drove through busy streets to a fine hotel. It was five stories high and the dining-room was magnificent. Here was a real city, with modern buildings, a genial climate, noble vistas. I was impressed, but my satisfaction was adulterated by anxiety. My valise had not been delivered to my room. I feared it might be lost. It was late in the afternoon before it turned up, and I had the impression it had been opened and searched. However, there was nothing incriminating, for I kept my diary and my notes in my breast pocket.

That afternoon I was surprised by the sight of a long table in the dining-room at which over a hundred places were set. Wondering, I waited over my caviare, when in filed a gay company of Parisians. All at once the atmosphere seemed to change and I felt so comfortably at home I began to love Kiev. Many were Communists of the working class, prepared to ecstasise over everything, but a good third were bourgeois tourists critically inclined. There were half a dozen honeymoon couples, and it was a treat to see dainty costumes again. The Parisiennes, so animated, so delicately fastidious, seemed strangely out of place in that Soviet setting. Beside them the Russian girls looked lumpish and ill-clad.

They were going sight-seeing next day and as their guide spoke only English I was asked to interpret. Climbing to a vantage point we had a fine view of the Dnieper, with a sandy island that was a Kiev Coney Isle. I longed to go down for a swim but my duties as interpreter prevented me. Also some of these girls were quite attractive, and even an Old Codger is not insensible to feminine charms. To tell the truth I was happier in Kiev than I had been on the whole trip; but perhaps that was because the prospect of getting home was so immediate.

We visited a people's athletic club, with a stadium, baths, tennis courts, and a gymnasium so well equipped I realised that in its big cities Russia does more for its working classes than we do. Everything was free to them. I saw handball teams, track runners and tennis players who had some good strokes. I don't think golf is

known in Russia, but perhaps in time they will get on to it. Or perhaps it is considered too bourgeois. I think, however, they might have a nine-hole course in the Kremlin; for it would do Molotov and Stalin good to have a round every morning. They might get to calling each other Joe and Mike and become quite human.

That evening the six young brides vied with each other in their display of evening toilettes, and very charming they looked. I was invited to their table where we had a gala dinner of caviare, bortsch, stergel, meat balls and ice-cream. We were all so gay I forgot the fears that were assailing me. Yet when I went into the street I saw those ominous queues lined up at the newspaper kiosks, and I wondered a lot. So I walked up and down till quite late; for the main street was well lit, with flower-sellers, boot-brushers and watchmen sitting in the doorways of the stores. When I returned to the hotel I found my French friends had retired but their places were taken by a proletarian mob. At the end of the big dining-room an orchestra was playing, and many couples were dancing. Every table was taken, while grimy citizens stoked up with steak and swilled champagne.

Next morning I felt tired and bored, but forced myself to visit the famous Lavra. The serene beauty of the exterior so affected me that it was like a soothing spell on my spirit. With its frescoes and gilt domes, both in form and colour it was a joy to the eye. Inside, it was gorgeous with carvings and gilded columns of fluted silver, so that I was more impressed by its richness than by its beauty. We had a guide whose gibes at religion annoyed me. To him all this was an object lesson in ecclesiastical depravity. Its bewildering splendour was achieved at the cost of the misery of countless millions. He told me in the Chapel that I need not take off my hat, but I did so and was pleased to see some peasants follow my example.

The guide told me that there were formerly four thousand monks here, all of them emasculated. He took us to the catacombs where we saw mummies of dead bishops, one of whom had an extraordinary resemblance to Rockefeller the First. He also showed us the dungeons, some no larger than a dog kennel. Shuddering, I was glad to get back to the daylight. It does one no good to see such sights. Let us forget the ghastly cruelties of the past and live in the present—joyously if we can, happily if we may, but at least with peace and content.

That evening I had a bit of a shock, for in the lobby of the hotel I again encountered White Collar. He favoured me with a hostile stare, which I returned with interest, but at the same time I felt a sinking of the heart. No doubt he was a young pup, puffed with authority; yet there was something so grimly menacing in his sour mug that it made him look twice his age. Fervently I hoped I had seen him for

the last time, for it seemed to me he had trailed me all the way from the Volga. In three different places I had encountered him, and in each he seemed to be keeping me under observation. Imagination works overtime in Sovietland. Trailed by the police, I thought, and without money. . . . Was I not on a spot! Oh, to get home as quickly as possible!

So I went to Intourist office with an attack of the jitters. There was a train leaving that night. Could I not catch it? The girl looked at me curiously. In front of her was a drawer full of passports piled in confusion, and among them was supposed to be mine; but though she hunted through them for many minutes she failed to find it. In any case, she told me, it would be impossible to leave that night. They had to arrange accommodation in advance. I had still three days to stay in Kiev and my railway passage to the frontier was booked for that date. But I insisted, saying that family matters called me home and begged to be allowed to leave by next day at the least. Again she gave me that curious look and left me, saying she would confer with the Director. She disappeared into a private room, returning after a long wait to tell me that she would have another search for my passport, and, if everything was in order, I might be able to leave on the morrow by the noon train.

How that day dragged! I sensed a certain uneasiness in the streets and wondered why. The French tourists knew nothing, except that things back home were pretty hot. They were enjoying the sunny charm of Kiev, but to me now it seemed a prison. I was beginning to get panicky and that night I slept little. However when, after a hasty breakfast, I went to Intourist bureau, the girl produced the missing passport and told me I could leave by the noon train. I was so relieved I felt like shouting. Warsaw, Berlin, Paris, Brittany—in three days I would be back home and cavorting in the jolly old sea. I was so happy I had a second breakfast.

Never did I pack my bag with greater glee. Soon, I thought, I'll be helping to get in my potatoes, roving the fields with my dog, fishing in the sea pools at low tide. In three days all my troubles will be over. . . .

Poor fool! Little I dreamed they were about to begin.

## Chapter Forty-Three

### CAUGHT IN THE WAR TRAP

Leaving Russia! Again that heavenly sense of *escape*. Perhaps I should say “release”—if not from prison at least from Communist Control. For the second time, as I took the train for the border, I had a feeling of gaol-breaking. But to reach that train I had to step over so many bundles and bodies as I crossed the floor of the waiting room, and saw such ragged misery and squalid suffering in that patient throng, that often I had to avert my eyes. Only in the Proletariat Paradise could one witness such dumb acceptance of poverty. Or was it that in other countries people of this class would not have presumed to travel by rail? Here it was one of their freedoms.

For the last time let me say that my objection to Russia was its *lack* of freedom, my kind of freedom, anyway . . . freedom to curse those in high places, to blast in print those in power, to denounce the Government and to throw it down if need be. I wanted to feel that my home was sacred, and as long as I obeyed the law my person also was sacred;—I wanted to go to Church or stay away; to be a rebel, even against rebellion. But in Sovietland there was no freedom of this kind. Could I go out in the public square and call the high muck-a-mucks sons of bitches? I wouldn’t last long at that. Yet these people claimed that theirs was the Higher Freedom, freedom to forge their shackles, to let themselves be enslaved for the good of the State. Economic planning means economic servitude. They were prepared to suffer in order that future generations might enjoy a standard of life higher than any they would ever know.

Well, perhaps they are right; but I believe in living in the present and leaving the future to fate. And to an Old Codger like myself Western Democracy is the best bet. But of one thing I am convinced—Communism and Capitalism will never be reconciled. The Soviets may pretend to be friendly but that is all eyewash. They will never yield on basic issues, and the world is not big enough for both. As a humble scribe let this be my word of warning:—there will be a war of conflicting ideologies more terrible than any yet. Thank God I will not live to see it, but only a miracle will

save mankind from anarchy. . . .

With such thoughts I sought the dining car and there I found two of my own race. One was a lady from Canada, a college professor in a mild way. I imagine she was also a sewing-circle socialist, though she never tried to inflict any of her doctrine on me. A gentle creature, full of courage, from first to last in our coming tribulations I never heard her utter a word of complaint; nor indeed did she often utter a word. As she came I think, from that town I will call her Mrs. Moosejaw. The other passenger was a Clyde Communist I will call Donald Duck, for he had a swagger and a blah-blah voice that made me think of this famous creation.

Donald Duck was a brash young man with a sense of his importance and a Communist chip on his shoulder. Although of the working class he had been to Oxford, and was now a Trades Union organiser. He was aggressively doctrinaire and reproved me for reading a novel that was innocent of class consciousness. With some irritation I responded that art had nothing to do with morality, social or sexual, and that propaganda in fiction was poison. He would not admit this, referring to recent Russian literature. Indeed, he was such an ardent admirer of all things Muscovite that I strongly advised him to become a Soviet citizen. At which he told me he was courting a lass in Camlachie and hoped to win her. He was really a fine chap—intelligent and manly—but his dogged dogmatism repelled me. Over-serious people bore me, while reformers make me mask my yawns.

In a rather filthy dining car our meal was consummated. It was a messy business and I was glad to retire to my first-class compartment. The other two were travelling “hard” so I saw nothing of them till we reached the frontier station whose outlandish name I have happily forgotten. I had already reviewed my position and formed my plan. I would obtain as much grub as the Soviet dining room would supply, and so have enough to take me to Paris where my in-laws would receive me with open arms. Only two days on the train. Two loaves, for I am one of those who can chew bread and pretend it is cake. So I consulted the guide on the chance of getting a lunch. Alas! My unused coupons, he said, were only good for food *eaten* on Soviet territory. Mean devils! I’ll get ahead of them, I thought. So I ordered three breakfasts in succession scrounging what portable food I could. Unfortunately it was mainly black bread and deformed apples.

After a series of unaccountable delays we reached the border about midnight. I shared my compartment with a Frenchwoman and a small boy, with another child very much on the way. In fact I feared there might be four of us instead of three if these delays were unduly prolonged. This girl was married to a Persian official and was going to her mother’s village in Brittany to increase the population. She lived



quite close to Dream Haven, so we had a nice talk, though the little lad kept climbing over me. I was sorry for her, travelling in that condition, with a boisterous boy. However, her home was only a few hours from Paris and in three days she could be there.

The frontier at last. We changed trains, contrasting the sordid Soviet one with the spick-and-span Polish car. I immediately got a berth, choosing an upper to be out of the way, and I smothered it with my baggage. Then I rejoined Mrs. Moosejaw and Donald Duck in their third-class compartment. Soon Polish officials in civilian clothes entered to examine our passports. They had a worried look, as if their minds were on other matters. Nevertheless, they discovered that the passport of Mrs. Moosejaw had no transit visa for Poland, and advised her to take the train back. No Canadian likes to retreat on the trail and it seemed she was on a spot. She was obviously worried when a soldier in a proud uniform solved the difficulty. Standing in the doorway in stilted English he delivered the bomb that left us shell-shocked. Said he:

“The German frontier is closed since yesterday. We are now in armed conflict with the Reich. It is war, war, WAR.”

Consternation! For a while we could not grapple with the situation. We were indignant with the Soviet authorities. Why did they not tell us the frontier was closed and that Hitler had attacked? Bitterly I cursed them. They had played a lousy trick on us, letting us leave when they knew there was no way out. But was there no way? A Polish official told me there were other frontiers—Roumania, Lithuania. “But I have no money,” I said. He shrugged his shoulders. That was none of his affair. If we liked to go on this train we could, and perhaps our Consul in Warsaw would help us. “I am sorry for you,” he said, “but War is War. And after all, are you not happy compared with us? Willingly would I be in your place.”

We held a conference. “This is one hell of a note,” I said, “but I’m going to risk it. I’m going through to Warsaw.” The others decided likewise. We would go forward, even if it meant putting our heads into the jaws of the lion. Donald Duck was a reckless lad, Mrs. Moosejaw had all kinds of grit, while the Old Codger could still thrill at the thought of adventure. So I went back to my compartment where I found the French girl in distress. She, like ourselves, had no money for an extended trip and in her condition her plight was pitiful. I tried to reassure her, telling her that the French Consul in Warsaw would look after her. I hope she came out all right and that another bouncing boy bears her name, but though I often cycled through her village I never dared to inquire.

It was a good thing I had secured my berth, for the compartment was invaded

by a number of reservists returning to their posts. Many carried swords, and sat on the lower berths all night, talking excitedly. I pretended to sleep but remained woefully awake, wondering how I was going to manage. If I only had some money I would have felt equal to the occasion; but without a cent what was I going to do? Perhaps in Warsaw I could sell some stuff and raise enough to pay my way home. What a wretched business! Tough luck on the Old Codger. I could only hope that as in the past my Special Providence would come to my aid. . . . And Providence did not fail me.

That is exactly what happened. I was standing in the corridor, making a breakfast of brown bread and an apple, when a Polish officer joined me. He looked haggard. But something familiar in his face struck an unpleasant note. Where had I seen someone like that before? Then I remembered—the Polish cadet in the train who, I supposed, had stolen my money. Oh, it was not the same. This officer was a bigger man with a frank look that the other had lacked. Still, he struck a sour memory, and for the hundredth time I bewailed my lost cash.

Particularly I thought of the ten thousand francs I had *intended* to put in a safe place. *Had I not done so?* In my bemused state I might have omitted this precaution, but I am fairly prudent and such lack of foresight was unlike me. How often had I hunted all my clothes for the missing money. Now as a forlorn hope I went back to my valise and gave it another combing. I even examined the lining. . . . Lining! That gave me an idea. I was wearing Old Whiskers. Rather hopelessly I went through six pockets. Nothing. Then I tried the monocle pocket. It was tiny, made to hold my eye-glass when it was not foppishly glittering against my waistcoat.

Again nothing. Suddenly my finger poked through the pocket. There was a hole in the lining which I made bigger, forcing my finger downward. Some canvas stiffening was sewn a little below and there in an interstice I touched something crisp. Could it be? Excitedly I hooked it out . . . *my missing money*. It was folded into a tight little wad and must have been pushed through the rip in the lining where it had lodged snugly. Almost with stupor I regarded it, then my heart leapt with joy. Salvation! With this I could pay my way home in comfort. Ten thousand francs. I gloatingly counted them. Yes, I was saved. . . .

It was about nine when we arrived at the mean little terminus of the Warsaw train and at once I saw the air was tense with excitement. Boring through the milling mob was a man in uniform who hailed us and told us he was from the British Consulate. The Consul wanted to see us right away. Would we come with him? The office was only a few blocks distant so, checking our baggage, we followed. Evidently our presence on the train had been telephoned, but the feeling of importance this gave us

was tintured with anxiety.

The Consul was a charming man, gentle and gentlemanly. In a calm, casual way he told us: "The bust-up's come. I'm leaving tomorrow by car for Roumania. But you better get away today by the first train. I advise you to go by Riga, and tonight will be your last chance." Sadly he sighed as he looked around his pleasant office. One side was lined with nicely bound books, and as he spoke he caressed some of them gently. The sunshine flooded the room, which was furnished with refined taste, so that it was more like the cosy den of a bachelor than an official bureau. "How you must hate to leave all this," I thought, "perhaps never to see it again. Poor elegant Consul, with your love of Voltaire and Shakespeare and Somerset Maugham! The Huns are bearing down on you and soon your Hedonism will be a thing of the past." Yet I heeded his words and we were all three grateful to him, though Donald Duck sprawled and smoked cigarettes with Communistic contempt.

Out in the sunshine of the streets again, I had a sense of urgency, and though we were famished I insisted on securing our tickets for Riga right away. A boy from the Consulate conducted us to the Hotel Bristol where there was a tourist agency that changed one of my thousand franc notes. Mrs. Moosejaw had some American greenbacks and bought a third-class ticket with them. I could have taken a first-class sleeper, but a sense of solidarity prevented me. So I bought two thirds and presented one to Donald Duck, who accepted it as a matter of course. Then I remembered: "From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs." In days to come I was frequently to be reminded of this Communist slogan.

In the garden of the Bristol trenches had been dug, and childishly foolish they looked wiggling amid the flower beds. In the dining-room of the Hotel Polonia a banquet had been set for that evening with a dazzling display of silver and snowy napery. I had thought of lunching there but that luxury dismayed me, so we sought a modest restaurant on the boulevard where we sat on the terrace and gobbled pork chops with gusto and tomato sauce. And all the time I was looking apprehensively up at the sky, for I saw so many others doing likewise.

And as we lingered, *they* came. In the clear blue there were five of them, flying in a wedge, like an evil spear-point. There was no doubt of their nationality, yet the people in the streets gazed up open-mouthed, as if they waited for bombs to fall into them. None fell. The planes passed over, till from the suburb we heard distant blasts. They were pounding Praga. Why did no Polish fighters go up? I would have loved to see a dog-fight in the sky. And there and then I had a fearful desire to stay in Warsaw and see the show out, even if it were a sticky one. Here was a book, a big book, for my making—one of the documents of the war. If only I had been an

American I would have taken the chance and stayed on, but I was a belligerent (or supposed I was) and it was up to me to get away as fast and as far as possible.

Indeed, as the day dragged on, a sense of anxiety, even of fear, gripped me. The waiters were listless and looked as if they wanted to drop their aprons and scam. Crowds surged round the mobilisation posters and there seemed to be the stupor that precedes panic. Yet never did I think Warsaw was doomed, nor did any of those who eddied round us in the streets. Warsaw would *fight and win*. That was a foregone conclusion in the minds of all.

Nevertheless, in the next few hours I imagined something like frenzy, and I suggested we had better go to the station and await our train. From that moment I took charge of our little party, perhaps because I had the funds. On that account I felt responsible, but I did not tell them I was so well heeled. As if it was stinted I doled out my money, for Donald Duck did not seem to worry about his impecuniosity. On the way to the station I bought chocolate, pears and cakes, and when we arrived there I pushed my way through a packed mob to retrieve my valise. As I stood at the Left Luggage counter I put my food package down for a moment and when I turned it was gone. That station must have been stiff with thieves, for as I waited I heard an elderly Dane hollering that he had been relieved of his wallet. The Poles are a mighty fine people, but when in Warsaw—watch your pockets.

Having recovered my valise in my fear that it, too, might be stolen, I sat on it, and stationed myself on the very edge of the platform where the train was due to come in. I wasn't overlooking any bets. I would freeze there till that locomotive arrived. And a good job I did, too. For soon the crowd began to pack behind me, till at the finish it was a dense mob that pressed forward, almost pushing me on to the rails below. If we had come down an hour later we would never have got on that train, and if we had not made it we would have been stranded in that doomed city.

After four hours of waiting the train pulled in. My prayer was that it would stop where there would be an open door opposite to me. Otherwise I saw no chance of getting in, for the pressure behind was so great. How anxiously I watched it! The nearest door was sliding towards me, then suddenly the train jarred to a stop. Curse the luck! The door was some ten yards away and already besieged. I prepared to fight my way with the others, lugging my heavy valise, when like a god from the car there stepped down a Polish soldier. He looked formidable and dominating, and for a moment he checked the mob. Then I heard Mrs. Moosejaw shrieking: "English! English!" and at that the trooper looked sharply in our direction. Then imperatively he raised his hand: "Let the English pass," he cried. "Are they not our allies and our

saviours?" At that the crowd cheered, giving way so that we were the first to enter that train. . . .

A month later in an easy chair of my London Club I watched the bulletins come from the ticker and in her death agony Warsaw cried to Britain for aid and cried in vain. I visioned that scene at the station and wondered. Would not that same soldier have cursed us, and would not that cheering crowd have spat in our faces? . . .

Well, there we were installed in a third-class car of the type that is open from end to end. It was jammed so tightly with conscripts that there was no room to move. At our end of the coach was an open space, and there I was penned in with my valise. Around me were peasants returning to their regiments, mostly uncouth country clowns and nearly all drunk. They sang and swapped bottles, till one after another they passed out. Then down they slumped on the floor and lay in heaps, making me think of dead on a battle-field. And in the midst of that inert huddle of humanity I sat on my up-ended valise in the attitude of Rodin's *Penseur* and dodged the vomit that sprayed from all sides. . . .

I was thankful Mrs. Moosejaw had found a seat on a wooden bench; yet after a while she squeezed a little space and beckoned me to join her. I missed Donald Duck but presently located him crouched comfortably under our bench. Trust a Communist to make himself snug. On the bench opposite were three peasants going to join their regiments. They were dressed in ill-fitting, rusty black and snored with mouths open. They leaned on one another till the end one tumbled over. Then he pushed the others back so that they leaned the other way. There was a rhythm in their profound repose, for they never awakened. As for me, I never slept. From time to time I would doze, then slump forward, then rouse with a jerk. And so on till the unmitigated misery of the dawn. What a night of fetid air, cramped discomfort and intolerable fatigue!

## Chapter Forty-Four

### FLIGHT FROM FEAR

In the morning we sorted ourselves out and thanked our stars the train was speeding us to freedom. Well, hardly speeding, for we stopped every few miles at agitated villages where the inhabitants cheered and waved banners. It was now the hour when we should have reached Riga, but to my dismay I found that we were barely half-way. If we reached our destination that night we would be lucky. At any rate we *were* rolling and it would be a relief when we gained Esthonia. So the long day passed with just enough excitement to sustain us, while the train disgorged passengers till we could move conveniently around. It was early afternoon when we arrived at Vilna.

What a comfort to stroll on the sunshiny platform and to breathe fresh air! We were on Lithuanian soil, free of the war zone. In the station restaurant we had supped at my expense, though I was forced to pay twice the tariff because I only had Polish *zilotys*. My trouble was that in every small country they despised the currency of the previous one; and in Vilna it was only by telling them I had nothing else that they took what remained of my Polish bills. Later on, in Riga, they would have spat on them.

At Vilna we changed into a more civilised train and continued our journey in comparative comfort. But a night of wakefulness had taken it out of me and I was overcome by fatigue. The miles passed turgidly as vainly I tried to sleep. If only I could have stretched under the bench like Donald Duck! Finally I did just that and so stole a semblance of slumber; but when late in the evening we reached Riga I was a sad-looking wreck. I crawled out of the train and, lugging my bag, began to search for a hotel. Once again I found myself in charge of the situation, perhaps because I spoke French or perhaps because I was the monied man of the party. But I have found that if anyone wants to take the initiative, there are always plenty to yield it gracefully. As a rule I was one of the yielders: here I found leadership forced upon me.

And in this instance I distinguished myself, for I conducted my party to a *bordel*.

At least it was that kind of a hotel that caters to that kind of trade. I tried several more respectable-looking establishments, but they were full up. This one had a small sign at the entrance to a stairway. A man who occupied a cubby-hole on the first-floor landing told us we could have three small rooms. Mine was clean and bright, but furnished only with a bed, a chair, a wash basin and a *bidet*.

I went downstairs and asked the clerk to give me the address of a good restaurant, as I decided we had earned a decent meal. He not only told me but asked me if I had any money. When I admitted I had none he immediately counted out a sum sufficient for our dinner and something over. "You can repay us when you settle the bill," he said carelessly. So we went to the place he recommended, and indeed it proved worthy of his mention. We had *Chicken a la Reine* and *Charlotte Russe* (unknown in Russia), and though the feast used up most of my money, considering the deliciousness of the fare I did not consider the bill excessive. After that, I went thankfully back to my room and slept such a sleep as I have rarely enjoyed in my lifetime.

How we liked that hotel! Though I am sure Mrs. Moosejaw never realised its character. All of the larger rooms were rented to ladies of the profession, and they plied it right merrily. But we all met in a small dining-room with a kitchen where one could have a light meal. On these occasions the passion-pedlars were very punctilious, and no one would have suspected their more devious activities. Donald Duck seemed to take kindly to the place and made laudable efforts to speak French to the ladies. He took to Riga, as indeed we all did, for it was a likeable old city, with quaint houses and cobbled streets. I changed one of my bills at the bank, but coming out I met two seedy individuals who offered me twice as much. I was sorry I had not seen them sooner. However, it would not have mattered, as I would have been left with so much more money on my hands.

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On the following day we left for Tallin on the night train. Mrs. Moosejaw had small traveller's cheques and paid her way, but I footed the bill for Donald Duck. I had just enough over to pay myself a sleeper, much to Donald's disgust, as he seemed to think I should have stood him one. But I was getting rather fed up with his "One for all and all for one" stuff, and though I would not let him down I did not intend to pamper him.

When we arrived in Tallin most of my Riga money was spent and I was determined not to buy any Esthonian currency. I would not change another big note and have most of the proceeds left on my hands. Let us all starve till we got to Stockholm. And that is just what this Old Codger did for, with the exception of a

cup of coffee and a bun bought in Tallin, I did not have a bite to eat from the time we left Riga till we sighted the Swedish capital. I don't know about Donald Duck; I think Mrs. Moosejaw staked him to some grub. I would not have minded helping him if he had shown any gratitude, but he seemed to take my aid for granted, and all I got was Red propaganda in big doses which I was too weak to reject. One thing I admired about him was his Puritan mind; for he never suspected the nature of the Riga establishment and when I said to him ironically: "Wasn't that little hotel rather charming!" (though the last word was not in his vocabulary) he agreed cordially. "I did like it," he said. "It's atmosphere was so *proletarian*."

I found Tallin even more limited than Riga, but with the same Baltic rigour and austerity. It had a mediaeval character, due to its grey towers and battlements, but its bleakness matched my own mood. We had to wait till evening for the boat so I spent the time sitting on my baggage, dismally brooding over my situation. Indeed, I touched a new low in the *cafard* line. I broke away from my companions and sat in a corner by myself. In truth I was sulking, for the insouciance of Donald Duck got my goat.

So when we boarded the little steamer I found a secluded corner of the deck far away from the others and hoped they would be comfortable. Donald was, for he slept that night on a deck chair covered with rugs while I shrank and shuddered in my corner as I watched the chill grey islands pass like ghosts. In the moonlight they came up like bubbles, thousands of them, so wild and clean and free. At another time I could have admired them and tried to imagine living on one, but now I could only shudder at their desolation.

There is something exhilarating in starvation. One has a sense of strafing the body and exalting the spirit. Pain is purgative. Self-denial may be sensuous. So from my fasting I derived a masochistic satisfaction. And as the grey islands rolled past and we threaded our way through that calm sea I became light-headed. My only grouch was the sight of Donald Duck having the time of his life with two Swedish girls who were treating him to the *smörgasbord* table. That guy sure had a way of falling on his feet, but as long as he kept off my corns I would not complain. Still, I would have liked some of that Danish pastry.

We were in sight of Stockholm when I met my good Samaritan. He was a handsome young Swede who was reading Galsworthy's *Man of Property*, and we fell into conversation. He was pleased to air his English which was almost perfect. When I complimented him on it he told me that our tongue was current in Stockholm, and that the best of our books were translated into Swedish. I did not tell him that mine were, but I felt that there was a bond between us. I have felt more



at home with Scandinavians than with any other peoples and I liked this young lawyer immensely. I got to telling him some of my adventures, till casually I mentioned I had not eaten for two days. Shocked, he arose, took me by the arm and marched me to the dining-room. The service was over, but he wangled me some bread, cheese and coffee and left me to enjoy it. And did I? No feast could have been more delicious. As I lingered over it I savoured every mouthful, blessing the young lawyer who had paid the bill.

The only hotel I knew was the Eden, where I stayed on a former visit; so though rather expensive I decided to go there. I let Donald Duck rustle a taxi, and when we arrived I told the hotel people I had no Swedish money to pay the chauffeur. Cheerfully they assured me they would charge it on the bill. Then in a room the last word in elegance and comfort I thought of Donald Duck in a similar one at my expense. It seemed I would have him on my hands till we got home. At dinner that night, as I watched him guzzling rich food with that "take it for granted" manner, he gave me a dose of socialistic doctrine for which I suppose I should have been devoutly grateful. In fact I had a feeling that in letting me pay his way it was he who was the benefactor. He was so patronising he ended by making me feel in his debt.

I love Stockholm. Under other circumstances I would have appreciated it more than ever, but I was too anxious about getting home to enjoy its beauty and its delicious food. Most of the time I spent in the office of the Norwegian Consul, for at that moment he was refusing visas to all comers. Among these was a stranded company of English performers in a Magic Show. In the waiting room were two sets of twins, used in those tricks where a girl disappears in a cabinet, and a moment after bobs up at the back of the audience. A young musical director and a lady press agent were also much in evidence. They were bitterly cursing their impresario and wondering how they were going to get home. Altogether the Consul's waiting room was a colourful spot.

I changed another of my thousand franc bills and camped in the office, waiting for the Consul to give us visas. I would have enjoyed the company of these people of the show business, but I was worried. Mrs. Moosejaw shared my worry. Though I offered to lend her one of my French notes she was a proud little woman and refused my aid. She had enough travelling cheques, she said, to pay her way. In the meantime Donald Duck was trying to impress his importance on the secretary of the local Trades Union, and complaining he had been received with a strange lack of sympathy. We saw very little of him though he never failed to turn up at meal times and order of the best.

So passed three days; but on the evening of the third the great, glad news came

through—the Consul had been permitted to give us visas. As we pressed forward, eagerly offering our passports, we felt anxious till we saw the stamp fall. Then we were raised to the seventh heaven of delight. “Let’s go at once and get tickets for Bergen,” I said, but Mrs. Moosejaw demurred. “What about Donald? We can’t ditch him.” Inwardly I said: “To hell with Donald,” but I told her grimly: “Here’s where I begin to think of myself. I’m going right now to reserve my place on the Bergen train for this evening. Do what you like; I’m scrambling.”

After a little she decided to scram too. So we got our tickets, hurried back to the hotel, packed and paid our bills. I retained the room Donald Duck occupied, and left a note saying we were going. I enclosed in it one of my thousand franc bills. We were hurrying away when we bumped into him. He was dumbfounded and indignant. “What about me?” he said. “Are you leaving me in the lurch?” So I gave him the money, told him his room was paid and wished him luck. “I’ll need it,” he snapped grimly, and went with us in the taxi to the station. He sulked all the way, evidently thinking I had played him a dirty trick, so I told him he could follow on the next train. But I never saw him again.

My conscience rather troubled me about Donald Duck. Perhaps I should have given him two thousand francs instead of one, but that would have left me short, and my position was still precarious. If he had shown any appreciation of my aid I would have taken a chance. As it was, he seemed to think it was up to a bloated capitalist to look after him. I don’t remember him thanking me even once for my help. Perhaps he resented being obliged to accept it, or perhaps he considered I was only doing my duty. In any case sourly he bade me: “So long, *Tovarich*.”

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As I cannot sleep sitting upright on the wooden seat of a third-class compartment I passed a wakeful night, regarding the lucky others who snoozed and snored triumphantly. Yet I consoled myself that they looked so grotesque in their sleep, with their jaws dropped and their faces vacant, that I was glad I was not making a similar exhibition of myself. But with the dawn everyone straightened up. The women preened, the men yawned, everyone sought the toilet. It was quite early when we arrived at Oslo where we took another train. It was crowded and even in the third class we had to reserve places.

The run from Oslo to Bergen is one of the finest scenic railway trips in the world. The day passed in a crescendo of excitement. We climbed the bed of a rushing river to far beyond timberline, and by a series of snowsheds mounted to a height of sublime desolation. Majestic mountains confronted us with bleak defiance, but we overcame them, and at the very height of the Divide we paused for dinner by a lake

of Arctic isolation. Then swiftly we descended to the coasts and the wonder of the fiords. I had not expected such grandeur, and as the splendid panorama unfolded itself, I passed the day in a trance of admiration. At the summit the air was so pure and bracing one felt quickened to exultation. Then came the heavy humidity of the coast and when we reached Bergen it was in a drizzle of rain.

Despite the rain I would have enjoyed Bergen had I not been so worried about getting away. I had a good hotel and the food was wholesome, but I spent most of my time haunting the shipping office. They would sell us no tickets on the next boat, which was booked to capacity. The following one was not for another ten days, and they could not guarantee it, for the German subs were already laying for British shipping. In all probability the service would be discontinued. A nice lookout. I saw myself stranded in Bergen, spending all my money before I could get away. I watched the steamer loading and envied those who were lucky enough to have tickets. She was due to sail in an hour. I felt very disconsolate, thinking how I would stand on the wharf in the rain and watch her leave without me.

It was Mrs. Moosejaw who saved the situation. She had a C.P.R. ticket to return to Canada and there was a C.P.R. agent in Bergen. Suddenly she had the bright idea of interviewing him and begging his aid. A smart young man, very proud of his Canadian connection, he rose to the occasion. He seemed to have a stand-in with the shipping company for they received him with respect. As he pleaded our cause how anxiously we watched him! Now he was coming to us with eagerness. He had succeeded. "The Captain and the Chief Engineer will let you have their cabins," he told us, "but you must hurry. Pack your bags and get on board right away. Hark! There goes the first whistle. There's not a moment to lose."

We certainly made a quick getaway from that hotel. Panting we arrived at the wharf and breathlessly we climbed the gangway. Oh, how happy we were! This boat was a bit of England and if the subs did not get us we were safely home. We were grateful to the C.P.R. agent. He was a grand fellow who helped us out of a bad spot. This was in the fall of '39, and if the company still has the same agent in Bergen today herewith I repeat my gratitude.

How wonderful to be on a well-known British boat in the stream of tourist travel! How splendid to have a comfortable cabin to myself, to loll in the saloon, order tea and talk with Englishmen fresh from their salmon fishing! Now they were hurrying home to join up and cheerfully get themselves killed. As I rested with a mind free from worry I appreciated these things more than I can say. Once again I knew that ineffable happiness too great to be fully realised that I call hearing the *Harps of Heaven*. I was like a frail craft that after much tossing in a stormy sea has gained a

snug haven.

Yet there was nothing safe on that boat. We went far north to escape the prowling wolf-packs and it was two days before we got to port. Yet those two days were of unalloyed happiness. I chummed up with the stranded theatrical troupe and listened to their tales of woe. These Bohemians of the boards were my kind of people. I felt at home with them as I never could in more respectable society. I was only sorry I could not help them, but I was down to my last bill.

This I changed in Cook's in Newcastle. When we got into that grey port it was quiet and dead, and our arrival seemed to surprise the few people about the docks. We hailed a taxi that took us to the money changers as we had no British funds. The driver was a "Geordie," a cheerful bloke who told us of the progress of the war. We got rooms in a family hotel fronting the station, and slept that night in a complete black-out. It seemed rather thrilling to be in the war zone and I was sorry we had not an air-raid alarm to give us the sensation of danger. Next day, after a good old English breakfast of ham and eggs, I bade good-bye to Mrs. Moosejaw. She had been a gallant sport, never once showing discouragement, or pessimism—an example both to Donald Duck and this Old Codger.

The train to London was saturated with soldiers and to me, used to the slow trains of Russia, it seemed to go at a thrilling pace. When we reached London I took a taxi to my bank and drew a hundred pounds, largely in small green notes, for it was unbelievably comforting to have lots of money again. I gloated over it in my room overlooking Bedford Square. There across the way was the French Consulate and I hurried over to get my visa for France. In two days at the outside I would be home. So I thought. But here I struck a snag. For the moment they had suspended visas. It was only possible to cross on official business. Despair! After all my tribulations here I was stranded in London.

And it took me three weeks before I got that visa. I filled out forms and lined up with a hundred others in front of the Consulate, often in a chill rain. I joined the line at eight in the morning, only to get the door shut in my face at twelve o'clock. But with what joy I got my passport stamped at last, and left a London of gas-masks, black-outs and bulletins of Poland's death agony! My only amusement was in buying new clothes, so that I accumulated enough to last me for the rest of my days. At Folkestone they took away all my books, including a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. They almost grabbed my Russian diary, but I retrieved it. How funny, but awkward, to cross the channel wearing a life-belt!

At Boulogne we had to wait till evening, for the train only ran by night. However, the moon was so brilliant it did not matter much. The coach was packed with French

officers who looked gloomily in my direction. There was none of the hectic enthusiasm of the first World War, but rather a sense of grim duty and stoic desperation. As I peered out at the countryside it was bathed in moonlit peace.

We got into Paris at two in the morning and a porter carried my bag over to a Terminus Hotel. I slept long and deep, awaking to a city that was strangely empty. My in-laws had fled and I was alone in a city that was carrying on in a strange atmosphere of apprehension and fatality. At night the black-out was weird. One had to grope one's way in the street and it was dangerous to go far afield. I was told I had to get a permit to travel, as there was no accommodation except for troops. At the American Express Company they were very pessimistic, and the personnel, reduced to three, offered me scant hope.

After all I had gone through this seemed the last straw. To be stranded so close to home! I went to the Commissariat of Police and waited hours, only to be told that Nice was in the war zone and *I could not go there*. I was disgusted, full of despair. Then I thought I would at least have a try, so with my bag I went to the Gare de Lyon and calmly demanded a ticket for Nice. Sure! They handed me one at once, and in another moment I was on the train. It was as easy as all that. And after a night passed comfortably in a *wagon-lit* compartment, the prodigal father arrived in the forenoon and surprised his family sitting down to lunch.

## Chapter Forty-Five

### THE PHONEY WAR

I spent that winter strutting round Nice in my Savile Row suits and giving birth to another verse book. It was a painless delivery; no need of an “assyrian,” as my concierge would have said. Most of the stuff had been conceived on high hill walks and reveries under the elms. It was neither better nor worse than any of my previous volumes and was received with the same gentle tolerance.

But I was resolved that it would be my last effort of this kind, for I was growing tired of myself in the role of a Rhyme-smith. Neither would I do any more novels of the synthetic type. Such works are too easy to forget. Only timeless sentiment expressed in terms of intense humanity has any chance of survival. Burns had it, and Shakespeare and Dickens. I had no illusions about literary sand-writing. I have seen so many writers potent in their day who are now scarcely shadows. And I can name so many who are really one-book men, though they have scores of titles under their names. A single rocket soars gloriously to the stars, the rest are fizzling fire-crackers. Yet every author likes to list all his works in the front of a new book. It is imposing! I do it myself, though I confess it is foolish vanity.

It may have been that one of my incentives to my last literary effort was that I was sleeping in a room where a famous French author had died. For we had given up our old apartment in the rue Dante, and taken one in a beautiful house in the Place Franklin. It was on the ground floor, and had a terrace that gave on a rose garden. Ornate and florid in style it made one think of a château. The rooms had proportion, balance, spaciousness, and my bedroom was the finest in the house. But to me it was precious because it was the room in which Gaston Leroux wrote his famous novel—*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*. In fact it *was* the Yellow Room, as my concierge assured me; and described how Gaston, a fat little man, used to work there in a gorgeous dressing gown and skull cap, bearded and spectacled like another Zola.

And if his style was contrastingly romantic, at least in fecundity he resembled the Master. A man of great imagination he aspired to be a French Conan Doyle, but

being so much in demand for newspaper serials proved his undoing. Of his many works the *Yellow Room* was the best; in fact, it is one of the finest detective novels ever written, because its solution is absolutely unguessable. And here in my bedroom, lying in my majestic bed, I surveyed its walls papered in a rich design of gold, and liked to think it had been the source of his inspiration. Indeed, just below the balcony that gave on the pergola was a sculptured scroll-work up which the villain must have scaled to commit his crimes. In any case that was the most delightful bedroom I have ever known, and probably ever will know.

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That winter Peter died. He had been ailing for long, but he used to descend from his sumptuous villa in Venice in his Rolls Royce and take me for drives. On these occasions we would talk of the old days in the Quarter, and the terrace of the Dôme when he would let his saucers pile up, smoke a packet of cigarettes and talk of the novel he would some day write to portray his beloved Paris. Now both tobacco and wine were taboo, while gastronomic joys were likewise forbidden. All that remained to poor Peter were his memories of past feasts and bygone libations. So there we were, two Old Codgers living in the lap of luxury, and conjuring up pale ghosts of poverty and jubilation. What rich dishes we had savoured! With what rare wines we had washed them down! And there was nothing remorseful about us. We chuckled over our excesses. Our only regret was for those sins we might have committed and didn't. So, reprobates to the last, we only mourned our incapacity to indulge in fresh follies.

Two days before he died I went up through the olive groves to see him. He showed me his roses, looking at them lovingly and saying: "You either like them a lot or you don't care a damn. And I think you don't." He was right. In the mass roses bore me. But there were so many other points of difference between us it was difficult to believe we were such friends. He was a romantic, I a realist. He was invincibly sentimental, I a professed cynic. To the last he couldn't convince me that *Alice in Wonderland* wasn't just silly, and I could not convince him that Charlie Chaplin was more than an inspired clown. But we agreed that Conrad was boring, and Stevenson "tops." We both read the *Ulysses* of his friend Joyce for the sake of the smutty parts. He boosted *South Wind*, I *Human Bondage*. He liked myth, allegory, folklore, while I loathed all that. But as regards the great mass of classical literature we clasped hands.

On the last occasion I saw him there was a certain exaltation in him that gives me a choke at the throat to this day. He asked about my work with such tender interest, and I could feel he liked me a lot. We must have made a contrast, he with his snowy

hair and blanched face, I ruddy and only iron-grey. He was so gentle and quiet, I so volatile, with exuberant gesture and facile expression. He was only ten years my senior. But he had lived irresponsibly, and I more or less with circumspection, and here was the result. His wealth meant little to him, his servants were only a worry. Despite my monocle I remained the Bohemian, the tireless tramp, the lover of simplicity.

I left him with a great feeling of sadness and two days later he died in his sleep. His face was very calm and contented. One would have said he was at peace. Yes, and glad. He was buried near Lawrence, who had passed away only some weeks before, poor Lawrence who had said to Wells: "Dying is a sad business. I'll be glad when it's done."

I saw little of Byron that winter. He was still working on his play *Prevailing Wind*, the third of that title, and read me many extracts. I was always impressed, for he had the stuff of a dramatist in him. The local dramatic society offered to play it but he was pettish and finicky. While he was reading it the leading man began to caress a pet bulldog, so Byron rose and walked out. . . . He suffered from his heart, and once when he climbed the hill to his apartment he had to pause for breath. He was a decade younger than I, but while I swam in the sea he played billiards. He worried about the war and its restrictions. He had a horror of official authority; vowed he would sooner die than experience the miseries of another prison camp.

But for a moment there was little reason to worry. Had not France one of the finest armies in the world—so we were told. And was not the Maginot Line impregnable! Ah, the Maginot Line! That was our salvation. Snugly ensconced behind it we were safe from invasion. As for the Siegfried Line—we would soon be hanging up our washing on that. So, Maginot-minded, we squatted serenely behind our forts and the French said politely: "*A vous la parole, Messieurs les Boches.*" It was a weird world. We suffered from a sinister sense of frustration, that was all. Hitler dared not attack, never would dare to attack. Yet, sitting over my beer in a café, a French soldier said to me: "You British are not *chic*. The army you send over is so small." And I answered: "Yes, but our navy and our air force make up for the smallness of the Expeditionary Force." He was so pleased to hear it he stood me a drink.

By day life went on normally enough. There were many soldiers in the streets and troop movements, and I had to curtail my walks, for all the roads had barriers of barbed wire and the woods were full of military camps. It was the "phoney war." The soldiers had little to do but smoke cigarettes, drink *pinard* and play *manille*. They got ridiculously plump and were horribly bored. But night was more war-



suggestive than day. The black-out was total and we went to the cinema flicking our torches on the side-walks. We had alarm rehearsals in which sirens screamed and all were supposed to go to the shelters. No one did. The only apprehension people showed was when eyes were directed to the Italian frontier. Just a few miles away Mussolini was bellowing that Nice was Italian and must be returned to Italy. This was unpleasant, but we were still so taken up with internal politics that the bellicose mouthings of Benito lost much of their menace. Daladier was driving the Communists underground, for at that moment they were supporting Stalin who was an ally of Germany. I was not sorry to see the Reds pursued, as they were the avowed enemies of Britain.

But we were too near the frontier to feel entirely secure, so we decided to leave for Brittany. We spent more time than usual putting our stuff away for the summer, and some prophetic sense must have made my family more lavish with mothballs than ever before. Pictures were covered, carpets rolled, curtains folded and beds dismantled. It was a good job and while we were in the midst of it one morning I went to get the morning paper. But in front of the kiosk I stopped, stared aghast. . . .

There! It had come at last. Hitler had struck with a vengeance. The *Blitzkrieg* was on. Poor little Holland was the first victim, Rotterdam the first shambles. The bombing of that city was unbelievable in its horror, but we still thought the Dutch could put up a good fight. The French were resisting in the north, and gallant little Belgium could be depended on. Oh, we would be all right. . . .

The first doubt came in the train to Paris. I bought a paper and to my dismay read that Gamelin had been superseded by Weygand. What did that mean? One does not change horses in the middle of a torrent. If Gamelin was incompetent what about the army he had trained? Was the French front no more than a shell? A phoney army with a phoney General? It was alarming, for Weygand was old and must be more rusty than trusty. What was behind all this?

When we got to Paris our consternation increased. We now heard it was the French who were bending back; nay, breaking even, for there were rumours that the Germans had crossed the Meuse. But no, we could not believe that. Then we heard that some of the bridges had not been blown up and the *Boche* had passed. It sounded like treason. Communist betrayal! Rage succeeded stupor. Well, all that would be rectified with Weygand at the head. He would form a new line. He would stop the foe. He would organise a defense in depth. For days we prated glibly on that theme. In the meantime the *Boche* came over Paris one midday, but dropped nothing. In the midst of the alarm no one took shelter. The Parisians stood in the middle of the streets staring up at the sky. And that night we had another alarm, but

no one descended to the cellar. Still, we were glad to get away from Paris and take the train for Brittany.

It had been hard to get places on the train, for it was packed with people escaping like ourselves. The corridors were jammed till it was difficult to get to the "Vaterre." I heard that a woman and her baby were parked there so I gave up my place to her. I was left standing, but a nun shoved along and made room for me, making ten of us in the compartment. We remarked children everywhere, most of whom had squares of canvas sewn on the backs of their coats with their names and home addresses. These were usually in Belgium and the children were waifs who had lost their parents in the shuffle and confusion of the retreat. In every station were swarms of lost children, and notice boards with their names, so that if their parents were on the train they could be claimed.

There were also canteens supplying milk and bread. All this was new to us from the south, and impressed us painfully. Yet before leaving Nice we had seen a film of Belgian villagers flying before the Stukas. Now we saw how true it was, and met in the flesh many of the victims of that rout. All of these people had terrifying tales to tell, but they were so glad to be going to a place of safety they were not too hopeless. After all, they *had* escaped; and even if it was only with the clothes they stood in, that at least was something.

At Rennes the train came to a stop and we were told it would be hours before it started up again. It was already evening so the prospect of getting home that night was slim. Rennes was monopolised by British troops who had commandeered every room in the place. It seemed strange to see them on such friendly terms with the people. Although we knew the old town well we had no prospect of finding sleeping accommodation. In our dilemma I had a bright idea. There was a taxi waiting at the station so I asked the chauffeur if he would drive us home. He shook his head; then something familiar in his face struck us, and we recognised him as a man of our own village. He was glad to see us and was now willing to help if he could borrow enough gas.

Soon we were seated in a nice car, rolling homeward with a song of joy in our hearts. Yet on the way we noticed many signs of despair. Cars were stranded along the road for want of gas. These had Belgian number plates, and all had mattresses lashed to the roofs. Some had broken windows and some were bullet pitted. In all household possessions were piled, tied to the mudguards and fenders. Every inch of attachment space was availed of. Bicycles and kitchen utensils were on the outside, while within were bedding and the most cherished of their household treasures. Many of these cars were driven by women with broods of children. One pitied them,

yet admired their courage and tenacity. They had all the same tale of woe—the Belgian forts had fallen, Liège was lost.

But at home what a welcome awaited us! Dear Dream Haven was lovelier than ever. I never watched so eagerly for my eyes to fill with that blessed vision, the red-roofed house on the point, the sandy cove, the pines and the gorse, with beyond the green sea broken by rocky islets. And there was Tasie and her family awaiting us with hugs and kisses, and the old house all ready to welcome us as if it too were smiling joyfully. Windows open, flowers, supper on the table. But where was Coco? Alas! he was old and suffering from rheumatism. He was at Tasie's in his kennel of an old cider barrel, too tired to move. But that would not do for me, so I jumped on a bicycle and went to fetch him. There he was asleep and, being deaf, he did not budge as I approached. But I put my hand within an inch of his nose without touching him. . . . In an instant he was all over me, whining, wailing, yelping with joy. He seemed to cry like a child, so I walked the bicycle back and he ran alongside, barking all the way.

What a happy home coming! Now we were safe from war's alarms. But were we? We heard alarming tales. The village was full of Belgian refugees. They were camped in the school and the *Mairie*. They had a canteen. Every available room was taken, a family to a room. They were fairly comfortable and had lots of money to pay their way. One did not pity them too much, for they seemed quite at home and were using up all the milk, butter and eggs. There was little left for us—the regular residents. Still, we made the best of it. It was war, and provided it did not get worse. . . .

It did, and rapidly. Suddenly there was a new wave of refugees, and this time from the north of France. Again we were astounded and wrathful. What was the French Army doing not to protect their own people? These refugees from Alsace and Lorraine told us of Rethel and Sedan, and depicted with horror the advance of the Panzers. How could the unarmoured troops of France withstand the tanks? They were being mowed down, broken, shattered, driven like chaff before the wind. And if the Boche could not be stopped on the Meuse where could he be checked? On the Seine probably. . . .

We sighed with relief. Weygand, we supposed, knew his job and would fight another battle of the Marne. So we housed the new refugees in shed and outhouses, and bedded them with straw. We had already given all our mattresses to the others, just keeping enough for our bare needs. There we lay on them, and trembled all night as we listened to strange planes roaring above us. We guessed they were German because of the rise and fall of the sound, but we knew we were not worth bombing

and felt safe. Still, they kept us awake, and every day we grew more and more nervous, doubtful of our ultimate security.

We hung over the radio, but the French news was incoherent, while the B.B.C. was unbelievable. Surely it could not be true that it had been decided not to defend Paris! That was a shock. It meant that there would be no defence of the Seine. What of the Loire, then? Surely Weygand would take advantage of that? Oh, for a Foch, a Clemenceau! But the line of the Loire was at our *back*. It would put us in the battle zone. If we could only take the car and join these other refugees who were going south! But that was impossible. No petrol, roads and bridges impassable. Too late. . . .

And then there came a third wave of refugees, but this time they did not want to batten on us. Oh no, they told us. The Boches were too near. *They* were keeping a-going. *This* was the danger zone now. We were in the war trap and they were speeding south to escape it. Across the Loire they would make for the Basque coast or the Riviera. They pitied us poor devils caught in the net. So they left us gasping with amazement that increased every hour as we listened to the radio. Things were moving swiftly. The Germans had shot forward their Panzer divisions into Picardy and nothing seemed capable of stopping them. We feared for the channel ports, but there was the British army ready to defend them to the last man. The enemy would be jolly well stopped by Gort and his gallant men. . . .

Then one morning after breakfast we heard that the King of Belgium had ordered his army to lay down its arms. The news was announced by Reynaud in a broken voice of scorn and sorrow, and at the same moment he made an appeal to Roosevelt to come to the aid of France in her agony. In the village the Belgians were weeping with grief and anger. They did not hearten us. They knew the Boche and gave us an inkling of the wrath to come. Consternation and despair gripped us. But surely they can't do that to *us*, we wailed, and watched the skies where the German planes were flying low. Then we saw something that gleamed in the air and heard the crash of an explosion in a nearby field.

My family went into hysterics. "We must fly!" they cried. But I rose wrathfully. "Never," I snarled. "I will stand my ground. Let the Boche come. I will take to the woods and you can steal out at night and bring me food. I will be an outlaw, a sort of Robin Hood." The idea appealed to my sense of romance and my love of adventure, but my family did not see the glamour of it. They could not vision themselves bringing me food and drink in a lonely cave. A cave was no place anyway for an Old Codger. My idea was idiotic. . . .

I came to think so too as I mounted on my motor bicycle and rode to St. Malo

where the boats were leaving and arriving from England. I watched ships black with troops against the horizon and I rejoiced. Here were reinforcements coming to our aid. Then with dismay I saw that they were *going*, not coming . . . and I knew we were lost. Shocked and saddened I was getting on my bike to go home when from a café nearby I heard a voice cracked and quavering, that dramatically pointed my dismay.

“People of France, before a superior force I have been obliged to ask for an armistice . . .” and so on. In the café a group of fisher folk were listening in an attitude of horror and stupefaction. As I harkened to the craven croak of a senile dotard I said: “This cannot be Pétain who speaks!” But the others nodded sadly: “*C’est Pétain.*” And so he went on to the bitter end, telling us we were sunk, must chuck up the sponge, pay the bill. Such the substance of that famous speech announcing that infamous armistice.

Around me men were crying openly, and women were moaning and wailing. Everyone seemed crushed by this tragedy that no one had even remotely dreamed of. So I slipped away abashed by so much poignant grief.

### LAST MOMENT ESCAPE

Arrived home I found the news had preceded me. Everyone had a strange sense of relief. I could understand this. Tasie had two sons at the Front. Now they could return to her instead of serving as cannon fodder. She loved France, but she loved her sons more, and was *not* willing to give them for the *Patrie*. Now she would have them back safe and sound, and that was what mattered most. How many felt that way.

So the first reaction of the village seemed to be one of relief, and the night that followed was peaceful. Then the sense of shame awoke. France had made a separate peace. . . . But no doubt England would do the same. Everyone thought that, and when they found that England had no intention of quitting—they were at first resentful, then envious, but above all ashamed. England would not admit she was beaten; on the contrary, she was full of fight. True, she was evacuating from France, and we heard terrible tales of the punishment she was taking. But undaunted she was facing her two years of lonely struggle that was to save the world. . . .

In spite of the Armistice, fighting was going on. Rennes was being bombed. Smashed cars loaded with bloody civilians were arriving at the village, and the main forces of the Germans were closing in on us. On Saturday morning the Consul advised us that the last boat for England was leaving that afternoon, and with it our sole chance of escaping. An English neighbour sent us word that she was going and implored us to join her. I went to Dinard to find it in a ferment. A number of friends were taking the boat and begged us to do likewise. Nearly everyone we knew was fleeing, yet a few stood staunch. One English merchant, a Jerseyman of seventy, said: "I won't budge. The Germans can take me out and shoot me." Another told him: "I'm off. They won't let us do business anyway, so what's the use of staying?" It was a moment for grim and instant decision; yet many people were wavering, myself among them.

The French were very resentful. They cried: "The English colony are going. They are saving their skins and leaving us to take the brunt." They were indignant,

forgetting that we were still in the war. “Yes,” they said, “but you have withdrawn all your forces. Remember Dunkirk.” To them Dunkirk, instead of being a glorious resistance, was a shameful betrayal. We heard lots of abuse in those days, and received many an insult.

On Sunday I again went to St. Malo to visit the Consulate. I found it abandoned, and wandered through empty rooms with no one to receive me. On Saturday it had been gorged with officials, the staff augmented by the Consuls from all the ports of the channel. They tumbled over one another to serve one. Now—no one. Some Belgian Jews, looking very forlorn, were trying to get embarkation cards for England. I had secured mine the previous day, yet it made me feel rather sick to find all the officials had “flown the coop.” In the shipping office, where I went to inquire about boats, the only clerk left pointed silently to a polished rifle on the counter. Already the Resistance was shaping. The people of the town stared at me stonily, as they waited for the occupation forces to arrive. They were not loving the English just then. They envied us, thinking: “What a grand thing it is to live on an island.”

That night was full of sinister calm, but none of us slept. What would the morrow bring? I was haunted by the thought that we had missed our chance to escape. I rose at dawn and went to the village where all kinds of rumours were flying around. The Germans had bypassed us and were in St. Brieu, converging on Brest. I was emerging from the village when I met a stream of cars. They were coming from Rennes which had been newly bombed. These cars had broken windows and were pitted with bullets. They were loaded with bloody passengers who were still faint from the horror of the bombardment.

I was told the Germans were close at hand, but I could not resist the temptation to see for myself. So I speeded on my motor-bike in the direction of Dinan. As I neared the highway linking Dinan and St. Brieu some peasants ran out to warn me. “Do not go further, Monsieur. The Boches are there on the road ahead.” But curiosity overcame me and, leaving my bike in a cottage, I crawled across some fields. There in a hayrick beside the road I was cowering when there came a swift stream of motor cycles ridden by grey, helmeted, goggled warriors armed to the teeth. France had nothing like that, I thought half-admiringly, and when they had ceased to pass I crawled fearfully away.

Again I took the road to St. Malo, but I found it congested with traffic—cars, field wagons, foot passengers, panic-stricken refugees telling of worse horrors than the others before them. A woman with a wheel-barrow and three small children asked me the way to Morlaix, a hundred miles away. She was going there with her household linen packed on the barrow. I told her it was in the hands of the enemy

and directed her to the village where she would get food and bedding. Further on I saw a hay wagon, laden with farm implements, household goods, crates of chickens, a pig and all the family of the farmer. They, at least, could sleep in the wagon and their horses could carry them far. Then I saw three elderly women urinating by the roadside, seeming in the general frenzy to have lost all sense of propriety. It was a hectic scene and I longed to escape it. Fortunately I knew a country road that was strangely deserted. So I bumped over it in record time and reached the too familiar port.

I found it a scene of sinister activity. They told me a train of ammunition in Rennes had been bombed and fifteen hundred British soldiers blasted to cinders. They were evacuating the wounded, bringing them in cars and loading them into four cargo tramps moored to the wharf. These boats were to leave that afternoon, after which the port would be blown up. Would there be any chance to get a passage? There might, if one was on the spot just before they sailed. . . .

Thoughtfully I started up my bike and climbed the hill to the town. There I knew an old Irishwoman who kept a tea-shop and who was a good friend of mine. Over a pot of tea and some scones I asked her if she intended staying on and she answered: "Why not? People will still have to drink tea and eat scones. Besides, I'm from Eire, and as a neutral I will not be molested." "Should I go?" I asked her. "Have you a young daughter?" she asked. And when I answered: "Yes," she said: "Then go. It's your duty for your daughter's sake." That decided me. Bless the old dear! She made up my mind for me and possibly saved my life.

As I rode back, my mind was curiously clear and in detail I made all my plans. We would go down to the port to chance getting away on one of those cargo tramps. We might fail but it was up to us to try. "If I don't get away," I thought, "it's definitely death for me," for I was on the Black List on account of things I had written. Yet never was I so lucid in my mind. My family met me on the road and I told them: "We're going. There's to be no snivelling. You must keep control of your nerves. You can only take one suit-case each and I give you half an hour to pack."

Then I went up to my roll-top desk and destroyed all my cheque books, bank books, and papers of any value: after which I packed the things I most needed. It took a clear brain to do this. To have gotten the wind up would have been fatal. But in our emergency we kept our heads, and when I descended with my valise I found my wife and daughter awaiting me. They looked strangely bulky, but I found they were wearing three dresses under their ordinary ones. I loaded everything on the car and had a last walk round the house. Poor, dear Dream Haven! Would I ever see it again? What would happen to it in the wrath of the days to come? Last thing I did



was to go to my library of two thousand books and caress some of those I loved most. Then, feeling heart-broken, I said good-bye to my home for what I thought would be the last time. . . .

On the driveway Tasie and her family were standing. There was also our little maid, Aline. I had forbidden my family to indulge in a single tear, but the others were shedding enough almost to float a battleship. And, worst of all, poor old Coco was whining and wailing, and from his eyes, too, tears were running. I wiped them with my handkerchief and kissed him. I wanted to kiss the women, but as *patron* it would not have been *convenable*, so I patted them on the back. Then I got to the wheel and drove off—my last picture of them being all four standing against the ivied background of the house, crying like to break their hearts and the dog wailing in unison.

Thank God! I knew that country road, for the main ones were now black with traffic. It made me think of a panicky swarm of ants, shuttling back and forth in a vain effort to escape. Never would I have reached the Port in time by that cluttered highway. As it was, I had to go with all speed at the risk of my springs on that rutted road through the fields. At last I saw the raking roofs of St. Malo and ran my car into a small garage. The garagist offered me a sorry sum if I would sell it, but I refused, though I never thought to see it again. My little blue *Lancia* never looked more beautiful and it broke my heart to leave it, though I told the man I would return some day to claim it.

Then on once more, for time was precious. As we lugged our heavy bags to the wharf an English girl hailed us. “Are you escaping? Can I come with you?” We told her to join us and went to the docks. At the shipping office the lone clerk was oiling his rifle for use. He looked at us bitterly and refused to speak. He was facing up, while we were turning tail. No help from him. I went away with the English girl, and we were scouting around when a British sailor came along. “Hello!” says the girl. “Any chance of a boat?” “Why not, Missy?” he said. “Go and see the Port Captain. He’s yonder at the entrance to the dock.” So we all four lugged our baggage over the cobbles till we came to three Navy officers. I had an anxious moment as I said: “We are escaping. Can we get on a boat?” I need not have worried. With alcoholic heartiness one of them said: “Why yes. Go ahead. Take the *Hull Trader*. She leaves in half an hour. And let me tell you, you’re lucky. We have to stay and blow up the Port.”

So we went along the wharf till we came to where two boats were docked together, and the outer one was the *Hull Trader*. A kindly sailor helped us with our baggage and carried it down to the Captain’s cabin, refusing the tip I tried to give

him. I was struck by the helpfulness of everyone, and for the next two days it was beautiful to see such disinterested kindness. The Captain gave his cabin to the female refugees, while I had a berth forward. So, assured of our passage, despite its danger, we installed ourselves. The boat was an old coal carrier but was reasonably clean, and the hatch over the hold was open, so that I could see that it was loaded to within two feet of the deck with high explosive. Evidently in this sudden emergency they had no time to discharge their cargo.

As I watched the scene it seemed to me to be full of drama. The cars were rolling down the road from Rennes laden with wounded. As they were unloaded they were ranged up ready to run into the deep water of the dock. There were hundreds of khaki-coloured cars and lorries waiting to be dumped over the wharf. Two other boats were pulling out, one brown with khaki-clad infantrymen, the other blue with men of the Air Force. They were clustered like a bee swarm and a pretty sight, yet oh! what a mark for a bomb! a thousand men slaughtered at one fell swoop. Planes were swooping down, but luckily they were our own and were protecting us. The men did not seem to worry, for they sang as they steamed slowly through the dock gates.

It was an evening of beautiful serenity, yet we knew that only a few miles away the Germans were pushing forward and only a few British troops were fighting a desperate rear-guard action. We realised this by the streams of fresh wounded arriving in those doomed cars. Now they were carrying them on stretchers to our boat and stowing them away, so I gave up my berth for a wounded man who died in it.

When I visited the Captain's cabin I found it crammed full of female refugees, with five babies squalling on his berth. I was glad to escape to the wounded-strewn decks. However, the babies kept the women from worrying over our precarious situation, for the tide was going out and soon we would be unable to leave. I worked myself into a fever of nervousness. Would we never cast off? Yet the wounded were still coming in, and it was heart-breaking to think of leaving them behind. Even at the risk of losing the tide we would stay till the last moment.

So I watched the sunset sky, the defending planes, the lowering tide, but most of all the precipitate cars with their wounded. Now, thank God! they were rare and soon they had ceased. Now we were casting off; now we were scraping through the narrow dock gates; now the officers who had to blow them up were waving us a grim farewell. The bay of St. Malo was full of strange craft—refugee vessels from the north. . . . At last we were clear of the coast and in open sea. On the far horizon were the two boats full of troops, while behind us was a boat quite empty. As I

looked down on our blood-boltered decks I thought enviously of that other so light and clean.

The night was one of anxiety and fear. It was a full moon, and never was that silver orb so triumphantly resplendent. I have always been a minion of the moon, and have written poems of moon worship, but never did I watch it in such eager vigil as I did that night. And Oh, how I cursed it! For in that dazzling waste of waters we were such an easy mark for a bomber. Twice during the night we heard the drone of a plane, and the troops lined up to await the volley-fire order if it came too near. Evidently it was one of our own, or it had no bombs to drop, so we were left unmolested. But oh, what a gorgeous target we were! Then there were U-boats and mines to fret about. That water was just staked with disaster, and every moment of that night I lay awaiting the shock of being hurled to eternity.

I crawled into the hold and lying on boxes of high explosive, wounded all about me, I listened to every clang of that old engine. I blessed our boat, though it was almost ready for the junk pile. It was labouring gallantly, straining to save us with every turn of the screw. And I blessed the crew who were risking their lives for us, and the Captain and Engineer who never for a moment left their posts. . . . Well, at long last came the dawn, and never was it so welcome. After a night spent in weeping or prayer the women looked pinched and weary, and as we looked over a wide welter of dark sea there was not another ship in sight.

We had on board several hundred wounded, about five hundred troops and half a hundred refugees. Two of the women broke down and went crazy under the strain, but the babies bore up splendidly. There was competition to nurse them, while the Captain was accused of their paternity, which he gallantly admitted. The day that followed was more cheerful. We felt that the chances were now in our favour. Yet we dared not allow ourselves to think of what we had left behind and of all we had lost. We could only look forward with a stoic acceptance of the future.

I admired the Tommies. Their faces were scarred with shell splinters but their spirits were undaunted. They were all in high spirits, and their one thought was to get ashore and have all the booze they could drink. "What's better than a glass of beer?" they chorused. "Why two glasses of beer!" They were joyful, because for them (so they thought) the blinking war was over. They had done their bit. All the slaughter they had seen seemed to have no effect on them. I only heard one wail: "I've broke the strap of me haversack, lost me tin hat, and now I've gone and smashed the bottle of perfume for me best girl! Ain't this a hell of a war?" That was the general sentiment—intrepid clowning. Even the officers reflected it, for at the final line-up for rifle inspection, holding out a handful of rifle shells a Tommy respectfully asked his

Captain: "Where shall I put these, sir?" And the Captain replied: "If I were not in my official capacity I could tell you where you could jolly well put them!"

It was late afternoon when we drew into a port of the English coast that we were told was Weymouth. But it was three hours later before we were allowed to land. First, they took off the wounded, then the troops marched away. Finally came our turn, but if we thought we were free we were woefully mistaken. We were classed as immigrants under the control of the authorities. We had tags attached to our coats, and were marched under guard to the local Casino. On the way crowds lined up and cheered us as if we were heroes instead of craven escapers. But how kind and sympathetic everyone was! Of course, we were such a weary bedraggled bunch it was not difficult to be sorry for us. But one resents pity. I did not, however, resent the boiling tea and biscuits offered us at the Casino, and as I drank and nibbled I watched the gay crowds bathing on the sands.

Then we were all marched off to be deloused. Our heads were examined and small-tooth combed, with only one protest. It came from a stout, pompous, elderly man with a grey moustache. "I am a retired General of the British Army," he blustered. But the civilian in charge said: "I am a private in the army of Winston Churchill." With that he gave the General an extra doing-over, even combing his moustache.

After that we had a medical examination, and were taken in buses to an old church, where we were informed we were under detention. They gave us a jolly supper, however—pork pies, cheese, cake and cocoa. Then we had to pass a police examination. The officer was intrigued by my passport with its foreign visas and asked me the name of the steamer on which I crossed from Bergen. I never can remember the names of boats, however, everything was Okay; and that night, still under guard, we entrained for London.

We reached the city in the grey dawn to find buses waiting for us. To our consternation they took us to the police station. It was full of refugees, and all that day I loafed round swapping tales of woe with other unfortunates. I admit it was a scene of throbbing human interest, and at any other time I would have revelled in it. But I was worried because it did not look likely that we would be released that day, and I hated to think of my family passing the night in a police station, though personally I would have enjoyed it.

However, we were in the official grip. Examinations and investigations followed one another. First we had a police inquisition, then a search of all our belongings, including our pockets. I had a moment of panic because I had some German marks in mine; but pretexting a need to go to the W.C. I managed to dispose of them down

the toilet. After that we were bathed and again medically examined. Finally we had our passports stamped, our French money changed. At last we were told we were free. . . . Oh, that wonderful moment! Tearing off our tags we hailed a taxi and an hour later we were eating five bob dinners in our favourite hotel.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

### RETURN TO HOLLYWOOD

The hills of Hollywood look down  
Upon the honky tonky town;  
Serene, aloof, austere they brood  
Above egregious Hollywood.

So I murmured as I gazed at that stage-curtain background of city and gulch so close to the teeming boulevard. I might have gone on and made a poem, but Hollywood is not a spot where one indulges in rhyme. It is a crazy quilt of a place where one's only holds on sane and simple living are those eternal hills that overhang it. Looking at them from the kaleidoscopic shuffle of the boulevard I felt a lift of the heart. After trials and tribulations, once more I knew joy and peace.

There are compensations even in disaster, and here I was in California again after an absence of twenty years. I had lost everything in Europe, I believed, but I would begin afresh. I would make a new home, I would work, I would be as well off as before. My gift for happiness asserted itself—that capacity for finding comfort in misfortune, and even turning adversity into an asset. I was indeed lucky to be basking in this favoured land when others were writhing in the horrors of war. Even now in London the bombs were raining down, and a million tons of shipping were being sent to the bottom. We ourselves had escaped these dangers. Our Chelsea flat had been blasted shortly after we had gone, and the boat we had crossed in had been torpedoed a few trips later. Now, as I strolled these streets so sunny and secure, I thought we had much to be thankful for.

London had filled me with a sense of doom. The tenebrous silence of the black-out, those weaving search-lights affronting the stars—I felt the impending terror and wanted to escape. I had no heart for death and devastation. So I wangled a passage to Canada and left London shuddering at the thought of the wrath to come. As I stepped on the steamer I had the same feeling as when I had gone aboard the *Hull Trader*—escape to freedom.

Liverpool looked greyly glum as we sneaked out at nightfall and slipped down

the Mersey. We wondered what our chances were of dodging the subs, for we knew the intervening seas were stiff with them. We had on board over a thousand children, so that if anything struck us—well, I just refused to think of that. There was comfort in our escort, the destroyer that tossed about a mile away, and blinked reassuring messages. For three days that gallant little boat stuck around dipping out of sight, to bob up again in those stormy seas. Then on the fourth day it was gone and we knew we were in the “safe belt.” So we played with the children, watched their mothers flirt with the flying cadets and enjoyed the unwonted goodness of the food. Indeed, my first sight of the table was a gasp of joy—a bowl of lump sugar! One could take as much as one wanted. Incredible!

Sitting in the lounge of the Montreal hotel I watched a youngish looking man approach me cautiously. He was good-looking and well built, with an air of professional prosperity. “Do you know who I am?” he said. “No,” I replied with polite apology, “I’m afraid I don’t.” “I’m your brother Stanley,” he told me so persuasively that I was forced to believe him. I knew I had a brother who was a Doctor in Ottawa, but when I had last seen him he had been a lad, and twenty years do make a difference. So I was introduced to his wife and he drove me to Ottawa where I had a spot of money trouble, for I found that all my funds in Canada were frozen.

In Toronto we stayed in the Royal York Hotel and had a grand time, though I found I was too much in the spotlight for my shrinking nature. There were broadcasts, autograph parties, crowds of visitors. I was glad to escape to Jasper Park, the bears and the glaciers. Then Vancouver, where I was accosted by a fine-looking woman who said: “Do you know who I am?” Staring blankly I admitted that I was absolutely at a loss, and she answered: “I’m your sister Agnes.” It was very bewildering for an Old Codger, and it took me quite a time before I got used to folks coming up to me saying: “Hullo, Bob! Why, I thought you were dead.” Indeed, so many seemed to think I had passed on that I began to feel like a veritable ghost. . . . Then a spell of fruity living, till skies portended gloomy days.

Vancouver rain, Vancouver rain,  
Again I heard its soft refrain  
Tap-tapping on the window pane.

Yes, California sunshine beckoned and here we were in hectic Hollywood, happy in its cutest little bungalow. It was two blocks away from the High School, with a deodar in front and gum trees behind. Between were palm and pepper trees. Immersed in verdure and frilled with flower beds it was a joy to the eye and a

comfort to the heart. In short, a lovely little abode, our home for five years.

I will never forget the evening of our return to Hollywood. It was late December and the length of the boulevard was ablaze with Christmas trees. Coming from the pitchy dark of London it stunned us with amazement. Indeed, the plentitude of food and the lavishness of light in this country seemed almost incredible. And now through miles of luminous lane we drove to Hollywood Hotel where we rested till we discovered our adorable bungalow. And so we settled down to a simple life in which the worries of war were for a while forgotten.

It was a life of routine, bland and suave, and for a year at least of undisturbed privacy. But let me sketch a sample day. . . . I arose at eight, awakened by bright sunshine flooding in at the window. I had a cold bath and ten minutes of setting up exercises in the bathroom. While I did these I would watch my pup make her round of the yard. She would yawn, contemplate the morn pensively, then going behind a bush would do her little duties. After which she would make a tour of inspection sniffing for trespassing cats. Meantime my daughter would be preparing breakfast, which my wife and I would take in bed. As we enjoyed our toast, marmalade and tea we would read what we called our "bed book." That first winter we specialised on Somerset Maugham, for whose works she was curiously avid.

At ten I got up to listen to the news on the radio. It was always interesting, sometimes thrilling, occasionally painful. After the news I shaved, dressed and went marketing. The big markets around us were so beautiful it was a joy to forage in them. I would return with a leg of lamb or a roast of beef, fruit, beer, ice-cream and cake. While lunch was preparing I would go for a promenade with the pup and the paper. It was pleasant sauntering in the sunshine under the magnolias, passing a pleasant word with a neighbour. Then home to a well-spread table and a well-cooked meal.

Three times a week we went to a restaurant. We had a rather swagger cafeteria with nice linen and a carpet on the floor. It was spacious, while the food was of great variety. We also went to a restaurant where the cooking was of the home quality, and for a dollar one could have a chicken dinner. Then after lunch I would have the sacred siesta. A drowsiness would overcome me and I would climb into my pyjamas. No dozing in a dressing-gown for me. Bed, my best friend, was not to be treated so scurvily. Between the sheets I stretched and pounded the pillow for two solid hours.

After tea I would start on my hike on the hills. For two hours I would be the solitary pedestrian, here in Hollywood more conspicuous than ever. For it seemed to me I was the only one who tramped these lonely roads with their lovely vistas. On



my walks I never used to meet a soul, but cars by the score whose drivers wanted to give me a lift. Foolish people! Why should I drive when I could enjoy the pleasure of walking? And as I reached some high vantage point exultation filled me. There at my feet stretched the city of Los Angeles. In the gathering dusk a myriad lights would bloom and waver, green lights trembling, ruby lights twinkling, golden and silver lights spangling like jewels—a garden of light outspread for the joy of my gaze. How privileged I felt, and how sorry I was for those who could not see this beauty through my adoring eyes!

From these walks I would return glad and glowing, with an eager appetite for supper. This we would take in the kitchen nook, a jolly little booth enamelled pale blue and cushioned with gay chintz. I loved that kitchen nook. Willingly would I have taken all my meals there instead of in the rather nice dining-room. But it, too, had its charm, for from the broad window we could gaze on the lawn and banks of bloom. Nearly every day in the year we had sunshine, with flowers smiling up at us. That is the only way to live, always in the sunshine, forgetting there are such things as dour skies and wintry days. I realised my luck as a writer, for I carried my workshop around in my head and I could choose my own environment. Here it was ideal—so I did no work at all.

During the first four years of my exile I did not write a line. In the evenings I strolled, or sat idly on the boulevard studying its colour and movement. A cheap, shoddy crowd, garish in garment, fantastic in fashion, yet so interesting. It was hard to believe one was not looking on a parade of eccentricity—mostly ugly women in ungainly slacks arrayed in all the colours of the rainbow. What a contrast between the artificiality of the boulevard and the brooding silence of the hills! Tired of watching I would go into a corner drug store for an ice-cream or a cup of coffee, then back to the bungalow and a quiet evening. I bought an accordion and practised till I was tired. Then I would settle snugly in my armchair and read till three in the morning.

I usually finished a book a day. I seemed to put all my mentality into my reading. We had a public library that allowed me to take out ten at a time, and there were a hundred thousand to choose from. It was a beautiful building, sunny, spacious, air-conditioned, where one was free to browse in sympathetic silence. I thought of the old days when as a hobo poet I would brood for hours in the little public library of Los Angeles. Now it contained a million volumes but I never revisited it. This nice Hollywood library was just to my taste, and I passed up and down its shelves, collecting a new bevy of books. Happily I carried my choice home, for books never seemed too heavy for me.

We are great dog lovers and at different times we had two. The first was a black cocker I bought as a pup and brought home as a surprise to my daughter. It grew to be a beauty and was unselfish in its affection for us. It was my duty to take it out every day, and when it saw me going to get my hat it would grab its leash from the nail and run to me with it. I never had the heart to turn down such an appeal. By joining three leashes together I had a long one that gave the pup scope and rope. He had the illusion of freedom, and yet I could pull him in like a fish if he got into trouble. This would usually be when he chose the centre of a beautiful lawn to evacuate his bowels, a proceeding the owner viewed without sympathy. On our gate was a big sign: BEWARE OF THE DOG, and beneath it our tiny pup would peer out ingratiatingly, just begging to be petted.

Our second dog was a female whom we had spayed to save complications. She was fox terrierish, with silky black ears and a round black spot on her white back, as if someone had dropped a bottle of ink over her. She was the greatest coward in all Dogdom. At sight of a cat the hair on her back would stand erect, while the most humiliating sight I can remember was her yelping up the street pursued by a tiny kitten. All the population of the block ran out thinking she had been run over. A clever little beast, she learned tricks easily. She was nice to touch and had a neat way of jumping on one's knee, so that it seemed unkind to dislodge her. I fear we spoiled our dogs, but they were a great delight to us and helped to cheer our exile.

Our greatest worry during our stay in Hollywood was shortness of funds. Of course, it's lots of fun to be poor, but not too poor. I had plenty of money in Britain but was only allowed to take out a small sum that was soon exhausted. From then on we were thrown on our own resources. We had to pledge the family furs and jewels, so that in the first year we ate our pearls and in the second our diamonds. In the third mother's mink coat covered the meal ticket, while in the fourth daughter's sables kept the wolf from the door.

It was fascinating living so near to the ragged edge, like a game, but not too anxious a one, because we knew that if it came to the worst we could always go to Canada. In Toronto I could live like a prince but I preferred to live like a pauper in Hollywood. For one thing, our penury prevented us from entertaining or accepting entertainment, so that I could enjoy the exclusive life I loved best. My daughter ran the house with efficiency; my wife went to classes in the High School and worked for the Red Cross. Thus with quiet contentment we rubbed along.

One day I got an offer from a cosmetic society to pay me if I would give them a forty-minute address. It was only twenty-five dollars, but I entertained them for a good hour and earned my fee. Though it was humiliating to take that sealed envelope

I put my pride in my pocket. Other offers followed. I tried to put up a good show and give general satisfaction. It was an entirely new line, but my experience as a reciter helped me. I determined to develop any ability I had in this way, and memorised and studied some of my ballads. The McGrew and McGee pieces were my great stand-bys. I thought people would tire of them but they did not. It is like with old songs. Folks enjoy most what they know best.

A retired Shakespearean actor, who sometimes washed dishes in the ice-cream parlor, taught me how to produce my voice and place it so that it could be heard at the back of the hall. He showed me how to use my diaphragm and nasal cavities so that every word would carry. In the end I could address a big audience with complete confidence, and from then on public appearances lost their terror for me.

I had several offers to go on lecture tours in a modest way, but I realised how hard that would be for one of my age. On several occasions in the throes of a dramatic recitation I was seized with dizziness and barely got through my programme. Then again I could not absolutely rely on my memory. My mind had a way of going blank. I dreaded these mental black-outs more than anything else. After one or two ghastly experiences I was afraid to deliver a recitation unless I had the script in my hand. To be effective a performer must be so sure of his lines that nothing can throw him off. By dint of repeating the lines hundreds of times I got so that I could give myself up to their rendition, but it was hard work.

As long as I was sure of my stuff I was never nervous before an audience. I could look people straight in the face and watch their reactions. But I was sensitive to the least inattention and unless I could rivet everyone in their seats I was unhappy. A cough or a whisper made me uneasy and an entry at the back of the hall put me off my stride. I concluded that I was not a natural entertainer or I would not have let these trifles put me out. I was too old to take up the game. My voice was good for half an hour, then it became worn and tired.

So I gave up the idea of making money on the lecture platform and contented myself with half-hour talks before clubs and societies. The most tiring part of the programme was the aftermath, when people pressed forward to introduce themselves and shake hands. One had to smile one's sweetest and make nice remarks to each. Then there were requests for autographs and books to sign, so that when I got home I crumpled up and had to go to bed until next day.

Autograph parties in the big stores were a trying ordeal. Again the bright smile and the glad hand, inscriptions in books till my wrist ached and my voice failed. I always tried to write something nice before my name instead of the mere signature. I could see long lines extending to the end of the store with people waiting patiently,

some for hours. This worried me. The least I could do was to make a pleasant remark and show a personal interest in these nice people. My heart was full of gratitude, but after signing some five hundred books my hand was weary.

I also eked out my meagre income by doing a bit of broadcasting. I had rather a good radio voice, low-pitched, clear, controlled. But when I first heard myself on the air I nearly had a fit. My Scotch accent came out so appallingly I thought they had put on Harry Lauder in my place. I say *heard* myself, for often my part of the programme was done from a disk. Thus it was I made a broadcast from the Frozen North, when I was really listening in in the Sunny South. It gave me quite a thrill, and indeed I know of no greater pleasure than to lounge back in one's own home and hear oneself talking on the radio.

I took lessons in radio technique till I was able to correct my accent, but my greatest defect was a slow delivery. I found that what was to me a fast tempo came out just right on the air. Also I learned that what was dramatic on the platform sounded "hammy" on the mike. In short, radio technique was largely repression. One went into reverse, so to speak. A whisper was more effective than a shout.

All of which interested me hugely and I practised with enthusiasm, usually on my lonely walks or under the gum trees in my garden. I learned to disregard dramatic technique, to break up my stuff so that it sounded colloquial. To be absolutely natural was my ideal and I worked hard to achieve it. . . . Yet often I wondered: was it worth while? Was I not just a pathetic puppet trying to please those whose cheap praise was not worth the winning? Well, I was always striving, always dreaming, even if my dreams were empty and my strife was vain.

So passed the years of eager effort, with not a few exalted moments in which I heard beyond the deeps of silence those secret harmonies I called the *Harps of Heaven*. Yet I knew the music was in my own heart, that I was the Harper, and that the Heaven was within me. . . . *And so can we all make our Heaven here today. In consideration for others, pity for the weak, tenderness towards dumb creatures, and love of nature let us realise our Heaven on earth. Let us each morn be born anew, finding raptures in the dawn and serenity in the sunset. Let us live each day for the joy that is in it; then life will give us moments when we will look with adoration at the mountains and feel as if hosts of angels were streaming down the sky. . . .*

## Chapter Forty-Eight

### “NOT THIS TIME, CHERRY”

One day Universal Studio called me on the phone to say that Frank Lloyd, the famous director, would like to see me. Now, Frank was an old friend of mine and I was intrigued by this message. Though I had not met him for twenty years I found him little changed. Age had mellowed him, but he was still handsome.

Sitting on a table, swinging his legs, he explained his idea. They were making for about the tenth time a version of that Rex Beach *chef d'oeuvre* *The Spoilers*. Marlene Dietrich was the girl, John Wayne the man, Randolph Scott the menace. Said Frank: “I just thought it would be cute to have you appear in one of the boxes of the dance hall, writing your immortal ballad of Dan McGrew.” “Will Marlene be in it?” I asked thoughtfully.

“That’s the bright idea. You’ll have a scene with her. Now here’s my suggestion.” He sketched it but I was not impressed. It seemed to me to lack imagination. In my conceit I thought cinema acting was like any other. Perhaps it was, but as a future film star Frank gave me the brush-off. My part, as he conceived it, ran something like this; Marlene, of course, playing Cherry Malotte.

*Cherry*: Good evening, Mister Service. What are you writing? Something about *me*, I hope.

*Myself*: No, not about you *this* time, Cherry. It’s about a man. His name is Dan McGrew. He’s a bad actor. He gets shot.

*Cherry*: Oh! Sounds interesting. Well, write something about *me* some time.

Then she flits gaily away, leaving me to my scribbling.

Such was my precious part in my first and last appearance as a cinema actor—exactly twenty-three words. But you have no idea how much trouble they gave me. The family heard me going around muttering: “No, not this time, Cherry,” till they took it up themselves, nearly driving me crazy with their applications of it to our daily life. As for me, I tried it in a dozen different intonations, sitting in front of a mirror, with appropriate grimaces. But I couldn’t get that simple phrase to sound anything but idiotic. I put emphasis on first one word, then on another. I changed my tone. I

modulated my voice. But the more I said: "No, not this time, Cherry," the more difficult I found it.

The dramatic director came to coach me. I must not, he told me, shake my head or make any gesture, while my face must be expressionless. The camera distorts everything, and what one supposes to be a play of emotion on one's mug becomes a grotesque grimace. Pathos is bathos; drama, farce. Cinema acting needs a low-toned technique, and as most stars are wooden-faced anyway it works out all right. But it was driving me distracted. From every corner of the bungalow I heard mocking voices: "No, not this time, Cherry!" So, going out to the garage, I patted the head of the pup and said: "No, not this time. Cherry."

I felt like refusing the job, but my funds were at a low ebb and they told me at the studio that I would have three days' work at a hundred dollars a day. This would keep us for nearly two months, so I told Frank I would be available and plunged into a fresh study of my part. I was thus concentrating when I received a call to go to a certain address and select a costume. It was a huge warehouse that hired out dresses to the studios, a sort of wardrobe pool for the entire trade. It was four stories high and consisted of narrow mazes of shelves, containing the costumes of all the ages in infinite number and variety.

They could fit you with everything, and now they brought me what they considered was right for my role. When I saw it I gasped with horror. It was a suit that might have been a success in a Keystone comedy. It had a clerical collar, a string tie, and zebra striped pants. It was very tight. The waistcoat buttoned up to the chin and the coat was so abbreviated it showed my behind to great advantage. When I tried it on I looked like a slap-stick comedian—one of the Two Micks.

So I told them it was not a comic part and they brought me a second costume which made me look like—the other Mick. Then I told them I did not want a custard-pie suit; what I wanted was a dashing dress that would display my manly charms. But they said: "We thought you were supposed to be a *poet*!" Well, perhaps they were right. Perhaps it was a comic role. But I said firmly: "No, not this time, Cherry! Take 'em away."

So, wandering through endless aisles of garments, I selected what was a cross between a miner, a cowboy, a rough-rider and Billy the Kid. It was romantic, it was reckless—in short, my idealised conception of myself if the worst had been the best. I was so pleased with the general effect I posed in front of the mirror till I was ashamed of my vanity. "That's what I want," I said. "Have them sent to the studio."

I next received a note to present myself on the lot at seven o'clock on a certain morning. I remember feeling mildly excited as I drove to the studio, but perhaps that

was because America had just got into the war and everyone was up in the air. Yet the sun shone just as peacefully, and the grass grew obliviously, and the California morn was of infinite beauty. In the studio, however, I found that War was almost ousting Work. Japanese invasion was menacing. Everyone, including Frank Lloyd, talked of joining something or everything. I must admit that after two years of darkness and distress in my homeland it made me feel good to see others doing a bit of worrying. But the first job was to finish up *The Spoilers*, and they figured on another dozen days of shooting.

So I was conducted to my dressing room, and there I found my Stetson, knee-breeches, long boots, khaki shirt, and donned them with a feeling of smug satisfaction. Then I was called to the make-up room where one of the most famous men in the business was awaiting me. He sized up his Old Codger. "Well, now, they tell me I have to make a young man of you. All right. I made up Boris Karloff for *Frankenstein*, so I reckon I can do something with you."

He did. First of all he dyed my hair black. Then he took the lines out of my face. Then he enamelled my teeth and painted my eyebrows. Then he . . . well, I don't know what else he did, but by the time he got through it was fantastic. Fifty years had dropped from my age. As I gazed incredulously into the mirror I did not recognise the dashing blade I saw there. Oh, if I could only remain that way, I thought with regret.

Feeling terribly bucked up I swaggered on to the lot to find no one recognised me. Even Frank Lloyd had to be introduced. But after the first flush of triumph I began to feel several kinds of a damn fool and wished the whole thing was over. Soon, however, I quite forgot my metamorphosis and wandered around, too interested in others to think of myself. There were half a dozen stages working, so I roamed from one to another with delightful liberty. It is difficult to get into a studio, but once you pass its guarded portals you are as free as air.

So I roamed from a Japanese spy picture with kilted British soldiers to another with a horror background, then to an escape picture. Hitchcock was directing this and I watched him make a thrilling episode. The scene was the Statue of Liberty, where the villain had taken refuge from the hero or the hero had taken refuge from the villain. Anyway, there was the heroine with long blonde hair to rescue the hero who was clinging to that dizzy height, with canvas clouds all about him, and the floor a vertiginous four feet below. I saw him pulled to safety by the heroine, while the villain plunged to his doom on a double mattress.

I was too thrilled for words when a messenger came panting to tell me that I was wanted on my own stage. Over I hurried to find I was really badly needed—in about

another four hours; so I watched the set being prepared. The scene was the big dance-hall and there were stairs going up to a balcony that was lined with boxes. How it reminded me of the old Dawson days with Diamond-tooth Gertie, Touch-the-Button Nell, Jew Jessie and the Oregon Mare. Nostalgic memories came back, and in my make-up of a Northern Sourdough half a century seemed to drop from my shoulders.

The scene was strikingly picturesque—the rough-bearded miners in mackinaws and buck-skin shirts, the dance-hall girls, the tin-horn miners, the barmen and all the riff-raff of a mining camp. There was the long bar, the small stage, the booths, the dance-hall floor set with tables, and even provided with real beer in old-fashioned bottles, served by waiters with sideburns. No detail was too insignificant to be neglected. It was an example of what is the finest quality of the Cinema at its best—intense exactitude and meticulous reconstruction of the past.

Even the frilly panties of the *can-can* girls were of the Tabarin pattern. There were four of them and they did their stuff for hours on the tiny stage before it was judged fit for shooting. Yet in the actual picture it passed like a flash. In fact I, thought it might have been given more footage, and I am sure the public thought so too. As for me, I watched the *can-can* girls with such keen appreciation that I forgot my own troubles and ceased to murmur: “No, not this time, Cherry.” So, after calling me in such excited haste, I sat in the bar for two hours gazing up at those frilly damsels with their shapely, black-stockinged legs. As I did so, I could see myself in the bar mirror, a strange rakish figure, a mixture of Bill Hart and Bill Farnum, and it all seemed fantastic to me.

Then my turn came and suddenly I found myself the centre of attention. There was the make-up man dabbing at me, the dramatic director giving me his final instructions: “For God’s sake don’t *act*! Don’t try to be a bloody Barrymore.” Then the property man supplied me with a pencil and copy book and I was taken up to the centre box and seated in front. As they posed me in profile I tried to look John Barrymorish. “Don’t look up,” they said. “Keep on writing. Write like hell.” So I began on the first page: “Write like hell. Keep on writing,” till I had covered the page.

On the stage a barber shop “harmony four” were singing *Sweet Adeline*. Two of them were bar-tenders and all had handle-bar moustaches. As I wrote I could hear them roar: “Sweet Adeline, will you be mine . . . the waving trees, the summer breeze,” or however the thing goes. Then there would be a break. The recording machine had failed to record, so they began over again. Seventeen times they began, and I covered page after page with my pencil. But I got tired of writing: “Write like



hell,” and wrote: “Sweet Adeline, will you be mine?” I was getting really interested in my penmanship, or rather pencilship, when the Director grudgingly admitted that *Sweet Adeline* was sour, but it would have to do.

Then he turned his attention to me. He was a fastidious chap who would never admit that anything was good, and who considered (quite properly) that the only important man in a picture was the Director, in which opinion he was sustained by a bunch of yes-men who surrounded him. He inspired me with fear and awe and I trembled in my boots. Below me the camera-men were busy wheeling the huge monster with the Argus eye full on my shrinking person. It looked to me like a crane as it was raised to my level and it pinioned me implacably, till I felt like a beetle impaled on a pin. But I went on writing. Thank God for that copy book and pencil! And now a last injunction from the dramatic director: “*Don’t try to act.*” . . . A hush . . . A strained pause.

Then from behind me a vision of sizzling beauty, the divine Dietrich. She wore a gown of gold, and as she looked at me her ice-blue eyes thrilled me to my marrow. Like music that low-pitched voice rang in my ears. You can imagine how this vision of sultry seduction threw me off my stride. She was smiling down on me, her hair a towering *casque* of gold, her ravishing lips parted so that one felt one could look on her forever. . . . “Writing something about me?” I heard as in a dream. Then my idiotic voice repeating: “No, not about you *this* time, Cherry,” and so on to the end of the speech. Then her reply in a lilting cadence: “Sounds interesting,” as she floated away . . . There! it was all over—all but the shouting which was done by the director. “It’s lousy,” he said, in effect, giving me a sour look, “but we’ll let it go.”

And so ended my first and last venture into pictures. It was months before I saw myself on the screen, and I was pleasantly surprised, for I was not so bad as I had feared. It is true I looked like a sheep and I bleated like one. My Scotch accent was worthy of Will Fyffe, my intonation idiotic, my enamelled smile a grimace. I was as natural as a tailor’s dummy. But otherwise I was all right. Anyway, for three minutes’ work I earned three hundred dollars, and that’s not so bad.

But the greatest pleasure was to come. It was the last day of shooting and they were going to do the Big Fight. This is the high spot of the picture. As it ends up with the destruction of the set, it is kept to the last. There have been many screen fights but that of *The Spoilers* is the most famous. It lasts for ten minutes. The actors are always big, husky men and frequently some of them get hurt. It starts in Cherry’s room, goes to the balcony, over which one of the combatants gets hurled; it storms through the saloon, wrecking chairs and tables. It sweeps the bar dry and ends by the hero pitching the villain on to the street through the plate-glass window. It’s a rip-

roaring bit of scrapping that gets the men in the audience all worked up. It is Filmdom's greatest fight, and to see it actually made was a thrilling experience. As I watched it from the stage I extemporised some lines:

Johnny Wayne and Randy Scott  
They fought and fought and fought and fought.  
With joy they shed each other's gore,  
And then they paused and shed some more.  
To bust each other's blocks they strove;  
They wrecked the bar and crashed the stove.  
Then with a heave big Johnny Wayne  
Hurled Randy through the window pane.  
So in the street and down the lot  
They fought and fought and fought and fought.  
So fierce they mixed it up I'll bet  
Them galoots might be fighting yet.

And the joke is that most of the fighting was done by doubles. True the doubles were made up to resemble the stars so that you could not tell the difference. But they pulled their punches and they faked their jolts. Their bruises were putty and their gore was paint. The chairs and tables were sawn so that they could be smashed easily, the stove disjoined so that a push would topple it over. And the pane of glass was made of sugar candy. . . . Oh, it was a grand fight all the same, worth all the rest of the picture.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

### I WRITE *PLOUGHMAN OF THE MOON*

One day I had a letter from Byron. He was living in seclusion in the valley of the Var, and in mortal fear of events. His letter was despairing in tone, yet he hoped to hear from me. I was sorry he had not escaped in one of the coal boats from Cannes; but knowing his fastidious horror of any kind of defilement I imagined he had shrunk from that ordeal. He would have looked at the grime through his monocle, flicked away imaginary specks and returned to his sanctuary on the hill.

The last time I had accompanied him there I remembered how he had been short of breath, and I halted pretending to admire the view. Now his sanctuary was a prison, and his letter gave me a sense of loss. And surely enough, some months later I got a telegram announcing his death. It was his old enemy *angina*; but I have no doubt the attack was brought on by fear of impending arrest. All of my friends, even women of eighty, who failed to escape were caught in the dragnet and many of them did not survive.

Although we were happy in our Hollywood bungalow we never ceased to think of our home in France. Now that the United States was with us hope revived that we might some day return. For a while I had decided that all was lost, and the best was to forget the past and look forward to the future. I would buy a small ranch where I could live my life in peace; but if we won the war I would go back to the pines of Dream Haven, and the Yellow Room of Nice.

Now the curtain had fallen and I could get no more news. No doubt my house was a ruin, my trees cut down, my apartment looted. I refused to think of those things. Perhaps because of my age, of all I possessed I remembered very little, and regret never overwhelmed me. When a man is over seventy property begins to lose its meaning. Possessions become more and more temporary, and if he is wise he will rid himself of the responsibility of ownership. He will become so progressively poor that when finally he accepts his shroud he is practically a pauper. I had this feeling of a short leasehold on life, but my family constantly thought of household treasures and referred to them with sadness. My daughter, however, had developed a regard for

the New World that assuaged to some extent her nostalgia for the Old; while my wife attended her English classes in the High School, became “teacher’s pet” and was very happy in her new friendships.

It was this business of the Hollywood High School that disrupted the even tenor of my life. Up to now I had been a recluse. Even people I spoke to every day had no idea I was an author and I was careful not to enlighten them. I liked to be a little man among little men. I was everybody’s friend, conserving my obscurity to an amazing degree. Hollywood is like that. It is the best hideaway in the land. Celebrities are three-a-penny, and though one is known, one is not noticed. So it happened one evening I went to the High School to meet my wife. As I waited I wandered the corridors, finally pausing in front of a door. In the classroom a silver-haired old lady was lecturing on poetry and to my amazement I heard her mention my name. I will not say that what she said of me was creditable. Indeed I’m afraid it wasn’t, and perhaps that was what impelled me to enter the room and take a seat.

No one paid any attention to me, so I continued to listen. She was giving me a terrible trouncing. According to her I was Poetic Enemy Number One; because people going into a bookstore turned away from the real poets and bought my verse. I really loved the sweet old thing for the way she sailed into me. . . . Then a man stood up to defend me. He claimed that the customer who bought my book would not have bought the *pukka* poet anyway. He would have bought nothing, and at least my stuff was a stepping stone to something higher. By reading my ballads people might be induced to tackle the better bards. I should be condoned, for I was a “come on,” an appetiser, a poetical pimp, as it were.

There was a lot of further argument in which I sat enjoying myself. When it was over I rose from the back of the room and asked the Professor (bless her, she afterwards became a dear friend) if as a stranger I might say a few words. She smiled graciously and every eye was turned on me. I began: “Ladies and Gentlemen. I have listened with the greatest interest to your discussion, particularly as the subject of it is an old crony of mine. I have known him for years, and I assure you he would be the first to deprecate the consideration of his work on such a high level. He has always disclaimed the imputation that he was a writer of poetry, and if he has ever perpetrated a really poetic line I know he would be the first to apologise for it.”

With that I thought I had better retire gracefully, but I had not reckoned with my champion. He followed me to the door, saying: “I was interested in what you said about your friend. Where is he living now, and how could I meet him?” Said I: “He inhabits a tiny bungalow not two blocks away, but he’s a shy guy. However, if you care to come along we’ll see if we can beard the Old Codger in his den.” So he

walked home with me and, arrived there, I asked if I was in, and was told I was. Then gravely I introduced myself and made a new friend.

He himself was a poet of parts, founder of an organisation of amateur poets that had branches all over California. They were having their annual convention in a few weeks and he begged me to address them. He was such a nice chap it was difficult to refuse outright, so I put him off with vague promises. But the fat was in the fire. The hounds of publicity were on my trail; for it quickly got around that the notorious Rhyme-smith was in their midst. Alas! the end of isolation. So far my home had been private but my poetic pals ended all that. They insisted in herding me into the fold. They not only made me a Life Member of their society, but they formed a special Chapter in my honour.

In these pages I avoid giving names of people, because if I once began there would be no end to the spatter of nomenclature and the public might not be interested. But to my friends of the various societies who honoured me, and particularly to the *Chaparral Poets*, I wish to express my deep appreciation of their kindness and friendship. Many of them were so gifted I felt rather a dud among them. One lady member of our Chapter composed sixteen sonnets in six days and they were more than good. But I thought the poets were too high-flown in their efforts and tried to bring them down to earth. Better green cheese than the moon, I said. Better beer than sunsets. Better human nature than nature. Despite such perverse advice they treated me with such respect that I feared they might address me as "*Chèr Maitre*." That would have floored me. No man who views himself in the mirror of honesty can have a very high opinion of himself, and I am just as much a humbug and a charlatan as the next. So I protested that I was only a rollicking rhymster and hoped that my seed of wisdom would fall on barren soil, for I do not suppose I meant half of what I said.

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This publicity descended on me in the third year of my Hollywood sojourn. Up to then I had lived in glorious incognito, but that was at an end. Besides visitors and fanmail I had club meetings, radio rehearsals, lunches and lectures. I was becoming a busy man and I hated it. There was scarcely a day I could call my own, so I decided that I must find some means of evasion. Work! That might offer me an avenue of escape. Accordingly I announced that I was going to write my autobiography and would retire into my shell for a year. I would make no engagements, see no one, never go out, in short, give the world the Big Brush-Off. Well, it worked; only it meant that I, too, had to work. As far as society went I had regained my freedom, but once more I was the galley slave chained to my typewriter. I installed it in the

garage and all morning it clicked merrily. If anyone called I said: "Excuse me, old chap, but I'm up to my neck in the job. Until it's finished I simply don't exist." So again I achieved solitude and became master of my time.

During a whole year I worked hard on my book. It was tough going at first, for the drag-nets of memory did not prove too rich in glittering trove. I toiled valiantly, however, and pictures of the remotest past came to reward me. Even infancy surrendered its contributions. From the murk and gloom scenes vivid and vital projected themselves, and triumphantly I pounced on them. Bit by bit I filled in the frame of my tapestry, thinking, what a marvellous thing is visual memory! How was it I could reconstruct an event of sixty years ago as clearly as if it were yesterday? Yet there it was, credible as a photograph, preserved by some magical process of the mind.

So the film of youth unrolled and I reported what I saw. But soon I was seeing too much. Recollections overwhelmed me till it seemed I was living entirely in the past. As I turned the flash-light on successive periods they yielded so lavishly I was at a loss how to handle them. Soon I had enough matter for two books, and to cram them into one would be to botch the job. I had to tell my story my own way. If I am reticent in speech, on paper I am garrulous, and my first draft is usually twice as long as my final copy. Yet, despite my pruning, my life story would have made a book of discouraging length, so I resolved to take it only up to my fortieth year.

Even at that I had to sacrifice much that I liked. Still I enjoyed it, pacing the sunlit garage with the roses at the door, and halting to punch at the old typewriter that stood on an up-ended trunk. My pup would look wistfully at me, wondering when I was going to stop that idiotic tapping and go for a sensible stroll. But I would keep on till lunch, usually doing two thousand words. In the afternoon I would go for a walk on the hills, doping out my stuff for next day. Only in the evening would I relax and emerge from the Past into the Present. That meant a coffee or an ice-cream in the corner drug store, a meeting with my wife at her High School class, a walk on the Boulevard. Yet often when I returned to my easy chair I would revise my day's work sooner than read a book from the library.

I began my book on a Hallowe'en, and I finished the manuscript exactly a year later. But I spent many months in revision, so that it took a year and a half out of my life. During that time I was in a dream, hardly knowing what went on around me. This was good, for evil history was in the making. Hong Kong, Singapore, Bataan, Corregidor—black moments when one wondered if we would win the war. Had it not been for my work I would have worried my heart out. It was escape, and if I had a good day I was cheerful despite the bad news over the radio. If all should be

lost, I thought, I will build me a home in the San Fernando valley and there I will cultivate my vines and fig trees. How comforting to think that out of disaster I could build beauty, while from havoc of war I could find peace!

It was a great day when I bound the manuscript of my book and sent it off, a greater when the galley proofs arrived. I slaved over them till there came a letter of protest from the publishers. But one can revise one's work a score of times and still find something to improve on. If I had not done a good job it was not for want of trying. So with a singing heart I sent away my proofs. There! My share of the work was done. It only remained to await the awards. And it was so wonderful to be free, yet . . . there was a sense of emptiness. Well, let me be for once a squanderer of golden moments. I owed it to myself to laze and dream, to let my mind lie fallow.

Ah! that was a happy summer, for it was the summer of Victory. France was free again. This shining event, combined with the appearance of my book, raised me to the heights of joy. Again I climbed the purple hills, and as I watched the golden sunsets, once more I heard the *Harps of Heaven*. What a happie chappie I was—seventy odd and getting such a kick out of living! I was in such exultant health that just to breathe seemed joy. The sky was shiny with the golden robes of angels and the mountains were organs making mighty music.

The beauty of authoring is that you toil in the field, sow and reap, but once your harvest is ripe another markets it for you. So you sit placidly down the years and accept the wages you have so richly deserved. For Royalty is brave money, worthily made, and though Governments took half of it away from me still I was undiscouraged. The commercial side of writing had always repelled me; yet I had to think of my publishers, so once again I plunged into a whirl of society. I went to bun-feasts and baby-shows; I strutted the stage, grimaced before the mike, glad-handed club ladies with bifocals, and club men with fallen tummies. I answered fan mail, autographed in stores, spoke to societies, lectured to students. In short, in the interest of my book I made a jolly good fellow of myself, which is not in my line at all. Publicity was hateful to me, and I hoped I would never see my mug in a paper again. Peering inside book-shops I would watch the pile of my books grow lower, wondering why people bought them, and worried lest that poor trusting guy, the bookseller, would get stuck. If he had, I think I would have bought them myself. . . .

And now it seemed to me that the War being won my Hollywood exile was due to end. So I applied for visas to return to France, filled in green forms and awaited a favourable issue. It was long in coming. Four months were to elapse before the necessary permission arrived. In the meantime I lived in a state of suspense. Much as I loved our life in the bungalow I thought of my apartment in Nice with even greater

joy. As I walked around the block pensively leading the pup, I visioned the Avenue de la Victoire and the Boulevard Victor Hugo. As I climbed Laurel Canyon I dreamed of the Valley of the Var. Sitting on a bench in front of the High School I pictured the Jardin d'Alsace and the peace of mellow afternoons when autumn leaves were falling. What marvellous happiness I had enjoyed there! And I would again, for I loved every nook and corner of the place.

But if I was lapped in lazy anticipation my daughter did not share my dreams. She had been attacked by a disease which I call *Kitchenitis*. In a land where most women did their own house-keeping she did ours with incomparable efficiency. She took a University course in Domestic Science and the marvels of the cuisine were dear to her. Her kitchen was a temple, she its priestess. Her shrine was the immaculate enamel of the electric cooking stove. She read home journals, gloated over devices to save drudgery. She was a poet of the pantry, an artist of the ironing table. The idea of returning to the crude inefficiency of the Old World was repugnant to her. However, in the end we prevailed on her to accompany us, with the understanding that she would return to the world of nickelled gadgets and concealed cupboards.

So as we waited for permits from Paris I passed the time in preparations for our departure. I found a nice home for the pup, though the parting was a sorrow. The people who took her promised her an egg for breakfast, and that consoled the dear little beast. I caressed her ears, scrooged up the loose skin of her tummy for the last time, and that was that. I sold my lovely accordion for a song, gave away my guitar to an old amateur of the banjo. I presented my books to the members of my poetry Chapter and bade them adieu. Mostly women, they were as sweet as they were talented, and I liked them a lot. I said good-bye to Percy the Poet, Paul the Player, Rex the Cowboy, and all the characters of the quarter. Last of all, I took back my library books for the last time, vowing I would return to that lovely building where I had spent so many placid hours.

One day arrived a letter from the Consul in San Francisco saying our visas had been granted, and would be ready for us in New York. It was a heart wrench to leave the little bungalow after five serene years for, despite the war, we had known peace and comfort there. We had never lacked for food—lots of it and of the best. Rich candies and ice-cream had been our daily portion, while in Europe people were eating grass, acorns and snails. Well, we were returning to that scene of suffering. We expected to have a tough time but nothing could hold us back.

So we left Hollywood in a glow of sunshine, and plunged into a blizzard in Chicago. Incredible contrast! We shuddered and dared not expose ourselves to



knifelike winds that swept the snowy streets. We were glad to get to New York, where a warm welcome awaited us in the Algonquin Hotel. There I met Frank Case and we became friends. He told me he was a sad man because his wife was sick unto death. He read to her every evening, so I gave him a copy of my book. But I saw in his eyes the glaucosity of the cardiac, and he it was who passed away.

While in New York I took my family to lunch at the National Arts Club, where I was an honorary member. I found it little changed from the time I lived there thirty years before. Only the old steward remembered me and greeted me with warmth. I sat in the chair in the bow window where I had corrected the proofs of my first novel and talked to Hamlin Garland, Graham Phillips and George Barr McCutcheon. Now they were mostly forgotten, their works in the scrapheap; yet the chairs and tables were the same and the club was comfortably shabby. So, too, was the Players next door, where I had lunch another day. A turban of snow crowned the bust of Booth in the well court, and a thaw flooded the floor of the dining-room. Indeed, we saw New York at its detestable worst for it, too, was in the grip of the blizzard.

But the bitter winds sharpened our appetites and we found fine food everywhere. Even the cafeterias and automats were lots of fun. We loathed the lights of Broadway but we loved Fifth Avenue. My family went on a shopping orgy there, so that we had to get an extra trunk to hold our stuff. In spite of the driving snow and the icy wind we three pampered Hollywoodites suffered no ill effects. . . . But while the family were buying glad rags I was trying to find a boat to take us home. The prospect was rather dreary. It looked as if we might get stalled in Manhattan for another month. Then suddenly we heard there was a sailing in two days' time, and of all places for *Marseilles*. It would take us practically to our own door. What luck if we could only get a passage! Through a high executive of the American Express Company we did, and we were told to be on board *next morning*.

It was too sudden. I had to rush to the Income Tax people to get clearance papers and found a long waiting line. When at last my time came I was told that my letter from my publisher to say my tax was paid at source was not sufficient, so I had to rush back to the publishers and beg the assistance of their accountant. It took me five hours of exhausting effort to get that precious certificate and *no one ever asked for it*. Then there were visits to the shipping office, the Express Company, the bank; rushing round in taxis till I finally got things lined up. That *was* a day. Then a few hours' sleep and up at five to finish packing, pay the bills and send off the trunks. A taxi to the Battery, driven by a chauffeur who told me he had just come from France where he had been stationed in Beauvais. He said he had liked it fine and would gladly go back. . . . Then the wharf and once more we were on the voyage that at

long last was leading us HOME.

## *Chapter Fifty*

### EXILE'S RETURN

The gaunt grey troopship edged from the dock and into the teeth of the growing gale. There was no one on the quay to cheer her going; she slipped away as surreptitiously as we had crept on her in the grey dawn. Yet only three days before, she had landed fifteen hundred G.I.'s. Now she was hastening back for more, with fifteen sickly civilians as her only passengers. As we huddled on the hatch under the middle deck, shivering with cold, I wondered what was in store.

Perhaps because we had come on board so early everything seemed unprepared for us. We were relegated to the hospital section and I selected a four-cabin room, only to find that it was the Isolation Ward. However, it had a certain privacy, so we decided to take a chance of foul germs. The other cabins had ten berths or more, and were less snugly situated. All had steel posts supporting wire mattresses. In fact, the boat was a huge cage of steel without a splinter of wood to be seen. It was grimly utilitarian, a carrier of troops and war supplies, not of woe-begone exiles.

We had no tickets or papers of any kind, and no one took any notice of us as we climbed the steep gang-plank. It seemed irregular to me—no check-up of any kind. We had paid two hundred dollars a passage; but it was not a passenger boat, so perhaps our presence was unofficial. In any case I had a feeling of evasion, and breathed a sigh of relief when at length we cast off. That was at four in the afternoon, and we had been told to be on board at eight that morning. In the interim we shuddered in the icy cold, and dreaded what discomforts awaited us.

Like a stealthy wraith the ship slipped into the gathering gloom, but we had little heart to admire the grandiose heights of Manhattan nor the grey Statue of Liberty. As we realised the lift and pitch of the seas we shrank into the cold, steel hostility of our cabins and huddled there. Yet it was impossible to sleep, for they turned on the heat and, from ice boxes, our staterooms became ovens. We had to open the door wide, so that we heard the racket of the engines, besides the shrieking of the tempest. Once we got into such a roll it was difficult not to be tipped out of our

berths. I was alarmed, but the calm face of a black steward reassured me. The ship was like an empty shell, he told me. We were bound to get all the tossing there was.

He looked for a rough trip, and was busy lashing down everything moveable. Our cabin gave on a big space between the middle deck and the lower, where was a huge hatch over the hold. It was covered with black tarpaulin and was our *salon* for the voyage. He was now roping it off, so that we could hang on to our deck chairs which had a tendency to pile up in one corner. Crawling from this place up a steep steel ladder, and over a steel bulwark, I peered out. The sky was black, the decks awash, the howl of the storm terrifying. Precariously I balanced myself and crawled back to my berth. The slightest slip on that structure of steel might have been fatal.

For two days most of the passengers were sick, then one by one they began to show up for meals. And what meals! True, they were served in the soldiers' quarters, but of the very best. For supper we had *filet mignon* we had not tasted for ages, and wonderful ice-cream. We were told it was food reserved for officers only, and they surely did themselves well. In no first-class passenger liner would we have been better fed than we were on that Victory troopship.

Immured in our floating barracks we tried to get our bearings. It was a strange situation. The ship suggested mystery as well as adventure—sort of soldier and sailor too. We felt somehow as if we had no right to be there. Yet our presence was recognised in a casual way, as if we were superior stowaways who had bribed a passage. For certainly the boat was never intended to carry the likes of us. Its sheer efficiency appalled me. It was purposive to the point of fear. All that grim, grey steel, so cold and comfortless! I shivered as I descended to its bowels, and shuddered as I saw six tiers of metallic beds on metallic braces. How could those on the top stay on in rolling weather when a fall to that steel deck would be fatal? Yet on the return trips every berth was filled, and even the corridors were paved with sleeping bags.

On those return trips there were five relays for meals, yet the food was first class—for those who could eat it. Ice-cream was served every evening, with Danish pastry and coffee, followed by a flicker show. There was a library consisting of narrow, paper-bound books printed specially for the army. There were also musical instruments. I borrowed a guitar and an accordion and played continually. Every evening we had a Cinema. On one occasion I was thrilled to see that production of *The Spoilers* in which I appeared with Marlene. I never thought to view myself in mid-ocean, acting in a picture, to the applause of G.I.'s and coloured stewards. Because I was a musician of sorts the latter were friendly. There was a guitarist among them who made me ashamed of my strumming, but none of them could swing *Roll out the Barrel* on the accordion.

It will be seen from all this that our voyage had its bright spots, to which the officers contributed. The Captain was a stalwart who tried to make me play medicine ball on the forward hatch but I had enough trouble to keep my own balance. The Purser was one of my fans and the various army officers in charge of transport were sociable and attentive to the ladies. There were three prospective brides among us, and an American Consul who organised a mock trial. Altogether it was amazing how we extemporised a certain gaiety on that hatch between decks, even though the rolling would sometimes ball us up together. For my part, however, I did not feel any too cheerful. In that Isolation Ward cabin I must have caught some foul microbe, for I started on a session of flu. Huddled in my grey army blanket I coughed all night long and worried about the landing. What would be our fate? I heard that Marseilles was full of thieves who would steal our baggage, and there was not a hotel room to be had.

Two features of our Victory vessel I should like to mention. One was the engine room which must have been a source of pride, it was so lofty, so spacious, so clean. It was like an engineer's palace, quite out of proportion in its airy amplitude to the rest of the ship. The other scene was the wash-room with its circle of a hundred toilet seats, close, naked, unadorned, with only a metal rod between them. I viewed that gleaming circle of porcelain with misgiving. Though its cleanliness was spotless I had no urge to respond to those hundred invitations. Maybe I am squeamish, but community commodity did not inspire me.

My sickness being sore upon me I spent the last two days on shipboard lying low and conserving my forces for the ordeal of landing. Even at its best it would be trying; but I was old and easily upset. Besides, I coughed continually. My weakness worried me; however, I thought: "This is the end of the trail. One last effort and I will be home . . . *home*." So as we neared Marseilles I crawled on deck. It was a cold, grey morning, and the great port looked like a graveyard of dead ships. There they were, nigh two hundred of them, half-sunk, tilted crazily, up-ended and awash. We edged into a wharf far from town that looked oddly abandoned in the chill sunshine. Pretty soon people dribbled down to meet us. Then a team of coloured soldiers appeared and made us fast to the wharf.

Gradually the crowd increased, and I watched it with interest. Once more I was gazing on the soil of France and soon I would tread it. If only I had not been so wretched I would have thought it a great moment. . . . Then the officials came aboard to check our money and give us landing tickets. They looked thin and shabby but were quite charming in the best French manner, and when the purser told them: "Don't take too long with these poor people. We have a nice lunch awaiting

you,” they brightened up and governed themselves accordingly. The Customs’ men reduced their formalities to a minimum, being also conveniently short-sighted in the examination of our trunks. It was all delightfully friendly and futile, and French, and my heart warmed to these easy-going people who refused to take life too seriously. So I bade farewell to the hard bitterness of the boat and, with a last look at its grey hull, I turned to the amenities of the land.

For the moment there were not many. There were baggage men and money changers, but no hotel touts. Rooms were unattainable. Under the eyes of the police a shabby Jew offered to pay me twice the official price for U.S. dollars. I have no doubt it would have been all right, but I have always had a horror of the black market and would not take a chance. Then to our great joy the Man From Cook’s arrived on the scene, and took entire charge of our situation. He handled the baggage, promising to reserve us tickets on the midnight autorail for Nice. How we blessed him, feeling that no money we could give him could repay him for all he did for us!

From the wharf we took a taxi to the station. It was dirty and broken down but the owner asked five hundred francs for the trip. However, for good value he took us for a ride through all the bombed and blasted parts of the city, which did not cheer us any. Having duly impressed us with its devastation he dumped us in front of the station where we sat on our baggage, afraid to leave it for a moment. There we ate lunches from the boat and talked to our fellow passengers.

Soon darkness fell but, owing to the few city lights, the scene became strangely sinister. A grizzly fog crept up from the sea, attacking my lungs so that my cough racked me. On the chill, bare platform we exiles cowered and shivered, yet the worst was yet to come. On inquiring at the ticket office about the night train for Nice we were told that *all places were taken*. What a shock! The prospect of sitting all night on that station platform unnerved me. At the best it would have been rather terrible; in my present state I believed it would be the death of me. I also worried about my family. In fact, we were all sunk in woe when Cook’s man again appeared on the scene. It was all right, he assured me; I need not “make the bile.” He had an arrangement with the conductor and by paying him a hundred francs each certain seats would be kept off the reservation list. Good old corrupt France! We were saved.

Squatting on our trunks in the ghoulish gloom and peering at the bleary lights of the Cannebière, Marseilles looked to us like a corpse city. Wraiths detached themselves from the grey mist and passed us shudderingly. It was just before Christmas, the coldest day of the year at its coldest hour. I tried to keep warm,

dreading pneumonia, coughing my lungs out. I tried to cheer myself by thoughts of comforts ahead—my grand bed in the Yellow Room, the sun glinting on the palm leaves as I pulled up the shutters, a friendly warmth in the radiators and breakfast of tea, toast and marmalade. That would be for the morning; in the meantime were four weary hours of waiting for the train. I paid the porters with dollar bills, but found they were better pleased with a ten cent packet of cigarettes. Indeed, we soon learned not to give away cigarettes by the packet. One or two were enough, and often more appreciated than a dozen. Cigarettes were almost currency at that time.

How would we find the apartment? Had it been looted? Would any of our stuff be saved? This was the question that agitated us as we sat in that grizzly gloom. After years of occupation the proud station was a sordid shambles. I prowled around, seeking for warmth but found it not. Everywhere icy drafts and a waiting room like a frigidaire. We were afraid to leave our baggage for a moment in case it might vanish, for sinister shapes lurked all about us. That four hours' wait seemed interminable, and only our hope that our troubles would soon be over saved us from utter despair. After all, we were lucky to get a train, even at this time of night. Only recently had communication been established, and some of the repaired bridges were temporary. Anything might happen. I began to fear Cook's man would fail us, and as the hour approached for our departure my anxiety increased.

When at the last moment he appeared I could have fallen on his neck. He had everything nicely fixed up, so that we passed before everyone in the crowd that clamoured to board the train. As we started I felt *unreasonably* happy, for a draft from the broken windows chilled us and we were really most uncomfortable. But the humming wheels seemed to sing: *Home, home*, and the names of the stations were like sweet music. Cannes, Antibes, Juan-les-Pins—how they rang joyously in my ears! The long years rolled away till it seemed I had been here but yesterday. Then, though cheated by the darkness of its precious approach—NICE. I was so eager to get out of the train I stumbled and fell my full length on the platform, hurting my hip, which did not help any. But little I cared. I breathed with ecstasy that ice-cold air and proclaimed its purity. My beloved Nice!

We acquired a porter who loaded our stuff on a hand-barrow, keeping a sharp look-out in case it got stolen. We followed him through the familiar streets of the musical quarter—the rues Mozart, Rossini, Verdi—to our house in the Place Franklin. There it stood in the frail moonlight, as solid and handsome as when I last looked on it. But what a job we had to arouse the concierge at that hour of the morning! She was still the same, though her husband had died in the interval. We called her *Casque d'Or* because she wore a golden wig, and now even the wig

welcomed us. She could not believe her eyes—thought we had all perished . . . Yes, the apartment was as we had left it. Nothing had been touched. It was marvellous. Houses on every side had been looted but ours had been spared. It was simply that they did not know about it. Both Italians and Germans had passed up that rich booty lying open to their hands. How unbelievably lucky we were! As we entered into that familiar scene it was almost uncanny to find everything just as we had left it, down to the smallest detail.



## *Chapter Fifty-One*

### HOME, SWEET HOME

Of course the apartment was cold and stale as a dungeon, but we were all so tired we grabbed blankets and curled up in beds that smelled of moth balls. All night, however, I struggled with a racking cough and woke weak and wretched. I had to beg some bread for breakfast which we prepared over a spirit lamp. The bleak morn was sunless and forlorn. The palms dripped and the rose bushes were bare. No comfort in the garden. We scouted around, discovering a little food we had left five years before—sugar, tea, coffee, also precious soap. This cheered us a bit, but I had to go out into the biting cold to arrange for the electricity and gas to be turned on. As I went to the various bureaux my head was like to split and I had to sit down on many a bench.

As I went through the markets I noted how the shelves were bare. The shops looked miserably poor, the people pinched and shabby. They did not seem to laugh any more. The girls were wearing wooden-soled shoes and coats made out of army blankets. The men were hollow-cheeked and pale. I got a painful impression of issue out of misery. Going to the bank I drew what little money I had to cope with the astronomical prices, but I could not buy bread because the bakers were closed. I had to borrow it again, and it was so bad it made us all sick. After waiting in line at a market barrow for an hour I bought a cabbage.

It was all like that. Take what you can get and think you're damn' lucky. Line up two hours for a loaf of bread that seems to contain sawdust and fills you with gas. No potatoes, no meat, no fish. Butter and eggs a dream of the past. Did they ever exist? No paper to wrap things in. A market woman charged me a franc for a twist of newsprint to form a poke. Once after a long line-up I was lucky enough to get a small salted cod which I had to carry home by the tail. And the anxiety of the queue! Would the stuff last till my time came? And how often it did not! In these first days people were living on a grey species of macaroni and half-rotted cauliflowers. Any vegetables one could get, such as leeks or salad, would be too green and give one dysentery. People looked so pinched and sad—thin too. How could anyone do a

day's work on such a diet? G.I.'s called the French a lazy lot, but in their own well-fed smugness they were unfit to judge.

Many of the girls rode bicycles and their legs looked thin and hard. But with their cheeks hollowed a little they were prettier than ever. Their high-heeled wooden or straw shoes made them look tall, and they wore their G.I. blanket coats with a gallant swagger. Bicycles were the favourite mode of locomotion, while there were taxi-bicycles where the owner pedalled in front of a light car that held two. All motor cars were fitted with weird and cumbrous contraptions that burned charcoal, and the roofs were packed with sacks of the fuel. Despite December weather few women wore stockings, and then usually sockinettes made of white homespun wool.

Everyone thought in terms of food, looking with avid wistfulness at shop windows where all was camouflage—empty boxes and bottles, with behind a few tinned foods at fantastic prices. I paid two hundred francs for a can of condensed milk, while candies, if you had coupons to buy them, cost you ten francs each. Tea, coffee and chocolate were unobtainable, while sugar had to be bought on the black market at three hundred francs a pound. True, we had ration cards for everything imaginable but there were no rations available. The sheer emptiness of the shops was appalling. It was indeed a weird world into which we had precipitated ourselves so recklessly.

Our first months were spent in trying to adapt ourselves to these rigorous conditions, and often we regretted that we had left Hollywood in such haste. It seemed the cards were stacked against us, for we happened on a spell of the coldest weather for twenty years. An icy wind swept down from the Alps, seeming to cut through one. I ventured out before my flu was completely cured and had a relapse. My doctor said I had just shaved pneumonia. I coughed incessantly and could scarce crawl from one bench to another. How anxiously I watched the bare ground, looking for the first sign of growth, for it meant food, vegetables, salads. The Earth would save us, but it was so long in coming to our rescue. More months of misery before glad spring greenness. I counted the days until we would be able to eat our fill again.

In the meantime I had lost ten pounds in weight, and was amazed to find my clothes fitting me so loosely. My family, too, went down with *grippe*, and they also had a tough time. For Christmas dinner we had each a sardine and a potato. That was the saddest Christmas I have ever spent, for then the pinch of misery seemed to reach its climax. Even the blackest of black markets failed us. But we had streaks of luck—a few eggs at twenty-five francs each, a bit of pork at six hundred francs a kilo, a small ration of dates. How such small things brightened existence!

But best of all were our Red Cross parcels. We learned of these through the British Consul and half believed they saved our lives. They had originally been designed for prisoners of war, but now the surplus was being distributed to indigent Britishers. We were each entitled to one every fortnight and it was a wonderful day when we collected them. They contained tea, sugar, Klim, corned beef, Kam, chocolate, raisins, sardines, prunes, salmon, pilot biscuits, and—just imagine! jam, butter, cheese. How three semi-starving people gloated over all that wealth of food!

And how wonderful everything tasted. My taste buds developed a new sensitivity, so that everything I ate seemed delicious. Hard tack with a little jam—what joy! Klim—what cream was sweeter? Kam—no fresh sausage could be more tasty! Butter and cheese—we had almost forgotten what they tasted like. Bless the Red Cross! How the French people looked at us with envy as proudly we carried our provisions home! Not ten thousand francs could have bought one of these parcels.

Yes, their coming seemed to usher in a brighter day. We felt we were saved for we had those little delicacies that make life tolerable. Then our own parcels, sent off before we left, began to arrive and this too was an occasion for celebration. Now we had tea and coffee in abundance. Fruit cake, too, and candy and marmalade. And at this point our friends in Canada and the States came to our aid. Parcels began to pour in. Soon we were on Easy Street: in fact, building up a reserve. My daughter, who was in charge of the commissariat, took pride in her well-stocked cupboard. And with the spring days the sun warmed the apartment, so that for a few hours every afternoon we were comfortable again. We had been obliged to break up old furniture to keep the furnace going; now, except in the evening, we could let it go out. Nature was showing us mercy.

We blessed the sunshine that glimmered on the palm fronds in the morning, and I began to notice green sprouting from the ground. It was a moment of joy when I saw my first buds on the trees. We had weathered the evil season. Hope gleamed bright again. I was able to buy some coal on the black market, and sugar and meat of good quality, for I had succeeded in getting funds from abroad. At first I had been limited to the few greenbacks I had brought over, changing them at the official price. Now I had ample money and could spend freely. Again I went my walks on the high hills, greeted the blue sky and sang with cheer. Again, in my joy, like a sweet echo, I heard the *Harps of Heaven*.

And so it went on, every day an improvement on the one before. People looked happier; the markets began to fill. Things were dear, but they were on sale. With tomatoes, celery and new potatoes colour came back on the shelves. The pastry

cooks sold us cakes of improving quality, the bread was better, the macaroni whiter. There was no longer that spirit of resignation. We looked forward with courage and confidence. But we could not look back on our austerity period without a shudder. Yet at its blackest there had been gleams of brightness. Everything is relative, and how we had enjoyed a warm radiator, a cup of tea, a sweet biscuit! And what a delight to parsimoniously nibble a morsel of chocolate!

But with the month of May came a magic change, for from the hillside a burst of bloom cascaded into town and the markets were a foam of flowers. Tulips, lilies, violets, anemones, they lit the streets with a spirit of invincible delight. They cheered and exalted. Or perhaps it was the spate of fresh vegetables that brought smiles back again. Peas, beans, artichokes, young carrots, new potatoes—one could be a vegetarian happily, especially as eggs were more easy to get. Rationed foods were still a mockery, and meat was rare, but the bread became really enjoyable. Colour took the streets, too, as the women put on gay gowns of flowered print that fluttered in the sunshine. How gallantly the girls carried themselves on their high-heeled shoes, and slung their shoulder bags with gay coquetry!

Quite suddenly one felt a vast change in morale, the spirit of liberation at last. The uplift was so great one wanted to dance in the streets, and at the May festival the bars were festooned, the accordions rejoiced and the people revelled as never before. It was good to be alive again. The roses in my garden bloomed exultantly. The pergola was ablaze with them, and every room spilled over with gorgeous colour. The big mimosa tree was a sheen of gold; the cherry trees were gemmed with blossom. The swallows returned and skimmed low over the streets, while starlings made music in the orange trees.

Yet in the midst of such a renaissance of joy there were mementos of the Terror. At street corners one came on marble slabs to tell you that the pavement below had been crimsoned with Resistance blood. Near the Place Massena were tablets where two young patriots had been hanged, and the people forced to pass before them for two days. On every hand one heard hideous tales of starvation, cold, moral dejection. Yes, the people deserved to rejoice for they had been through hell. Now their hearts were buoyant again and instead of wry grimaces they gave you radiant smiles.

It was the old France of laughter and gaiety, of peace and plenty, for with the beginning of the fruit season the cornucopia seemed to brim over. There were cherries and strawberries, peaches and apricots, plums, greengages, grapes, pears, apples, all succeeding one another and in such abundance we seemed to be living on fruit. During the winter our chief complaint had been that we had forgotten its taste, and

now this plenitude. One felt one was blessed. To me the *Harps of Heaven* sang serenely.

The Italian occupation had been easy, but the German one unbelievably brutal. The Gestapo was everywhere. They had their quarters in the Hermitage and the cells underneath were scenes of torture. Most of the Jews had been deported to the death chambers of Dachau and Auschwitz, and many Communists had been liquidated. But it was along the sea front the sign of the Occupation was most glaring. By forced labour the Boches had built a magnificent bastion that stretched for miles, skirting the promenade. Some of it was unfinished but the stones were there, ready to be put in place.

Now it made a beautiful sea wall behind which were forts and gun stations. Also on the beach, which was a bristle of barbed wire, were guard houses of steel and concrete. Every means had been taken to repel invaders and now it was wasted labour. For they were heaping the barbed wire in rusting masses, and demolishing the guard towers with dynamite. The promenade had been turned into a defence zone, the villas had been evacuated. In one of those my bank was situated. The officials had received twenty-four hours' notice to clear out, and in that time they had forced the strong boxes, put the contents into sacks and packed them off to a safe French bank.

Yes, I was lucky; for in our strong box were many precious bric-a-brac, all our silver plate, and the manuscripts of three unpublished books. All were saved by the energy of the bank officials. On the other hand my strong box in Paris was opened by the Germans who must have been badly fooled, for it contained nothing but out-of-date publishers' contracts. In Dinard, too, my safety deposit box was forced by the Boche, but it only contained some Life Annuity contracts that could not interest them.

And Nice was lucky too, for the city had escaped bombardment. It would have been so easy to make rubble of those shell-like houses with their red tiled roofs. A little destruction would have gone such a long way. The damage done by five minutes of shelling would have taken years to repair. The city might never have recovered, yet here it was smiling again and using German prisoners to work on its roads and its gutters. One saw hundreds of them, looking not so badly off. Indeed, those employed by the Americans were chipper to the point of arrogance.

The Yanks on leave dominated the water front. Those G.I.'s were having the time of their lives, pursued by French *poules* and lodged in the best hotels. They bought cartons of cigarettes in the canteens and traded them off in the black market. At night the more obstreperous roamed the streets uproariously, leaving broken

windows in their wake. Then quite suddenly they seemed to vanish. Hotel after hotel was closed, till only the Ruhl remained. Their girls were sent to the hospital for treatment, and they, too, vanished overnight. It had been rather hectic and I was glad to see those signs of military occupation disappear. Yet the townspeople missed the cash the big Yanks squandered so lavishly.

So at last we had our own Nice back again, the Nice of the Carnival, of the Battle of Flowers, of the swarms of tourists. I hoped I would never set eyes on a khaki uniform again. To hell with war and all its paraphernalia! One should have been grateful to the men in uniform, but all one felt was a desire not to see any more of them. And perhaps I was grateful. At least I was thankful as I looked round my lovely apartment and saw everything in its place. By a miracle those precious things we had collected over half a lifetime had been spared to us. Pictures, statuettes, carpets, curtains of lace and velvet—they were our treasures even though their value was negligible. That picture I bought for a hundred francs in an old junk shop gave me the same serene pleasure as the day I carried it home twenty-five years before. Yes, our possessions were priceless because they conserved the essence of our years of happy living. To have lost them would have been the worst heart-break of all.

And last but not least my beloved books, over a thousand, some rare and many in rich bindings—how thankful I was to have them restored to me! I dipped into them with inexpressible joy. My accordion too—it was still in tune. And my three guitars—their tone was as sweet as ever. How the Boches would have grabbed them if they had known! But perhaps they did, for the apartment above me, owned by a wealthy Jew, was stripped completely. Perhaps because I was British they left my stuff alone . . . but I doubt it.

And while I was marvelling at my immunity I had another bit of good news. The garagist in my Brittany village wrote to say he had saved my car. Three times the Germans had come to take it, but each time he had stalled them off. He had risked imprisonment to preserve my lovely little *Lancia*, and he wrote that he was putting it in shape for me. That reminded me I had another home, the dearest of all. How had things fared at Dream Haven? How was Tasie and her family? Had my house been smashed or looted? Had my trees been spared? . . . It was calling me, the spot on earth I most loved, begging me to return.

### RETURN TO DREAM HAVEN

Seven years after our flight I returned to Dream Haven.

It was dusk when I entered the village and a summer storm was brooding. By lightning flashes I followed the path till I neared my home, but all I could see was a black pyramid of pines. My trees! With my own hands I had planted them, digging the hole and setting up the tiny sapling. Now each was forty feet high, with the girth of a woman's waist. How often in my exile I had worried about them, hoping they would be spared. Behold them a tiny forest, hiding the house from view. I hungered to see it, but the thunder roared and the rain poured, so I returned to the village.

On my way I called on the garagist who had saved my car. A grimy man of seventy, he greeted me with roars of joy; offering me his oily wrist to shake. Four times the Boche had tried to take away my *Lancia*, but he had dismantled it and hid the tyres. "I told them it was mine," he said; "but if they had discovered me in the lie they would have shot me. Ah, what brutes! Fancy—ten thousand of them quartered in the village. They had their petrol pump in my garage and a soldier to guard it. All day he sat there, but I did not speak to him. Then one morning the Commandant came on him with his belt unbuttoned. He made him stand to attention, put on a glove and slugged him three times on the jaw. Each time he knocked him down and made him stand to attention again.

"Oh he was a swine, that Commandant. He terrorised the village. He swore he would shoot anyone who uttered the word *Boche*. He evacuated all the houses near the sea. Your neighbour, the English lady who was seventy, he sent to a concentration camp. Your other neighbour, the dentist, got eighteen months in prison for reproaching a collaborator. That's the bitter part of it. We who were honest have to go on living with those who worked for the enemy. It doesn't pay to be a patriot."

That night I slept in the house of Tasie. Her joy at seeing me knew no bounds. Time and again she clutched my hand and held it. A bunched old woman, grey-haired and spectacled. With pride she showed me her home, once a barn and pig-sty, now a rustic residence of charm and taste, with whitewashed walls, oak beams, window

nooks and a winding stairway. She was the richest woman in the village, owning half a dozen houses and a score of fields. "And I owe it all to you, Monsieur," she told me with tears in her eyes. "When you first engaged me I hadn't a *sou*, and the five francs a day you paid me seemed a fortune."

This, however, wasn't exactly true. She owed it to her industry and shrewdness. With her small savings she began by buying the earth-floored hovel in which she lived, and by sweat and saving she forged her way to fortune. Property was cheap. When she saw a bargain she would come to me timidly and ask for the loan of a few thousand francs. She became the village washerwoman and bell-ringer, working day and night to repay her debt. So bit by bit, over thirty years, she realised a proud independence. A woman of deep integrity whose motto was: Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day before yesterday.

To a Britisher expressions of gratitude are a bore so I switched the subject to the Occupation. No sooner had we gone than the Germans surged on the scene. The road was stiff with their cars. "Where is the Englishman," they cried, "who writes bad things about our Fuhrer? Escaped! Well, we will make sure. . . ." So they crashed in the door, searched the house, started the radio. When Tasie arrived they were already at home. "English *kaput*," they sneered. "This ours now, always ours." Then as she sought to save the family photographs they drove her off, threatening to shoot her if she touched anything.

Soon the Commandant appeared. A slim man about my height, he too, sported a monocle. "This place pleases me," he said; "I will make it my head-quarters." Then he looked at my shelves of books, remarking: "If I were not a German soldier it would please me to be an English gentleman. But this author is an enemy of my country. In his books does he not call us *Huns*! Well, if ever we are obliged to quit this charming spot we will leave behind us only a shambles."

So saying he selected the best of my Savile Row suits, my pearl grey and chalk-lined blue flannels, and monocle in eye strutted through the village. Then began the joyous loot in which all of value we possessed vanished overnight. Our silver and napery, our linen, embroidery, pictures, our carpets, curtains, clothes and shoes—all disappeared in a twinkling. The search was ruthless. With what sadistic joy they discovered my accordion under the roof-beam where I had hidden it. My grand piano, a Steinway, was shipped to Hamburg; my guitars, my motor bicycle were grabbed with delight. Indeed, in a few days everything that was easily transportable had vanished.

Twenty-five soldiers occupied the house, and no one was allowed to go near. As its commanding site gave it strategic value it was made a defensive point. Yet when



Rommel came on a tour of inspection he called it a “mouse-trap” and ordered it to be converted into a citadel. They began by breaching the walls for machine-gun posts. They built pill-boxes in the garden; they tunnelled and trenched till they transformed my home into a fortress.

They were fairly correct in their behaviour, but if they did not pursue the fair sex some of the women ran after *them*. A buxom wench who had been regarded as the village harlot, was soon running a *bordel* with a dozen women and girls to assist her. By night they played my accordion and drank champagne from my cellar. After the liberation everyone of them were publicly cropped and marched up and down the village; while one girl, who had a portrait of Hitler in her room, was made to kiss it, as she paraded to the jeers of the populace. The Resistants were bitter. Few who had been friendly to the Boche escaped their vengeance. Our village vamp got three years in gaol, while some of the male Hitlerites were sent to the chain gang.

There were others who willingly had business dealings with the Germans. Many of these are now rich, but they will never live down the reproach levelled at them. Collaborationists! one shrugs with a look of contempt. Fortunately they were in a minority. The others, the Incorruptibles, refused to speak to or even look at a Boche. Even in the darkest hours they never lost hope. They were, it is true, only passive Resisters, but they conserved their honour. Lastly came the militant men, the real Resisters. Marcel, son of Tasie, was one of those, and was imprisoned for hoisting the tricolour on the church steeple. But most people lived in fear, for they had been told that the least act of revolt would result in the total destruction of the village.

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Next morning I set out for Dream Haven. After the storm the land was glittering—the fields bright with buttercups and rich with growing grain. I wanted to bless each ear of wheat for its promise of bread to come. But my way was slow. Red-faced men with bellowing voices wrung my hand, while women unknown to me hailed me joyfully. The heartiness of their welcome surprised me. To them I was an exile returning home. I belonged to this strong, ruddy race and they received me with open arms. So after many haltings and greetings I came in sight of the sea. I was picking my way through a clover meadow when a huge, hairy man greeted me.

“Ah Monsieur, you go to see your poor house. But it has not suffered so much. Mine they razed to the ground. The stone they used for their ramparts, the wood to line their trenches. Yours still stands, and that is something. You were lucky the Commandant liked it. He had orders to blow it sky-high, but he did not have time. The Americans came too quick. Oh the grand boys! How they drove the Boche out

of the house, chased them across the fields, killed them in the wood yonder. What joy to see them! And so by a miracle, Monsieur, the Americans saved your home.”

As I drew near the coppice behind which it lay, I hoped and feared in turn. First, I saw that all the fences had been torn down and the gateway was gone. Through pine-gloom I passed over a carpet of crushed cones to come on a wasteland that once had been my rose garden. A lone rose greeted me, and gratefully I plucked it. High grass hid the main alley while debris blocked the other paths. The approach was difficult. I walked warily, fearing traps. . . .

There! I saw it at last—the old house. Sadly it seemed to welcome me, seeming to say: “Here I am, Master, broken, battered, weak and worn, but faithful to you still. For thirty years I sheltered you. Now, do not abandon me in my age and sorrow. Once again rejoice me with your music and your laughter. . . .” And I said: “Home of my Heart, do not fear. I will not desert you. I will return and live in you, and love you as long as life shall last.”

And as I gazed in sentimental reverie there was a scream and a crash. I started—it was only a shutter swinging in the wind. Then I saw that all the windows were broken, and the wind swept through the house, so that it moaned like a lost soul. Slowly I stumbled my way to the side that faced the sea. The red roof-tiles were rusty, plaster peeled from the walls, but staunchly the house stood. Rommel himself had ordered it torn down and a bastion built in its place. Already they had made a beginning by breaching the wall and installing cement platforms for machine gun emplacements.

Seated on one of these, where rocks went ruggedly down, far and wide I scanned the sea. On the iron shore it crashed yeastily, tossing in peacock shades of blue and green to the empty islands that barred the ocean. A caller wind whipped the blood to ecstasy. Here was a grandeur and beauty the Boche could not destroy. This, at least, they had left me, and with the sight to glory in it. Gratefully I gazed till, turning at last with a strange reluctance, I entered the house where I had passed the best years of my life.

Grudgingly the door yielded to my key and I found myself in the hallway. The wind souged in the corridors, the floor was splintered underfoot. The wainscoting was shattered, the tapestry torn away, the walls lettered with Boche inscriptions. Luckily the doors were intact, and I opened that leading to the salon. The first thing I saw was a strange piano, battered, upright, anonymous. It was cracked and tinny but easy to play, for it was so out of tune that if you struck a false note it sounded like a true one. I thumped out the *Harp That Once Through Tara's Halls*, and the music I evoked echoed weirdly in that deserted house.

The place had been gutted with ferocious enthusiasm. What little remained would not have tempted a travelling tinker. The rich tapestry that covered the walls had been ripped away, revealing them in their stark crudity. The woodwork had been systematically smashed, and everything that could not be removed had been deliberately damaged. A beautiful home wrecked, and I was too old to restore it. That was the worst of it: I had not the guts to begin over again.

Finding little to comfort me, bleakly I went from room to room. The bedrooms were bare and bedless, the kitchen an empty shell with only a ruined stove to show what it had been. In some rooms the destruction was complete. My roll-top desk and cabinet had been smashed; every wardrobe was doorless. My pictures had vanished and my library. . . . But fearing the fate of my beloved books I had left that to the last. Well, seemingly about a third of them remained but in such grievous state I was sorry they, too, had not been destroyed. For the pages were pulp, the covers rain-rotted. To a bookman a sad sight. Had they been left to mock me? And the others—fuel no doubt for a Boche bonfire. Well, that was that. No use crying over burned books. I was inclined to bewail the manuscript of my novel, “And His Seed Forever” but probably it was no good anyway. Of more account, to my thinking were my hundred bound volumes of *Punch*, my *Encyclopedia Britannica*, my big *Webster’s Dictionary*. What a bonny blaze to rejoice the hearts of Vandals. Sick of staring at empty shelves I sought the sunshine of the garden!

Sitting by the well under the fig tree (where, if the publisher cares to print it you may see a picture of me) soberly I took stock. After all, things might have been worse. At least the house stood. One day all the able-bodied men of the village had been summoned to demolish it. They had refused, so the elders had been arrested. Seeing their fathers threatened with a firing squad the young men had yielded. But before they could make a start the Commandant had changed his mind. For the moment my house was saved. Less fortunate my neighbour and friend, an English lady who owned a gem of a *chalet* perched on a point. They used it as a target to test their fire. Now its sightless skeleton echoed the wail of the winds.

Yes, I was lucky. After all I was alive, while so many I had known had come to a sorry end. Radiant living might still be mine. Even in my wild garden there was beauty—gay gowans and impudent poppies. I could fold my hands and invite Peace. Patience, resignation, charity were mine. Largely I had learned the lesson of life. . . . So sitting in the quiet sunniness I looked up at Dream Haven and thought of the happy part it had played in the harmony of my days. I would never let the old shack down. As long as health remained I would go back every summer and sing and play and loaf and laugh. I would light the hearth fire and rouse the walls with cheer. And

perhaps as I sought my rest with soft stars burning, I would hear again my mystic melody, my *Harps of Heaven*.

# THE END OF THE TRAIL

I am writing this on the terrace of a big brown villa, perched amid proud palms. Below me is the sapphire sea, and afar the Isle of Corsica glows like a golden ember in the diamond dawn. Olive groves wimple to the beach, waves flash like silver sea-gulls on the shingle. Twice daily I go down to play with them; I roam for hours on the mountain-side, I muse on banks of rosemary and thyme. . . . A place one dreams of—Journey's End for a life-long dreamer.

The villa is spacious and gracious. It has floors of marble, arches and Corinthian columns. Indeed, it once played an important part in the life of the community, for it was the official *bordel de luxe*. There was a *bidet* in every room, including the drawing room. Even now I feel it is harlot haunted, and somehow it tickles me to think I am ending my days in a house of ill-fame.

Ending my days—there is a finality in the phrase that affronts me. I look on life as an Experiment in Longevity. When I was young I had three ambitions: to make a million dollars, to write twenty books, to live a hundred years. The last I will never do. I will have to content myself with a modest ninety. "Today," I tell myself, "you are bright-eyed and alert. The years will pass and you will toddle round, a perky Old Codger with a cheery smile. If Bernard Shaw can do it so can you. True, you are not a vegetarian, and if steaks and ale do not harm you you will continue to enjoy them. So with your back to the fire and your belly to the table you will still get a lot of fun out of living. And that's the sum of human wisdom—enjoy your days on earth, for they are all you will have to enjoy."

I had a mind to end this book on a gleeful note but I find it hard to do so. I hate to be serious and I am afraid to be a bore. Yet I have a feeling that these may be my last words and I want them to be worthy. So forgive me if a solemn note creeps in. After writing many pages to clarify my final relations to living, I am tearing them up. I prefer to hark back to a dead book of mine, and from it quote words that to me ring as truly as when I wrote them twenty-five years ago.

I am a professional ink-slinger and most of my life I have made my bread and

butter by my pen. I like my job, but I have no foolish illusions as to its importance. Nor have I any but the most pessimistic views as to the permanent value of literary effort. The good will go with the bad. We who are sprats and don't matter may console ourselves that even the whales don't matter. In the long run we are all headed for the scrap-heap; the Pantheons of today will be the Parthenons of tomorrow.

What's the use of fortune? What's the good of fame?

Rank and riches, pomp and power, the end is just the same:

We're nothing but a pack of fools that play a silly game.

The devil of it is: we've got to play it, and it's the way we play that counts. It's the spirit of striving that matters. In expressing the best that is in us we are keeping alive the genius of the race. And however, futile we consider the fight we must carry on. We may realise that pride is a sham, property an illusion, wealth vain . . . yet we must work or we will die. In our fashion each of us must serve Nature's purpose as she moves in us and through us to her inscrutable ends.

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Every man who reaches the sober seventies should be a philosopher of sorts. With the years he acquires patience, tolerance, stoicism. He revises his values and begins to see existence as a whole. He realises his insignificance, his mortality. In the end he is enriched by resignation and a cheerful acceptance of destiny. . . . But before he comes to this he may have a moment of self-searching. He may want to conceive some idea of what he is, and why he is. He would like to know what the whole thing means. Or at least satisfy himself that he can never satisfy himself. He would fain reach a final position of which he can approve, and not leave this earthly scene baffled and discontented. All this I have gone through.

Unfortunately I have a scientific mind. I would like to account for life in terms of physics and biology. I would explain emotions by chemical action. I would prove that everything that exists can be expressed in terms of Matter. I would conceive the Universe as a mechanism in which Man plays an automatic part. I would regard him as no more responsible for his actions than he is for his existence. Indeed, he owes his being to an act of brutal passion in which he is ignored. He is not so much a product as a by-product. . . .

All of which may be true, but it does not help us to happiness, and that is the aim of everyone. Materialism, Determinism, Agnosticism—these are bleak beliefs that lead us up a blind alley. Science does not supply *The Answer*, and after much muddling I have abandoned it. I realise that I am a fool and that I know nothing, yet I

do not see that others know a great deal more. Baffled by the mystery that surrounds me I cease to puzzle over it. Having satisfied my lust for reality I am willing to return to illusion. I am resigned to a destiny I cannot fathom. I make the best of things and develop my capacity for enjoyment. I cease trying to probe the depths and take my happiness as it comes.

No doubt happiness is something different for each of us. Even to ourselves its character is constantly changing. I think, however, that, generally speaking, we all get about an even ration. In the long run the poor are almost as happy as the rich. Nature adjusts us to our circumstances so that whether we are peers or peasants we get our share of the sun. When it comes to the question of taste-buds or testicles the pleasure of the travelling tinker is equal to that of the movie magnate.

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Having been pushed around in my early days I demand in my seventies the right to comfort. I assert my claim to avoid anything that threatens my peace. I put my interests and those of my household before everything. I admit this is selfish, but I am not responsible for the state of the world and I feel it is not my affair to reform it. I give to charity but take care that my own needs are satisfied. I would not sit out a sermon but cheerfully I pay for the family pew. I denounce the unearned increment but I clip my coupons carefully. And in reaping the benefits of capital I am not ashamed, for I believe that those who condemn it most would do as I do if fortune came their way.

But at least I can say that for all the good I enjoy I am deeply grateful. If it were a tenth of what it is I believe I would still be grateful. Give me Ruskin and a rusk and I will mock the pomp of princes. Only let me rise in the morning feeling that I am *free*, and that the day before me is all my own to do with as I will. Only let me potter round my garden, joyously do my physical jerks and fuss over my toilet. Only let me eat my simple lunch with the appetite I have studiously unsophisticated. Let me walk the windy heath, returning rosilily to tea. Let me sit in dressing gown and slippers before an open fire, stroking a cat that purrs, chatting of idle things, dipping into a pleasant book. Let me pass the long evenings in cheerful repose, and when the house is hushed let me take a last look at the stars, saying: "What a good day it's been. Rich, full, sweet. For all its happiness I thank whatever Gods may be. . . ."

So in my seventies this is what life means to me. Of course, to you it means something quite different. But whatever it does mean it should hold out happiness to you with both hands. If not, something is terribly wrong and the sooner you right it the better.

Happiness, in whatever form it comes, is not to be questioned. It is to be hugged

to the heart. Illusion is to be cherished. On the surface of things is enchantment enough. Do not let us seek to see too clearly. Let us like painters be satisfied with appearance. Let us like children be satisfied with little things. In the simple joy of the heart let us forget inalterable destinies. From the gladness of birds, the rich tenderness of the rose, the lusty joy of roaring tides, let us learn to live radiantly.

Yet it is good to have some conception of what we are, and of the part we play. It will make us humble and at the same time glorify us. A conception of world destiny is as necessary to us as is a conception of human destiny. We are part of the Oneness of things, and through each of us moves the Eternal Purpose. We are at the mercy of no blind forces, but part of a sublime scheme. Let us believe in the wisdom of the world plan, and the ultimate triumph through law and order of the unknown and almighty energy.

Surely a faith in our Universe and our human destiny should satisfy us. Let us then put all futile gropings for a meaning of life out of our minds and come down to the pure joy of living. Let us worship Nature as she reveals herself in all simplicity and beauty. And if we live in usefulness and sanity according to her laws, cultivating happiness and sharing it with those near and dear to us, we will do more than well. The measure of our sunshine is the brightness we can kindle in the eyes of others.

In some cloistered garden we may walk with peace, and in the joy of little things our vain efforts to comprehend the Universe may be forgotten. In tangible beauty is charm and solace. In visible nature is comfort. Let us be eager to be pleased; grateful for every gleam of sunshine. Nature can comfort us and bring us joy. Are we not her children? Let us try, if it so pleases us, to understand her with the minds of sages, but let us enjoy her with the hearts of children.

So in the end let us seek a quiet home, and with earth radiant about us, face the setting sun. With thankful eyes and grateful hearts let us rejoice that it has been granted to us to live the length of our years in a world of beauty—to understand much, to divine much, and to come at last through pleasant paths to peace. Peace and understanding! So with our last gaze let us face the serene sunset, content to have played our parts and saying humbly:

“Nature, from whose bosom I come, take me back tenderly, lovingly.

Forgive my faults, my failures, and now that my usefulness to you is ended,  
grant me to rest eternally.”

ALL IS WELL





# *TRANSCRIBER NOTES*

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

[The end of *Harper of Heaven* by Robert William Service]