

II

GENERAL AND MISS PRIMROSE

I HAD a good opportunity on this first day of sailing of observing the numerous company who were proceeding to India. With the exception of Mr. George Pellew, I believe that all the passengers assembled at the luncheon table at one o'clock on this, *my* first day at all events of the voyage, at which hour the ship was well clear of the Sound, standing for the central Channel navigation under full breasts of canvas from truck to waterway; her decks an extraordinarily busy scene of sailors coiling away the rigging and clearing up, and of soldiers passing in and out of the galley with smoking kids and steaming puddings for the messes of the three or four score men who formed the ship's cargo of red-coats.

The water was wonderfully smooth, otherwise the company might not have been numerous. I observed the glittering swing-trays, and their scarcely perceptible oscillation indicated a movement in the ship that could be trying only to the imagination. Surely Mr. George Pellew, who smoked tobacco in his cabin and talked of chicken and champagne—something light in short, when trifles lighter than air are as heavy as thunderbolts to the really capsized stomach—could not be so seriously inconvenienced by this soft cradling and rhythmic sliding of the structure, in whose movements you felt the whole life coming into her out of her milky pinions, as to be obliged to keep his cabin! I ran my eye over the company. It was an *omnium gatherum*—as typical a mixture of human beings as was ever wafted from the British coast to remote parts. Ten or twelve military men; a parson; a brigade surgeon; a naval lieutenant; a beef-faced merchant captain named Whale, the representative of a firm of ship-owners, sailing to India to inquire into some matter of collision. Needless to say it took me a few days to find

out these people's vocations. There were some Civil Service young gentlemen; and we were largely leavened by ladies, from Mrs. Colonel Mowbray, an immensely stout woman, whose high Roman nose and projecting under lip made one think of a wall drinking fountain—spout and cup: down—though I know not why *down*—to a delicate young girl named Miss Vava-sour, whose brilliant eyes and wax-like fingers too surely indicated that her embarkation in pursuit of health was all too late.

My gaze however was chiefly attracted by Miss Primrose. The General sat on the right of the captain at the athwartship table at the after-end of the saloon, and his daughter's seat was next him. Sir Charles darted searching looks everywhere, pausing sometimes with an air of haughty and contemptuous inspection; but his daughter kept her eyes downwards bent. She seldom raised them I observed even when replying to words addressed to her by one or two ladies who sat near. She lunched in her hat, which, being somewhat large and richly plumed, overshadowed her face, sitting as she did for the most part with her head

bowed; yet enough was visible of her countenance to render its expression of melancholy memorable to me even though my sight had gone to her then for the first and last time. Nor was it melancholy only: there was something of fear in it too, and the combined effect seemed to my mind to suggest a violent heart-wrench, the brutality of which had coloured anguish with the highest form of tragic amazement.

At this first lunch aboard the *Light of Asia* we were all very constrained, truly British in our cautious regard and wary approaches. Here and there you would hear a voice talking somewhat loftily and drawlingly, and occasionally a "Yaas" and a "Good Ged" would meet the ear, and there was a frequent glitter of wine-glasses raised to moustachioed lips; and a species of emotion termed by newspaper reporters "sensation" would be noticeable amongst the ladies when reference was made for instance to the Bay of Biscay and to the weather off Agulhas. I eyed General Primrose with some respect, for he was a man who had risen by merit to distinction in his profession,

and he had a high character for courage and fortitude and adroitness in passages of difficulty, though I had also heard of him as an unpleasantly severe disciplinarian and a person whose popularity was wholly to be found amongst those who had never been in any sort of way associated with him. What was his motive, I remember speculating, for withdrawing his melancholy daughter from the green lands and pleasant climate of England, to hold her within sight under the bloom-destroying sun of India? He did not look to be a gentleman who stood in need of the ministrations of a daughter. A valet, a man-servant, always standing at attention, a passive object to be easily sworn at, a target for a half-wellington boot, something too large to be missed by even an awkwardly flung missile: this methought, as I gazed at his stern, haughty, and forbidding face, with its eyes which seemed to shower impassioned expletives at every glance, was the species of attendant *he* would require—*he* with his savagely curled white moustache and sullen dye of cheek which promptly sent the mind to years of inflaming dishes and to a liver dis-

organized by protracted periods of injudicious hospitality. Was he taking out this girl to India to get her married? Surely her gift of most uncommon beauty must render such a project as *that* the easiest of all achievable things in England, providing of course she held no opinions of her own on the subject. And these speculations, all swiftly entered upon and dismissed, as I sat on this first day at sea at that table, conducted me to another fancy: was her undissembled expression of melancholy due to love? Had she made some grave maidenly blunder—from her father's point of view I mean? And was this voyage to India, and was her residence in that country, to be the General's corrective for an untimely or an ill-placed sentiment?

But whilst I thus sat thinking, exchanging now and again somewhat abstractedly a sentence with the surgeon of the ship, whose place at table was next me, the bulkheads on either hand slightly creaked and the ship leaned to a sudden increase of weight in the wind, and to the first of a long light heave of swell rolling to the quarter of the vessel out of the south-east.

In fact I supposed we had now opened the Channel past Bolt Head, and the respiration of the wide breast of water beyond was to be felt. There was some staring one at another, and a general pause in the conversation; but the ship continued to roll, lightly indeed, yet in a manner to cause one to look at one's wine-glass to see what was to become of it. Then one lady stood up, then another; Mrs. Colonel Mowbray sailed balloon-like to her cabin, and in a few moments everybody was in motion hastening on deck or withdrawing to his berth.

Though by no means an old sailor—in those days my age was eight-and-twenty, and I had rounded the Cape of Good Hope twice in my passages to and from India—sea-sickness never troubled me. My cigar-case was empty, and I went to my cabin to fill it from my portmanteau. I use the words cabin and berth indifferently; but strictly the term *berth* applies to a sleeping-place on board ship, whilst *cabin* signifies the living-room. As I made my way to my berth I felt very sensibly the inconvenience of sharing it with another; or perhaps I should say with such another as Mr. Pellew threatened

to be—a man who promised to be incessantly present whenever I made my visits, and who must therefore rob my half of the sea-bedroom of all charm of privacy. I opened the door and found him sitting erect in his bunk, with his legs over the edge, smoking a Manila cheroot. A tray containing the remains of his luncheon and an empty bottle of champagne stood on the deck. His posture now fully disclosed him; the sunshine lay strong upon the sea on the port hand of the vessel on which side our cabin was situated, and the sheen flowing off the rich and trembling brilliancy of the water gushed to the large open porthole, and rendered the interior thrice as light as I had previously found it.

I stood for a few moments staring with real wonder and admiration at the surprising beauty of the young fellow's face—but a beauty as masculine as any woman could wish to find in the graces of a man—every feature virile in its very essence. He smiled and, holding up his cigar, exclaimed, "I am an inveterate smoker, and hope you will not object to the smell of tobacco-smoke in this cabin?"

"Not at all. I too am a hard smoker." I opened my portmanteau and produced a box of cigars. "But I should have thought that smoking would not suit your complaint."

"My nausea?" he exclaimed, eyeing me gravely and keenly. "Oh, yes. Tobacco is good for sea-sickness. It has certain tonical properties. It is also a sort of narcotic, they say. Whatever is good for the nerves is good for nausea." He continued to coolly puff at his weed, meanwhile observing me with a narrowness wholly wanting in offence, though it made me very sensible of its curious quality of penetration.

"Pray," said I carelessly, but talking with intention, "why do you not go on deck and breathe the fresh air? Surely for nausea there is a virtue in fresh air which must be wanting even in tobacco."

"I am very well here," he answered. "Did you lunch in the saloon?"

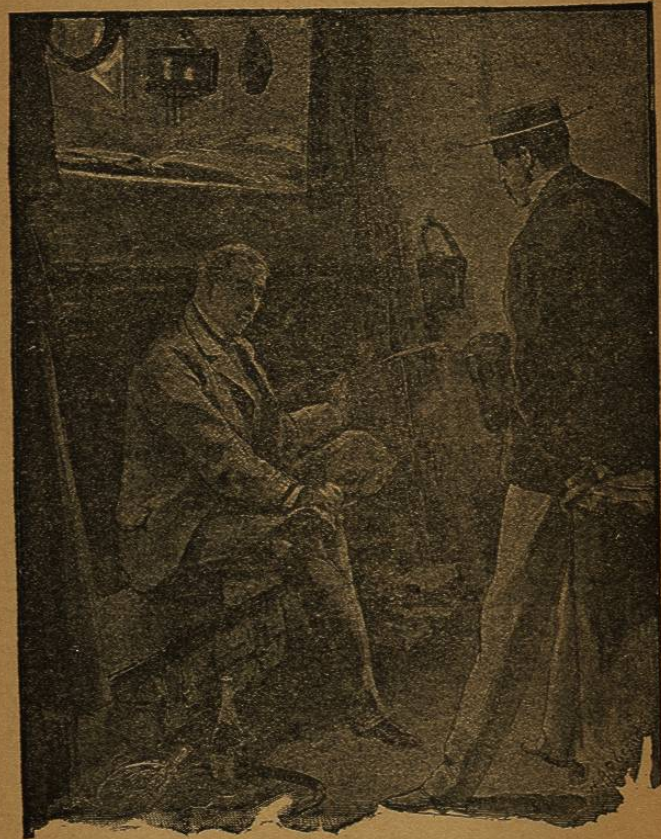
"I did."

"Many present?"

"All, I should say, saving yourself."

"A large number of military men, no doubt?"

"Yes, we muster fairly well."



"MY NAUSEA?" HE EXCLAIMED. "OH, YES, TOBACCO IS GOOD FOR SEA-SICKNESS."

"In fact," said he, "this is almost a troopship. The fellow who waits upon me here, talks of there being a General on board."

"So there is," said I, "Major-General Sir Charles Primrose—a big gun in his way—a whole breast of medals no doubt, and with record enough to furnish him with a page or two in books which tell you who people with titles are."

"Do you know him?" he asked languidly.

"No, but I shall be presently making his acquaintance, perhaps."

"I dare say he is a very disagreeable person. An objectionable old East Indian officer surely tops the list of people one ought to dislike. Such airs! such prejudices! such despotism, resulting from the habit of commanding not only black troops, but black servants. And then," continued he, preserving his languid voice, "the objectionable old East Indian officer has a trick of shouting when he converses. He will bawl *good-morning* to you as though he were ordering a regiment of Sepoys to charge. I believe I shall remain very much out of sight. It is miserable to be locked up with unpleasant

people," he added, talking with an affectation of "nerves" and with a sleepy droop of his lids which only served to sharpen the clear intelligent gaze of his handsome eyes.

"But you will not surely wholly live in this cabin?"

"No. I will of course take the air from time to time, but I shall probably continue to eat here. There is no shipboard law I presume to oblige a passenger to take his meals at the cabin table? Many ladies on board?" continued he, speaking with a slight drawl.

"A baker's dozen, I should say—perhaps more."

"I figure," said he—"a Lady Primrose, a woman rendered as objectionable as her husband by the contaminating airs and graces of Indian society."

"There is no Lady Primrose: at least there is no Lady Primrose in this ship. There is a Miss Primrose, a beautiful and interesting girl. But why do you speak of the General as objectionable? I have not called him so, and you I may take it have not yet met him."

He slightly yawned, and answered whilst he

relighted his cigar: "Something in your reference to him may have suggested the old gentleman as objectionable. I really do not know, Captain Swift, and I may honestly add that I really do not care."

"Well," said I, moving towards the door, "I must hope to be able to coax you on deck later on."

He smiled, and rose out of his bunk to take a book from the top of the little chest of drawers which he had appropriated. He was even taller than I had supposed him to be, a magnificent figure of a man, and as he stood for a moment there was the grace of a reposing dancer in his posture. "Well now," thought I as I walked out, "who the dickens is this noble creature I should like to know? and what is his motive in going to India? and what can be his object in imprisoning himself in a darksome cabin? And he is to be *my* berth-fellow too! I shall find out something about him by and by, no doubt. Is he a criminal flying from his country? A forger? a homicide? A mystery there certainly is. He is no more sea-sick than I am; he is no more averse to the society

of old East India officers than another. What is it then?" And this question, uttered to myself, landed me on the poop.

The scene into which I rose extinguished in me all thoughts of Mr. Pellew. The after-part of the ship was comparatively deserted, many of the passengers being probably too incommoded by the movements of the vessel to show themselves, whilst others were busy in their berths with the bestowal of the clothes and conveniences they had brought with them. The breeze had considerably freshened, and the countenance of the windward sky had undergone one of those swift changes which always impress me as a sort of miracle. When I had gone below to lunch, the heavens were high and pure, with but a film of cloud here and there, and the sun in the south and west sparkled in the September atmosphere with a silver mistiness that by a discerning eye might have been deemed prophetic. And now that same face of heaven was sullen with ridged cloud, a surface of corrugated vapour that was already streaming past our mast-heads and away over the lee-bow, with the sun now and again flashing a

single beam through a crevice and smiting some frothing head of sea under it into a dazzle of snow. The ship was swarming along magnificently, some of her lighter sails on high blowing out like bladders in the grip of their gear, with the figures of reefers aft, and seamen forward trotting up the wide spread of massive black shrouds to furl the canvas; her round bow and enormously thick cutwater stormed through the hurl of the surge, and often to her curtseyings the foam was swept ahead of her to the distance of her flying-jibboom end when it would come rushing past in a giddy boiling that made the eye which watched it spin again.

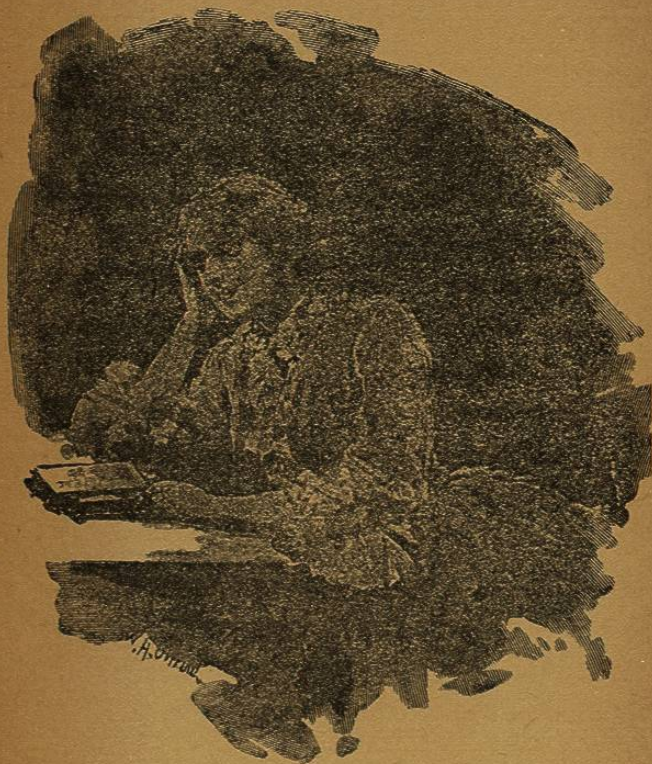
This was, indeed, being at sea! We had sunk the land--No! hard away down upon the quarter in the windy haze you saw the phantasmal loom of the English coast, but so ghost-like was it that it eluded the gaze you directed that way; it revealed itself fitfully and was gone when you looked. Yet it was England, the last glimpse maybe we were to obtain of the old home; and my spirits sank as I strained my eyes into the horizon.

I peered through the glass of the skylight

and saw Miss Primrose seated at the table almost directly beneath. An open book lay before her, but it was easy to guess by her slightly averted face that her eyes were not fastened upon the page. She had removed her hat, and I could now see that she added to her other extraordinary charms an amazing profusion, a wonderful luxuriance of dark gold hair—to call it so, though it would puzzle a greater artist in words than I to communicate the exquisite hue of this girl's tresses. She sat motionless as though in a profound reverie, making nothing of the gathering uneasiness of the ship's movements and entirely heedless of those who passed her. Indeed in the brief space during which I watched, a lady paused and addressed her, then, finding herself unanswered, moved on with a smile.

The mate standing at the rail which protected the overhanging ledge of the poop-deck was sending orders in a bull-like note aloft and forward, and the ship was full of hurry. Indeed the weather was hardening into what promised to be half a gale of wind, and I stood watching with interest the complicated business of

shortening sail. Many of the poor Tommies were already hopelessly sea-sick, leaning over



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the bulwark rail, and a few of them lay like logs in the lee scuppers, rolling a little way to the left and then a little way to the right with

the heave of the deck. Some who were more seasoned dragged with the sailors at the ropes, and their uniforms combining with the varied apparel of the Jacks made so commonplace a shipboard matter as that of manning the top-sail halliards quite a picturesque affair. But happily the wind blew from a quarter to quickly thunder us out of the Channel, and by five o'clock the ship with a reef in each topsail was thrashing at some ten or eleven miles in the hour through the swelling waters, flinging the spray aft as far as the gangway with a frequent large soft cloud of spume blowing like a burst of steam off her bow, a couple of men at the wheel, a long race of boiling wake astern of her, and a rigging vocal with orchestral notes that rose at times into triumphal bursts amid which the fanciful ear might catch the clear bugling of some wild ocean melody.