

McCarthy Justin Huntly

Marjorie



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CHAPTER I

MY APOLOGY

What I have written may seem to some, who have never tossed an hour on salt water, nor, indeed, tramped far afield on dry land, to be astounding, and well-nigh beyond belief. But it is all true none the less, though I found it easier to live through than to set down. I believe that nothing is harder than to tell a plain tale plainly and with precision. Twenty times since I began this narrative I have damned ink and paper heartily after the swearing fashion of the sea, and have wished myself back again in my perils rather than have to write about them.

I was born in Sendennis, in Sussex, and my earliest memories are full of the sound and colour and smell of the sea. It was above all things my parents' wish that I should live a landsman's life. But I was mad for the sea from the first days that I can call to mind.

My parents were people of substance in a way – did well with a mercer's shop in the Main Street, and were much looked up to by their neighbours. My mother always would have it that I came through my father of gentle lineage. Indeed, the name

I bore, the name of Crowninshield, was not the kind of name that one associates usually with a mercer's business and with the path in life along which my father and mother walked with content. There certainly had been old families of Crowninshields in Sussex and elsewhere, and some of them had bustled in the big wars. There may be plenty of Crowninshields still left for aught I know or care, for I never troubled my head much about my possible ancestors who carried on a field gules an Eastern crown or. I may confess, however, that in later years, when my fortune had bettered, I assumed those armes parlantes, if only as a brave device wherewith to seal a letter. Anyway, Crowninshield is my name, with Raphael prefixed, a name my mother fell upon in conning her Bible for a holiname for me. So, if my arms are but canting heraldry, I carry the name of an archangel to better them.

I was an only son, and my parents spoilt me. They had some fancy in their heads that I was a weakling, and needed care, though I had the strength of a colt and the health a sea-coast lad should have, so they did not send me to a school. Yet, because they set a store by book-learning – which may have its uses, though it never charmed me – I had some schooling at home in reading, writing, and ciphering. My father sought to instil into me an admiration for the dignity of trade, because he wished me to become a merchant in time, with mayhap the Mayoralty in perspective. I liked the shop when I was little, and thought it a famous place to play in, lurking down behind its dark counter as in a robbers' den, and seeing through the open door of the parlour

at the back of the shop my mother knitting at her window and the green trees of the garden. I liked, too, the folds of sober cloth and coloured prints, and the faces of folk when they came in to buy or cheapen. Even the jangle of the bell that clattered at the shop door when we put it to at meal times pleased my ears, and has sounded there many times since and softly in places thousands of miles away from the Main Street. I do not know how or why, but the cling-clang of that bell always stirred strange fancies in my mind, and strange things appeared quite possible. Whenever the bell went tinkle I began to wonder who it was outside, and whether by chance they wanted me, and what they might want of me. But the caller was never better than some neighbour, who needed a button or a needle.

The great event of my childhood was my father's gift to me of an English version of Monsieur Galland's book, 'The Arabian Nights' Entertainments.' Then the tinkle of the shop bell assumed a new significance. Might not Haroun al Raschid himself, with Giafar, his vizier, and Mesrour, his man, follow its cracked summons, or some terrible withered creature whom I, and I only, knew to be a genie in disguise, come in to catch me by the shoulder and sink with me through the floor?

Those were delicious terrors. But what I most learnt from that book was an unconquerable love for travel and an unconquerable stretching to the sea. When I read in my book of Sinbad and his Seven Voyages I would think of the sea that lay so near me, and wish that I were waiting for a wind in a boat with painted

hull and sails like snow and my name somewhere in great gold letters. I would wander down to the quays and watch the shipping and the seamen, and wonder whence they came and where they went, and if any one of them had a roc's egg on board. I was very free for a child in those days, for my parents, still fretting on my delicacy, rarely crossed me; and, indeed, I was tame enough, partly from keeping such quiet, and well content to be by myself for the hour together.

But, when I had lived in this wise until I was nearly fifteen, my father and my mother agreed that I needed more book-learning; and, since they were still loath to send me to school, they thought of Mr. Davies, the bookseller, of Cliff Street. He was a man of learning. His business was steady. He had leisure, and was never pressed for a penny, or even for a guinea. It was agreed that I should go every day for a couple of afternoon hours, to sit with him and ply my book, and become a famous scholar. Poor Mr. Davies! he never got his will of me in that way, and yet he bore me no grudge, though it filled him with disappointment at first.

There was a vast deal of importance for me, though I did not dream it at the time, about my going to take my lessons of Mr. Davies, of Cliff Street. For if I had not gone I should never have got that tincture of Latin which still clings to me, and which a world of winds and waters has not blown or washed from my wits; nor, which is far more important, should I ever have chanced upon Lancelot Amber; and if I had not chanced upon Lancelot Amber I should have lost the best friend man ever had in this

world, and missed seeing the world's fairest woman.

CHAPTER II

LANCELOT AMBER

Mr. Davies was a wisp of a man, with a taste for snuff and for snuff-coloured garments, and for books in snuffy bindings. His book-shop in Cliff Street was a dingy place enough, with a smell of leather and paste about it, and if you stirred a book you brought enough snuffy dust into the air to make you sneeze for ten minutes. But his own room, which was above the shop, was blithe enough, and it was there I had my lessons. Mr. Davies kept a piping bullfinch in it, and a linnet, and there was a little window garden on the sill, where tulips bloomed in their season, and under a glass case there was a plaster model of the Arch of Titus in Rome, of which he was exceedingly proud, and which I thought very pretty, and at one time longed to have.

Mr. Davies was a smooth and decent scholar, and when he was dreamy he would shove his scratch back from his forehead and shut his eyes and recite Homer or Virgil by the page together, while Lancelot and I listened open-mouthed, and I wondered what pleasure he got out of all that rigmarole. The heroes of Homer and of Virgil seemed to me very bloodless, boneless creatures after my kings and wizards out of Mr. Galland's book; even Ulysses, who was a thrifty, shifty fellow enough, with some touch of the sea-captain in him, was not a patch upon my hero,

Sindbad of Bagdad, from whose tale I believe the Greek fellow stole half his fancies, and those the better half.

I remember still clearly the very first afternoon when I presented myself at Mr. Davies's shop in Cliff Street. He told me I was very welcome, assured me that on that day I crossed the threshold of the Muses' Temple, shook me warmly by the hand, and then, all of a sudden, as if recollecting himself, told me to greet my class-fellow. A lad of about mine own age came from the window and held out his hand, and the lad was Lancelot Amber.

I have seen many gracious sights in my time, but only one so gracious as that sudden flash of Lancelot Amber upon my boyish vision. As he came forward with the afternoon sunlight strong upon him he looked like some militant saint. There is a St. George in our church, and there is a St. Michael too, both splendid in coat-armour and terrible with swords, but neither of them has ever seemed to me half so heroic or half so saintly as the boy Lancelot did that morning in Mr. Davies's parlour. He was tall of his years, with fair hair curling about his head as I have since seen hair curling in some of the old Pagan statue-work.

The boy came forward and shook hands with me in friendly fashion, with a friend's grip of the fingers. I gave him the squeeze again, and we both stood for a moment looking at each other silently, as dogs over-eye one another on a first meeting. How little it entered into either of our brains that moment of the times that we should stand together, and the places and the trials and

perils that we should endure together. We were only two lads standing there in a snug first-floor room, where yellow parrots sprawled on the painted wall, and a mild-mannered gentleman with a russet wig motioned us to sit down.

Our life ran in current for long enough. We sat together at Mr. Davies's feet – I am speaking metaphorically, for in reality we sat opposite to him – and we thumbed our Cordery and our Nepos together, and made such progress as our natures and our application permitted. Mine, to be honest, was little enough, for I hated my grammar cordially.

Lancelot was not like me in this, any more than in bodily favour; he was keen of wit and quick of memory; he was quick in learning, yet as modest as he was clever, for he never sought in any way to lord it over me because I, poor dunce, was not of such nimble parts as himself.

It was the hardest task in the world for me to keep my eyes and my fancy upon the pages of my book. My eyes were always straying from the print, first to the painted parrots on the walls, and then, by natural succession, to the window. Once there, my fancy would put on free wings, and my thoughts would stray joyously off among the salt marshes, where the pools shone in the sunlight and a sweet air blew. Or I would stand upon the downs and look along the curve of cliffs, and note the ships sailing round the promontory, and the flashes of the sea beyond, and feel in fancy the breeze blowing through my hair, and puffing away all the nonsense I had been poring over in the room.

At such times I would quite forget myself, and sit staring into vacancy, till Mr. Davies, lifting his nose from his volume, would note my absence and call on me by name, and thump his desk, and startle me with some question on the matter we were supposed to have in hand. A mighty matter, truly, the name of some emperor or the date of some campaign – matter infinitely less real than the name of the ship that was leaving the harbour or the sunlight on the incoming sail. And I would answer at random and amiss, and earn reproof. Yet there were things which I knew well enough, too, and could have given him shrewd and precise answers concerning them.

Lancelot Amber was never much my companion away from Mr. Davies's room. His father, whose name he perpetuated, had been a simple, gentle gentleman and scholar who had married, as one of his kin counted it, beneath him, because he had married the woman he loved. The woman he loved was indeed of humble birth, but she made him a fair wife and a good, and she bore him two children, boy Lancelot and girl Marjorie, and died for the life of the lass. Her death, so I learned, was the doom of Lancelot Amber the elder, and there were two babes left in the wood of the world, with, like the children in the ballad, such claims upon two uncles as blood might urge and pity supplement. These two uncles, as Lancelot imagined them to me, were men of vastly different stuff and spirit, as you may sometimes find such flaming contrasts in families. The elder, Marmaduke Amber, used the sea, and was, it seems, as fine a florid piece of sea flesh

as an island's king could wish to welcome. His brother, Nathaniel, had been a city merchant, piling up moneys in the Levant trade, and now lived in a fine house out in the swelling country beyond Sendennis, with a fine sea-view. Him I had seen once or twice; a lean monkey creature with a wrinkled walnut of a face and bright, unkind eyes. He was all for leaving the boy of three and the girl of two to the small mercies of some charity school, but the mariner brother gathered the two forlornlings to his great heart, and with him they had lived and thriven ever since. Now it seems Captain Marmaduke was on a voyage to the Bermudas and taking the maid with him, while the boy, to better his schooling and strengthen his body with sea air, was sent to Sendennis to stay with his other uncle, Nathaniel Amber, now, to all appearance, reconciled to the existence of his young relative. This uncle, as I gathered, did not at first approve overmuch of Lancelot taking lessons in common with a single mercer's son, but Mr. Davies, I believe, spoke so well of me that the arrangement was allowed to hold.

But after lesson hours were done Lancelot had always to go back to his uncle's, and though I walked part of the way, or all the way, with him most days of the week, I was never bidden inside those doors. Lancelot told me that he had more than once besought leave to bring me in, but that the old gentleman was obdurate. So, save in those hours of study in the parrot-papered room, I saw but little of Lancelot.

I never expected to be asked inside the doors of the great

house where Lancelot's days were passed, and I did not feel any injustice in the matter. I was only a mercer's son, while Lancelot derived of gentleness, and it never entered into my mind to question the existing order of things, or to wish to force my way into places where I was not wanted. Excellent gentlemen on the other side of the Atlantic have made very different opinions popular from the opinions that prevailed with me in my youth. Indeed, I myself have now been long used to associate with the great folk of the earth, and have found them in all essential matters very much like other men. I have had the honour of including more than one king amongst my acquaintances, and have liked some and not liked others, just as if they were plain Tom or Harry. But in the days of my youth I should have as soon expected to be welcomed at St. James's as to be welcomed in the great house where Lancelot's uncle lived.

CHAPTER III

THE ALEHOUSE BY THE RIVER

Three years after I went to learn under Mr. Davies, of Cliff Street, my father died.

I remember with a kind of terror still, through all these years, when death of every kind has been so familiar to me, how the news of that death came upon me. I had no realisation of what death meant till then. I had heard of people dying, of course; had watched the black processions creeping, plumed and solemn, along the streets to the churchyard; had noted how in any circle of friends now one and now another falls away and returns to earth. I knew that all must die, that I must die myself, as I knew a lesson got by heart which has little meaning to the unawakened ear. But now it came on me with such a stabbing knowledge that for a little while I was almost crazy with the grief and the fear.

But the sorrow, like all sorrows, lessened with time. There was my mother to cheer; there was my schooling to keep; there was the shop to look after.

My father had thriven well enough to lay by a small store, but my mother kept the shop on, partly for the sake of my father, whose pride it was, partly because it gave her something to occupy her widowed life, and partly because, as Mr. Davies pointed out to her, there would be a business all ready for me

when I was old enough to step into it. In the meantime my life was simple enough. When I was not taking my schooling with Lancelot I was tending the shop with mother; and when I was doing neither of these things I was free to wander about the town much as I pleased.

Our town was of a tidy size, running well back from the sea up a gentle and uneven acclivity, which made all the streets that stemmed from the border slightly steep, and some of them exceedingly so. Upon the coast line, naturally enough, lay the busiest part of the hive; a comely stretch of ample docks and decent wharves along the frontage of the town, and, straggling out along the horns of the harbour, a maze of poorer streets, fringed at the waterside with boozing-kens, low inns, sailors' lodging-houses, and crimperies of all kinds. There were ticklish places for decent folk to be found in lying to right and left of the solemn old town – aye, and within ten minutes' walk of the solemn old market-square, where the effigy of Sir William Wallet, the goodly and godly Mayor of many years back, smiled upon the stalls of the hucksters and the fine front of the town-hall. If you strayed but a little way from the core of the town you came into narrow, kinkled streets, where nets were stretched across from window to window drying; and if you persevered you came, by cobbly declivities, to the bay shore, and to all the odd places that lay along it, and all the odd people that dwelt therein.

Of course, with the inevitable perversity of boyhood, it was this degenerate quarter of the town which delighted me. I cared

nothing, I am sorry to say, for the fine-fronted town-hall, nor for the solemn effigy of Sir William Wallet. I had not the least desire ever to be a functionary of importance in the building, ever to earn the smug immortality of such a statue. I am sorry to say the places I cared for were those same low-lived, straggling, squalid, dangerous regions which hung at one end of respectable little Sendennis like dirty lace upon a demure petticoat. In the early days of my acquaintance with those regions I must confess that I entered them with a certain degree of fear and trembling; but after a while that feeling soon wore off, when I found that no one wanted to do me any harm. Indeed, the dwellers in those parts were generally too much occupied in drinking themselves drunk and sleeping themselves sober to note an unremarkable lad like me. As for their holiday time, they passed it so largely in quarrelling savagely, and occasionally murderously, amongst themselves that they had scant leisure to pay any heed to me. For the rest, these Sendennis slums were not conspicuously evil. You will find just the same places in any seaport town, great or little, in the kingdom. But there was one spot in Sendennis which I do not think that it would be easy to match in any other town, although, perhaps to say this may be but a flash of provincial pride on my part.

A good way from the town, and yet before the river fairly widens into an estuary, there stood a certain hostel, or inn, which it was my joy and my sorrow to haunt. It stood by the water's edge in a kind of little garden of its own; a dreary place, where

a few sickly plants tried to hold their own against neglect and the splashings of rinsed glasses. There was a wooden terrace at the back of this place – the back overlooked the river, while the front was on the by-road – and here the habitual revellers, the haunters, whose scored crosses lent the creaking shutters an unnatural whiteness over their weather-beaten surface, dark with age and dirt, loved to linger of a summer evening, and ply the noggin and fill the pipe.

There was an old fiddler, a kind of Orpheus of the slums, who would sometimes creep in there and take his post in a corner and begin to play, happy if the mad lads threw him halfpence, or thrust a half-drained tankard under his tearful old nose: happy, too, if they did not – as they often did – toss the cannikin at him out of mere lightness of heart and drunkenness of wit. He used to play the quaintest old tunes, odd border-side ballad airs, that seemed to go apace with blithe country weddings and decent pastoral merry-makings of all kinds, and to be strangely out of suits with that brotherhood of rakehells, smugglers, and desperadoes who gambled and drank, and swore and quarrelled, while the poor old fellow worked his catgut.

Lord, Lord, how the memory of it all comes back upon me while I write! I have but to close my eyes, and my fancy brings me back to that alehouse by the river, to a summer's eve with its golden shafts falling on the dingy woodwork and lending it a pathetic glory, upon the shining space of dwindled water in the middle of its banks of glistening mud, and there in the corner

the pinched old rogue in his ragged bodygear scraping away at 'Barbara Allen,' or 'When first I saw thy face,' or 'The Bailiff's Daughter of Islington,' while the leering rascals in the pilot coats and the flap-eared caps huddled together over their filthy tables, and swigged their strong drink and thumbed their greasy cards and swore horribly in all the lingo of Babel.

One such summer evening surges up before me with a crimson smear across its sunlight. There was a Low Country fellow there, waist deep in schnapps, and a Finlander sucking strong beer like a hog. Meinheer and the Finn came to words and blows, and I, who was sitting astride of the railing staring, heard a shrill scream from the old man and a rattle as he dropped his fiddle, and then a flash and a red rain of blood on the table as my Finn fell with a knife in him, the Hollander's knife, smartly pegged in between the left breast and the shoulder. I declare that, even in my excitement at that first sight of blood drawn in feud, my boyish thought was half divided between the drunken quarrel and the poor old fiddler, all hunched together on the ground and sobbing dry-eyed in a kind of ecstasy of fear and horror. I heard afterwards that he had a son knifed to his death in a seaman's brawl, and never got over it. As for the Finn, they took him home and kept it dark, and he recovered, and may be living yet for all I know to the contrary, and a perfect pattern to the folk in Finland.

That inn had a name, stranger I have never heard; and a sign, stranger I have never seen; though I have wandered far and seen more than old Ulysses in the school-book ever dreamt of.

It was called the Skull and Spectacles; and if its name was at once horrible and laughable, its sign was more devilish still. For instead of any painted board, swinging pleasantly on fair days and creaking lustily on foul, there stood out over the inn door a kind of bracket, and on that bracket stood a human skull, so parched and darkened by wind and weather that it looked more fearful than even a *caput mortuum* has a right to look.

On the nose of this grisly reminder of our mortality some wag – or so I suppose, but perhaps he was a cynic – had stuck a great pair of glassless barnacles or goggles. It was a loathly conceit, and yet it added vastly to the favour of the inn in the minds of those wildings that haunted it. Must I add that it did so in mine too, who should have known better? If it had not been for the fascination of that sign, perhaps I might have kept better company, and never done what I did do, and never written this history.

When first I happened upon the Skull and Spectacles it attracted me at once. Its situation, in the middle of that wilderness of mouldering wharves, decaying gardens, and tumble-down cottages, was in itself an invitation to the eye. Then the devilish mockery of its sign was an allurement. It looked like some fantastical tavern in a dream, and not a thing of real timber.

The oddness of the place tickled my adventurous palate, the loathsomeness of the sign gripped me hardly by the heart and made my blood run icily for an instant. Who does not recall to mind moments and places when he seems to have stepped out of the real living world into some grey, uncanny land of dreams,

where the very air is thick and haunted with some quality of unknown fear and unknown oppression? So it seemed to me when I first saw the Skull and Spectacles with its death's-head smirking welcome and the river mud oozing about its timbers. But the place piqued me while it frightened me, and I pulled my courage together like a coat, buttoned it metaphorically about me, and entered.

Like many another enterprise upon which we enter with a beating heart, the preface was infinitely more alarming than the succeeding matter. There was no one in the bar-parlour when I entered save a sailor, who was sleeping a drunken, stertorous sleep in a corner. From the private parlour beyond, when I entered, a man came out, a burly seafaring man, who asked me shortly, but not uncivilly, what I wanted. I called for a jug of ale. He brought it to me without a word, together with a hunch of bread, set them before me, and left me alone again, going into his snugery at the back, and drawing the door after him jealously.

I sat there for some little time, sipping my ale and munching my bread – and indeed the ale was excellent; I have never tasted better – and looking at the grimy wall, greasy with the rubbings of many heads and shoulders, scrawled all over with sums, whose addition seemed to have mightily perplexed the taproom arithmeticians, and defiled with inscriptions of a foul, loose-witted, waterside lubricity that made me blush and feel qualmish. But I found a furtive enjoyment in the odd place, and the snoring sailor, and the low plashing of the estuary against the

decaying timbers, and the silence of solitude all around.

Presently the door was pushed open; but before anyone could come in I was made to jump from my seat in a kind of terror, for a voice sang out sharply just above my head and startled me prodigiously.

‘Kiss me – kiss me – kiss me – kiss me!’ the strange voice screamed out. ‘Kiss me on the lips and eyes and throat! kiss me on the breast! kiss me – kiss me – kiss me!’

I turned up my eyes and noted above my head what I had not seen before – a cage swinging from the rafters, and in it a small green parrot, with fiery eyes that glowed like blazing rubies.

It went rattling on at an amazing rate, adjuring its hearers to kiss it on all parts of the body with a verbal frankness that was appalling, and with a distinctness which even pricked the misty senses of the slumberer, who peevishly turned in his sleep and stuttered out a curse at me to keep still.

As the human voice called me back from my contemplation of that infernal old bird my lowered eyes looked on the doorway. The door was wide open, and a girl stood framed in the gap, gazing at me. Lord, how the blood rushed into my face with wonder and delight, for I thought then that I had never seen anything before so beautiful! Indeed, I think now that of that kind of beauty she was as perfect as a woman could wish to be, or a man could wish to have her. She smiled a little into my crimson, spell-bound face, wished me good-morning pleasantly, gave a kind of little whistle of recognition to the bird, who never left off

screaming and yelling his vociferous desire for kisses, and then, swinging the door behind her, crossed the floor, and, passing into the parlour, disappeared from my gaze.

Immediately the parrot's clamour came to a dead pause. The semi-wakened sailor dropped into his sodden snooze again, and all was quiet. I waited for some little time with my eyes on the parlour door, but it did not open again; and as no one came in from outside, and I needed no more either of drink or victual, I felt that I must needs be trudging. So I drained my can to the black eyes of my beauty, clucked at the parrot, who merely swung one crimson eye round as if he were taking aim and glared ferociously, signed a farewell to the parlour door, and passed out into the world again. The Skull and Spectacles had gained a devoted customer.

Ah, me! I went there a world of times after that. I am afraid my poor mother thought me a sad rogue, for I would slip away from the shop for a whole afternoon together, on the plea of needing a walk; but my walk always led me to that terrible inn. I soon became a familiar figure to its ill-favoured master and his beautiful niece. The landlord of the Skull and Spectacles had been a seaman in his youth, and told tales of the sea to guests who paid their score. He had a cadet brother who was a seaman still, and who drifted out of longshore knowledge for great gaps of time, and came back again liker to mahogany than he had been before, a thought more abundant in blasphemy, and a great deal richer in gold pieces with the heads of every king in Christendom

stamped upon them.

It was this wanderer's daughter who made the place my paradise. She was a tall, largely made girl, of a dark favour, with eyes of black fire, and with a warm, Spanish kind of skin, olive-toned with rich reds under, and the whitest, wonderfulest teeth, and a bush of black hair that was a marvel. She would let it down often enough, and it hung about her body till it reached the back of her knees. Lord knows who her mother was. I never knew, and she said she never knew. Her father brought her home much as he had brought the parrot home, but I could never think other than that she was the child of some Spanish woman he had wooed, and, it is to be hoped, wedded, though I doubt if he were of that temper, on his travels in the South Americas.

A very curious thing it was to watch that girl go in and out among the scoundrelly patrons of the Skull and Spectacles, listening to their devil's chatter in all the lingoies of earth, and yet in a kind of fashion keeping them at a distance. She would bandy jokes with them of the coarsest kind, and yet there was not a man of all the following who would dare to lay a rude hand on her or even to force a kiss from her against her will. Every man who clinked his can at that hostelry knew well enough that her father, when he was ashore, or her uncle, when the other was afloat, would think nothing of knifing any man who insulted her.

I need hardly say that my association with the Skull and Spectacles greatly increased in me my longing for the adventurous life. The men who frequented the inn had one

and all the most marvellous tales to tell. Their tales were not always commendable; they were tales of pirates, of buccaneers, of fortunes made in evil wise and spent in evil fashion. But it was not so much the particulars as the generalities of their talk that delighted me. I loved to hear of islands where the cocoa trees grew, and where parrots of every hue under heaven squealed and screamed in the tropic heat; where girls as graceful as goddesses and as yellow as guineas wore robes of flaming feathers and sang lullabies in soft, impossible tongues; lands of coral and ivory and all the glories of the earth, where life was full of golden possibilities and a world away from the drab respectability of a mercer's life in grey Sendennis.

I grew hungrier and thirstier for travel day after day. I had heard of seamen in a shipwrecked craft suffering agonies of thirst and being taunted by the fields of water all about them, to drink of which was madness and death. I felt somewhat as if I were in like case, for there I lived always in the neighbourhood, always in the companionship of the sea and of seafaring folk, and yet I was doomed to dwell at home and dance attendance upon the tinkling of the shop bell. But my word was my word all the same, and my love for my mother, I am glad to think, was greater after all than my longing to see far lands.

CHAPTER IV

A MAID CALLED BARBARA

I suppose the Skull and Spectacles was not quite the best place in the world for a lad of my age, and perhaps for some lads it might have been fruitful of evil. But I found then, and have found all through my life, an infinite deal of entertainment in studying the ways and humours of all kinds of fellowships, without of necessity accommodating myself to the morals or the manners of the company. I have been very happy with gipsies on a common, though I never poisoned a pig or coped a nag. I have mixed much with sailors of all kinds, than whom no better fellows – the best of them, and that is the greater part – exist on earth, and no worse the worse; and yet I think I have not been stained with all the soils of the sea. I have been with pirates, and thieves, and soldiers of fortune, and gentlemen of blood, and highway robbers; and once I supped with a hangman – off boiled rabbit and tripe, an excellent alliance in a dish – and all this without being myself either pirate, highwayman, or yet hangman. It is not always a man's company, but mostly a man's mind, that makes him what he is or is not. If a man is going to be a pitiful fellow and sorry knave, I am afraid you will not save him by the companionship of a synod of bishops; nor will you spoil a fine fellow if he occasionally rubs shoulders with rogues and vagabonds.

The girl at the Skull and Spectacles was kind to me, partly, perhaps, because I differed somewhat from the ordinary ruck of customers of the Skull and Spectacles. Had it been known that that crazy, villainous old alehouse contained such a pearl, I make no doubt that the favour of the place would have gone up, and its customers improved in outward seeming, if not in inward merits or morals. The gallants of the town – for we had our gallants even in that tranquil seaport – would have been assailed by a thirst that naught save Nantz and schnapps and strong ale of the Skull and Spectacles could assuage, and the gentlemen of the Chisholm Hunt would have discovered that the only way after a run with the harriers was through the vilest part of the town and among the oozy timbers of the wharves which formed the kingdom of the Skull and Spectacles.

But few of the townspeople knew of the Skull and Spectacles. It never thought to stretch its custom into the higher walks of life. It thrived on its own clients, its high-booted, thick-bearded, shaggy-coated seamen, whose dealings with the sea were more in the way of smuggling, buccaneering, scuttling, and marooning than in honest merchandise or the service of the King. These sea-wolves liked the place famously, and would have grievously resented the intrusion of the laced waistcoats of the provincial dandies or the scarlet jackets of the Chisholm Hunt. So the Skull and Spectacles went its own way, and a very queer way, too, unheeded and unheeding.

How the girl and I got to be so friendly I scarcely know. It

is like enough that I thought we were more friendly than we really were, and that the girl took my boyish homage with more indifference than I guessed for. She had always a pleasant smile for me when I came, and she was always ready to pass a pleasant word or two with me, even on the days when the business in the place was at its heaviest, and when the room was choking fit to burst with the shag-haired sea-fellows.

But there were times, too, better times for me, or worse, it may be, when the Skull and Spectacles was almost deserted; when all its wonted customers were away smuggling, or buccaneering, or cutting throats, or crimping, or following whatever was their special occupation in life.

In such lonely times the girl was willing enough to spend half an hour or more in speech with me. Of course, I fell in love with her, like the donkey that I was, and worshipped the rotting boards of the Skull and Spectacles because she was pleased to walk upon them. Her speech was all of strange lands, and it fed my frenzy as dry wood feeds a fire. Her people were all sea-people, her talk was all sea-talk, her words were all sea-words. It was a strange rapture to me to sit and listen while she spoke of the things that were dearest to my heart and to watch her while she spoke. Then I used to feel a wild, foolish longing, which I had never the courage to carry out, to tell her how beautiful she was – as if she needed to be told that by me! – and how madly I loved her. All of which I very profoundly thought and believed, but all of which – for I was a shy lad with women-kind – I kept very devoutly to myself.

I wonder if the girl had any idea of my devotion. I thought she had; I felt sure that my love must be as patent to her as it was to myself, and that she must needs prize it a little. I believe, indeed, that I never talked to her very much during those happy times when she would come out on to the creaking terrace and speak to me of the things which she never seemed to weary of – the sea, and ships, and seamen. As for me, who would not have wearied of any theme that gave her pleasure, had it even been books and lessons, I was overjoyed that my sea longings could help me on with her.

Then her black eyes would follow the river's course to where the estuary widened to the sea, and search the horizon and point out to me the sails that starred it here and there, and sometimes say with a laugh: 'Perhaps one of those is my ship.'

But when I asked her what was her ship she would smile and shake her head and say nothing; and once, when I asked her if it was her father's ship, she laughed loudly and said yes, it was her father's ship she longed for.

So late spring slipped into early summer; and, as the year grew kinder, so every day my boy's heart grew hotter with its first foolish passion. Somewhere about the middle of June, as I knew, her birthday was; and in view of that saint's day of my calendar I had hoarded my poor pocket money to buy her a little toy from the jeweller in the Main Street, whose show seemed to me more opulent than the treasures of Aladdin.

The day found me all of a tremble. I had sat up half the night

looking at my token and kissing it a thousand times. It was a little locket that was fashioned like a heart, and on the one side her name was engraved, and on the other mine, for I thought by this to show what I dared not say.

It was early when I stole from our shop, little less than ten, and I calculated that I would look in at Mr. Davies's on my way back and make some excuse for my truancy, and so be back in time for noonday dinner; and I knew if I were a little late my mother would forgive me. Lord, how I ran along the quays! I seemed to fly, and yet the road seemed endless. As I ran I noted that some new ships had entered the night before, and men on the wharves were busy unloading, and sailors were lounging round with that foreign air which Jack always has after a cruise.

When I got to the Skull and Spectacles the landlord was standing before his door smoking. As he saw me he nodded, and when I asked for Barbara, saying I had a message for her, he told me she was upstairs, and added something which I did not stay to hear.

I bounded up the crazy stairs with a beating heart. I was all on fire with excitement at the thought of offering her a gift; my blood seemed to be turned to quicksilver, and to race through its channels with a feverish swiftness.

There was a gallery at the head of the stairs, a gallery on to which looked the doors of the guest-rooms of the inn – rooms where bearded men from over sea sometimes passed a night when they were uncertain where to journey next, or when they

were too much pleased with the liquor of the Skull and Spectacles to leave it before morning.

As I swung round the stairs into the gallery I thought for a moment that it was empty, as it lay before me dark and uninviting. Then from the far end came the sound of voices, laughter, and laughing expostulation – this last in a woman's voice that I knew too well. While I stood staring, not understanding, and bewildered by a sudden and wholly meaningless alarm, one of the doors at the end of the gallery that was just ajar swung open, and Barbara slipped from it, laughing, breathless, with tumbled hair and crimson cheeks. A man sprang after her and caught her, unreluctant, in his arms.

I see the scene now as vividly as I saw it then with my despairing boyish eyes. The great strong man had his arms close about her; her dark hair was all about her face and over her shoulders as she flung her head back to meet the great red mouth that was seeking hers. I have seen since pictures of satyrs embracing nymphs, and whenever I see them I cannot stay a shudder running through me as I think of that dim, creaking gallery and the dishevelled girl and the strong man and the tearful, trembling lad who beheld their passion.

I suppose a painter would have admired the group they made; she with her body eagerly flung forward and her beautiful face all on fire with warm animal emotion; he, big and amber-bearded, his great mouth crushed against hers as if he wanted to absorb her life, and his arms about her pliant body, at once yielding and

resisting in its reckless disarray. But I was not a painter – only a longshore mooncalf – and my eyes swam and my tongue swelled till I thought it would stick between my teeth as those of poor rogues do on the gallows, and I was chickenish enough to wish to blubber. And while I stood there, stockish and stupid, the pair became aware of me. I do not think I made any noise, but their eyes dropped from each other and turned on me, and the man scowled a little, without loosening his hold, but the woman, no whit troubled, flung one arm away from her lover's neck and held out her hand to me, with a laugh, and greeted me merrily.

‘Why, it's little Raphael!’ she said, laughing the words into the yellow beard of the sea-thief who clipped her, and again she nodded at me, in no ways discomposed by the strangeness of her position. But I, poor fool, could not bear it, and I turned and ran down the stairs as if the Devil himself were after me.

CHAPTER V

LANCELOT LEAVES

There was a place upon the downs to which it was often my special delight to betake me – a kind of hollow dip between two humps of hills, where a lad might lie warm in the windiest weather and look straight out upon the sea, shining with calm or shaggy with storm, and feel quite as if he were alone in the world. To this place I now sped half unconsciously, my face, I make no doubt, scarlet with passion and shame, and my eyes well-nigh blinded with sudden up-springing of tears. How I got to my hollow I do not know, but I ran and ran and ran, with my blood tingling, heedless of all the world, until at last I found myself tumbling down over its ridged wall or rampart of hummocks and dropping, with a choking moan, flat on my face in an agony of despair.

There I lay in the long grasses, sobbing as if my heart would break. Indeed, I thought that it was breaking; that life was over for me; that sunrise and sunset and the glory of the stars had no further part to play for me; and that all that was left for me was to die, and be put into a corner somewhere and speedily forgotten.

Troops of bitter thoughts came surging up over my brain. My mood of mind and state of body were alike incomprehensible and terrible to me. It was a very real agony, that fierce awakening

to the realities of life, to love and passion, and blinding jealousy and despair, and all the rest of the torments that walk in the train of a boy's first love. I wallowed there a long time, making a great mark in the soft grasses, as if I sought to measure myself for an untimely grave. The strong afternoon sun drove on his way westward, and still I lay there, writhing and whimpering, and wondering, perhaps, a little inwardly that the sky did not fall in and crush me and the wicked world altogether.

A boy's mind is a turbulent place enough, and stuffed pretty often with a legion of wicked thoughts, which take possession of his fancy long before evil words and evil deeds have struck up their alliance. Yet even the most foul-mouthed boy thinks, I believe, nobly, or with a kind of nobility, of his first love, and a clean-hearted lad offers her a kind of bewildering worship. I was a clean-hearted lad, and I had worshipped Barbara; and now my worship was over and done with, and I made sure that my heart was broken.

I do not know how long I lay there, with whirling brain and bursting heart, but presently I felt the touch of a hand on my shoulder. I had heard no one coming, and under ordinary conditions I might have been a thought startled by the unexpected companionship; but just now I was too wretched for any other emotion, and I merely lay passive and indifferent.

The hand declined with a firmer pressure and gently shook my shoulder, and then a voice – Lancelot Amber's voice – called softly to me asking me what I was doing there and what ailed

me. I always loved Lancelot's voice: it seemed to vary as swiftly as wind over water with every thought, and to run along all the chords of speech with the perfection of music in a dream. Whenever I read that saying of St. Paul's about the tongue of men and of angels I am reminded of Lancelot's voice, and I feel convinced that of such is the language of the courts of heaven, and that if St. Paul had talked like Lancelot he would have won the most sceptical. The sound of his voice soothed me then, as far as it was possible for anything to soothe me, and I shifted slightly to one side and looked up at him furtively and crossly, my poor face all blubbered with tears and smeared with mire where I had lain grovelling.

Bit by bit I told him my story. I was in the temper for a confession, and ready to tell my tale to anyone with wit enough to coax it from me. Perhaps it did not seem so much of a tale in the telling, though to my mind it was then as terrible as the end of the world itself and the unloosening of the great deep.

So I hunched myself up on my left elbow, and, staring drearily at Lancelot through my tears, I whimpered out my sorrows; and he listened with a smileless face.

When I had done, and my quavering broke off with a sob, he was silent for a while, looking straight before him beyond the meadow edges into the yellowing sky. Then he turned and looked at me with a brotherly pity that was soothing to my troubled senses, and he spoke to me with a softness of voice that seemed in tune with the dying day and my drooping spirits.

‘After all,’ he said, ‘you have not lost much, Raphael. She is but a light o’ love, and you were built for a better mate.’

Truly, though I scarcely noted it at the time, it was gracious and quick-witted of him to assume that I was of a lover’s age with the great lass of the Skull and Spectacles, and unconsciously it tickled my torn vanity. But part of his speech angered me, and I took fire like tinder.

Swinging myself round on my elbow, I glanced savagely into Lancelot’s face of compassion.

‘You lie!’ I growled, ‘you lie! She is a queen among women, and there is no man in all the world worthy of her!’

Then – for I saw him smile a little – I struck out at him. I am thankful to think that I was too wild and weary to strike either true or hard, and my foolish hand just grazed his cheek and touched his shoulder as he stooped; and then, turning away again, I fell into a fresh storm of sobbing. Lancelot remained by my side, gently indifferent to my fury, gently tender with my sorrow. After a while he turned me round reluctant, and looked very gravely into my tear-stained face. We were but a brace of lads, each on the edge of life, and as I look back on that page of my history I cannot help but shudder at the contrast between us, I bellowing like a gaby at the ache of my first calf-love – and yet indeed I was hurt, and hardly – and he so sweet and restrained and sane, weighing the world so wisely in his young hands.

‘I am very sorry for you, Raphael,’ he said, and his voice was so clear and strong that for the moment it comforted me as a

cordial will comfort a sick man, against my will. 'I am very sorry for you, and because of my sorrow for you and because of my love for you I will give you a gift that I would part with to no other in the world. Women are not all alike, and therefore I will give you a talisman to help you to think well of women.'

I suppose it would have diverted an elder to hear him, so slim and simple, discoursing so sweetly and reasonably on a theme on which few of us at the fag end of our days are ever able to utter one sensible syllable, but Lancelot always seemed to me wise beyond his time, so I listened, although dully enough and I fear sullenly. He slipped his hand into his breast and drew forth a small object which he held shut in his hand while he again discoursed to me.

'What I am going to give you, Raphael, is the little picture of a lass who is in my eyes a thing of Heaven's best making. For loyalty, honour, courage, truth, faith, she is an unmatched maid. I have known her all the days of my life and never found a flaw in her.'

Then he opened his hand and I saw that it held a picture, an oval miniature in a fine gold frame. My mind was all on fire for the black eyes of piratical Barbara and my blood was tingling to a gipsy tune, but as I stared at the image in my comrade's palm my mind was arrested and my fancy for the instant fixed. For it showed the face of a girl, a child of Lancelot's age or a little under, and through my tears I could perceive the sweetness of the countenance and its likeness to my friend in the fair hair and

the fine eyes.

‘This is my sister, this is Marjorie,’ Lancelot said slowly. ‘She has the truest soul, the noblest heart in all the world. I think it will help you to have it and to look on it from time to time, as it always helps me when I am away from her.’

As he spoke he pushed the picture gently into my unresisting fingers and closed them over it. ‘My sister Marjorie is a wonderful girl,’ he said, with a bright smile. He was silent for a little while as if musing upon her and then his tender thoughts returned to me.

‘Come away, Raphael,’ he said. ‘Let us be going home. The hour is late, and your mother may be anxious; and you have her still, whatever else you may have lost.’

The grace of his voice conquered me. I rose at the word, staggering a little as I gained my feet, for passion and grief had torn me like devils, and I was faint and bewildered. He slipped his arm into mine and led me away, supporting me as carefully as if I were a woman whom his solicitude was aiding. We exchanged no word together as we went along the downs and through the fields. As we came to the town, however, he paused by the last stile and spoke to me.

‘Dear heart!’ he said, ‘but I am sorry for all this – more sorry than I can say; for I am going away to-morrow.’

The words shook me from myself and my apathy. I gazed in wonder and alarm into his face.

‘I am going away,’ he said, ‘and that’s how I chanced to find

you. For I waited in vain for you at Mr. Davies's, and sought you at your home and found you missing; and then I thought of this old burrow of yours, and here, as good luck would have it, I found you.'

I could only gasp out 'Going away?' in a great amazement.

'I must go away,' he said. 'My uncle that was at sea is in London, with Marjorie, and has sent for me. He needs me, and I am so much beholden to him that I should have to go, even if I were not bound to him by blood and duty, and indeed I long to see my Marjorie.'

'How long will you be away?' I gasped.

'I do not know,' he answered; 'but it is only a little world after all, and we shall meet again some time, and soon, be sure of that. If not, why, then this parting was well made.'

This last was a quotation from one of his poets and play-makers, as I found afterwards, for the words stuck in my memory, and I happened on them later in a printed book. But indeed I did not think the parting was well made at all, and I shook my head dismally, for I knew he only said so to cheer me.

He laughed and tossed his brown locks. 'London is not the end of the world,' he said. 'I hope to go further afield than that before I die. But near or far, summer or winter, town or country, we are friends for ever. No distance can divide, no time untie our friendship.'

Here he wrung me by the hand, and I, with this new sorrow on top of the old – that was new but two hours ago – could only

sob and say: 'O Lancelot!' and tremble. I suppose I looked giddy, as if I were about to faint, for he caught me in his strong arms and propped me up a minute.

'Come, come!' he said; 'take heart. To-day is not to-morrow yet. I will go in with you to your mother's and spend an hour with you before I say good-bye.'

Then he gently led me by the arm, and we went into the town and along the evening streets till we came to the little shop, and there at the door we found my mother, looking anxious.

Lancelot made my excuses, saying that he had kept me, and telling my mother of his speedy departure. My mother, who loved Lancelot, was almost as grieved as I. But he, in his bright way, cheered us; he came in, and would take supper with us; and though it was a doleful meal, he went on as if it were a merry one, talking and laughing, and telling us tales of the great city and its wonders, and all he hoped to see and do there.

And so a sad hour went by, and then he rose and said he must go and give a hand to the packing of his belongings, for he was leaving by the early coach and would not have a moment in the morning. And then he kissed my mother and kissed me, and went away and left us both crying. There were tears in his own eyes as he stepped out into the summer twilight, but he turned to look back at us, and waved his hat and called out good-bye with a firm voice.

A sullen blackness settled down upon me after Lancelot's departure. I was minded to rise early in the morning to see him

off by the coach, but I was so tired with crying and complaining that when I fell asleep I slept like a log, and did not wake until the morning sun was high and the coach had been long gone. Well, it was all the better, I told myself savagely. He had gone out of my life for good, and I should see no more of him. I had lost in the same hour my love and my friend. I would make up my mind to be lonely and pay no heed. As for the picture he gave me, what good to me was the face of that fair girl? Lancelot's sister Marjorie was a gentlewoman, born and bred, as my lost Lancelot was a gentleman. What could she or he really have to do with the mercerman in the dull little Sussex town? Marjorie had a beautiful face, if the limner did not lie – and indeed he did not – and I could well believe that as lovely a soul as Lancelot lauded shone through those candid eyes. But again, what was it to me and my yardwand? So I hid the picture away in a little sweet-scented cedar-wood box that I had, and resolved to forget Lancelot and Lancelot's sister, and everything else in the world except my blighted youth and my blighted hopes.

I reasoned as a boy reasons who thinks that the world has come to an end for him after his first check, and who has no knowledge as yet of the medicine of time. My mother had but a vexatious life of it with me, for I was silent and melancholy; and though I never, indeed, offended her by uncivil word or deed, yet the sight of my dreary visage must have been a sore trial to her, and the glum despondency with which I accepted all her efforts to cheer me from my humours must have wrung her heart.

Poor dear! She thought, I believe, that it was only grief for Lancelot which touched me so; and once, after some days of my ill-temper, she asked me if I would like to run up to London and see my friend. But I shook my head. I had made up my mind to have done with everything; to stay on there to the end, morosely resigned to my lot.

To make myself more sure in isolation I even took the letter which came from Lancelot but a few days after his departure, in which he told me where his uncle's house was, and bade me write to him there, and burnt it in the flame of a candle. As I tossed the charred paper out into the street I thought to myself that now indeed I was alone and free to be miserable in my own way. And I was miserable, and made my poor mother miserable; and acted like the selfish dog I was, like the selfish dog that every lad is under the venom of a first love-pang.

I went no more to the Skull and Spectacles; I saw my beautiful tyrant no more. One day I drifted along in the familiar direction, came to the point where I could see the evil-favoured inn standing alone in the dreary waste, hesitated for a moment, and then, as the image of the girl in the sailor's arms surged up before my mind, I turned and ran back as hard as I could into the town.

But if I went that way no more, I drifted about in other ways helplessly and foolishly enough.

I would spend hours upon hours mooning among the downs and on the cliffs, and sometimes I would sit on some bulkhead by the quays and look at the big ships, and wish myself on board

one of them and sailing into the sunset. Love for my mother kept me from going to the devil, but my love for her was not strong enough to put a brave face upon my trouble, and I was not man enough to do my best to make her life light for her.

But no trouble of this kind does endure for ever, and by the end of a year the poison had in a great degree spent itself, and with my recovery from my love-ache there grew up in my mind a disdain of my behaviour. As I saw my mother's visage peaked with pity I grew to be heartily ashamed of myself, and to resolve honestly and earnestly to make amends. I disliked tending shop more bitterly than ever. But there was the shop, and it was dear to my mother's heart; and so I buckled to, if not with a will, at least with the semblance of a will, and did my best to become as good a mercer as another.

Two things, however, I would not do. I would not enter into correspondence with Lancelot, and I would not go any more to Master Davies's house. Lancelot wrote again and yet again to me. But I served the second letter as I had served the first, and the third as I had served the second. I did, indeed, scrawl some few lines of reply to this last letter, bidding him somewhat bluntly to leave me in peace; that my bed had been made for me, and that I must needs lie upon it, and that I did not wish to be vexed in my slumber. It was a rude and foolish letter, I make no doubt; but I wrote it with a decent purpose enough, for I was desperately afraid that I could not hold to my resolutions and to my way of life if I kept in communication with Lancelot, and was haunted

by the thoughts of his more fortunate stars. Lancelot wrote back to me with his invariable sweetness and gentleness, saying that he hoped time would make me amends; and after that I heard no more from him, and he seemed to have passed out of my life for good and all.

As for Mr. Davies, he too seemed to belong to the old life from which I had cut myself adrift, and so I went to his shop no more; and as he was a home-keeping bookworm, he but seldom stirred abroad. And thus, though we dwelt in the same town, I may fairly say that I never saw him from month's end to month's end.

The days slip by swiftly in an unnoticeable kind of way in a town like Sendennis. It was but a sluggish place, for all its sea-bustle, in the days that now lie far behind me. Our shop lay in the quietest part of the town, and we took no note of time. Ours was a grey, lonely life. We had friends, of course, whose names and ways I have long since forgotten, but we saw little of them, partly because my mother learnt after a while that I hated all company, and would take no part in any of the junketings of our neighbours.

I might have made an apt mercer in time, but I do not know, and I do not love to linger over the two years I spent in the trial. For though I did my duty fairly well, both by my mother and by the shop, and though my love-ache had dulled almost to nothing, my passion to go abroad was as hot as ever, and I thought it a shame that my twenty years had no better business, and my life no other aim, than to wear out its strength behind a counter. Let

those two years go by.

One evening I was sitting with my mother in the little parlour behind the shop, she knitting, I think, or sewing – I am not sure which – and I with my legs thrust out before me and my hands in my pockets, outwardly idling and inwardly cursing at my destiny. Every now and then my mother glanced at me over the edge of her work and sighed; but it may have been, and I hope it was, because she found her task a difficult one.

Suddenly the bell at the front door tinkled. In my younger days I used to fancy that every ring of that same cracked bell brought some message from the outer world for me. Well, here was the message at last, though I never dreamt of it, but just sat stupidly, with my fingers touching my pocket seams.

CHAPTER VI

THE GENTLEMAN IN BLUE

My mother glanced up from her work at me. I knew that her look asked me if I had heard the bell, and if I would not go to the door in answer; and, though I felt lazy, I was not base enough to ignore that appeal. So I lurched up from my chair and swung through the little shop and flung the door wide open, a thought angrily, for I had been deep in my brown study and was stupidly irritated at being jarred from it.

I half expected, so far as I expected anything, to see some familiar neighbour, with the familiar demand for a twist of tape or a case of needles, so that I confess to being not a little surprised and even startled by what my eyes did rest upon. The doorway framed a wholesome picture of a middle-aged comely gentleman.

I see the stranger now in my mind's eye as I saw him then with my bodily vision – a stoutly made, well set-up man of a trifle above the middle height, in a full-skirted blue coat; a gold-laced hat upon his powder, and a gold-headed cane in his hand. The florid face was friendly, and shrewd too, lined all over its freshness with little lines of experience and wisdom and knowledge of the world, and two honest blue eyes shone straight at me from beneath bold black eyebrows.

It was certainly a most unfamiliar figure in the framework of our shop door, and I stood and stared at it, somewhat unmannerly, for a space of several seconds. After a while, finding that I still barred his way and said nothing, the stranger smiled very good-humouredly; and as he smiled I saw that his teeth were large and white and sound.

‘Well, young sir,’ he said pleasantly, ‘are you Master Raphael Crowninshield?’

I told him that was my name.

‘Then I should like to exchange a word or two with you,’ he said; ‘can we be private within?’

I answered him that there was no one inside but my mother, and I begged him to step into the little parlour.

The stout gentleman nodded. ‘Your mother?’ he said. ‘Very good; I shall be delighted to have the honour of making madam’s acquaintance: bring me to her.’

I led the way across the shop and up the two low steps into the little parlour, where my mother, who had heard every word of this dialogue, had laid aside her sewing, and now rose as the stranger approached and dropped him a curtsy.

‘Be seated, madam, I beg,’ said the stranger. ‘I have a word or two to say to your son hereby, but first’ – here he paused and addressed himself to me – ‘prithee, lad, step to the door a moment and wait till I call for you. Your mother and I have our gossip to get over.’

There was something so commanding in the kindness of

the stranger's manner and voice that I made no hesitation about obeying him; so I promptly rose and made for the shop, drawing close the door of the parlour behind me.

I stood awhile at the outer door, looking listlessly into the street, and wondering what the blue gentleman could have to say to my mother and to me. Even now I can recall the whole scene distinctly, the windy High Street, with its gleams of broken sunlight on the drying cobbles – for it had rained a little about noon, and the black clouds were only now sailing away towards the west and leaving blue and white sky behind them. I can see again the signs and names of the shops opposite, can even recall noting a girl leaning out of a window and a birdcage in an attic.

When the door of the parlour behind me opened for the blue-coated gentleman I noted that my mother stood with a pale face and her hands folded. He beckoned me to him and clapped his hand on my shoulder, and though he laid it there gentle enough, I felt that it could be as heavy as the paw of a bear.

‘My lad,’ he said, gazing steadily into my face with his china-blue eyes, ‘your good mother and I have been talking over some plans of mine, and I think I have induced her to see the advantage of my proposals. Am I right or am I wrong in assuming you have stowed away in your body a certain longing for the wide world?’

I suppose my eyes brightened before my lips moved, for he cut me short with: ‘There, that’s all right; never waste a word when a wink will do. Now, am I right or am I wrong in supposing that you have a good friend whose name is Lancelot Amber?’

I was determined that I would speak this time, and I almost shouted in my eagerness to say ‘Yes.’

‘That will be a good voice in a hurricane,’ the blue gentleman said approvingly. Then he began again, with the same formula, which I suppose pleased his palate.

‘Am I right or am I wrong in assuming that he has told you of a certain old sea-dog of an uncle of his whose name is Marmaduke Amber?’

I nodded energetically, for after his comment I thought it best to hold my tongue.

‘Very good. Now, am I right or am I wrong in supposing that you feel pretty sure at this moment that you are looking upon that same old sea-dog, Marmaduke Amber?’

This time I smiled in good earnest at his fantastic fashion of self-introduction, observing which the blue gentleman swayed me backwards and forwards several times with his right hand, and I felt that if I had been an oak of the forest he would have swayed me just as easily, while he said with a kind of approbative chuckle: ‘That’s right – a very good lad; that’s right – a very smart lad.’ Then he suddenly lifted his hand, and I, unprepared for the removal of my prop, staggered against the counter, while he put another question.

‘And what do you think Marmaduke Amber wants with you?’

I shook my head, and said I could not guess.

‘Why, to make a man of you, to be sure,’ the gentleman answered. ‘You are spoiling here in this hen-coop. Now, Lancelot

loves you like a brother, and I love Lancelot like a father, and I am quite prepared to take you to my heart for Lancelot's sake, for he is scarce likely to be deceived in you. You must know that I am going to embark upon a certain enterprise – of which more hereafter. Now, the long and the short of it is that Lancelot is coming with me, and he wants to know, and I want to know, if you will come too?’

‘If I would come too!’

My heart seemed to stand still for joy at the very thought. Why, here was the chance I was longing for, dreaming of, day and night; here was a great ship waiting to carry me on that wrinkled highway of my boyish ambition; here was the change from the little life of a little town into the great perils and brave existence of the sea; here was a good-bye to love and sorrow, and the putting on of manhood and manly purposes!

Would I not come! My lips trembled with delight and my speech faltered, and then I glanced at my mother. She was very pale and sad, and at the sight my joy turned to sorrow. She saw the change on my face, and she said, very quietly and resolutely: ‘I have given my consent, my dear son, to your going hence. Perhaps it is for the best.’

‘Mother,’ I said, turning towards her with a choking voice, ‘indeed – indeed it is for the best. I should only mope here and fret, and come to no good, and give you no pride in me at all. I must go away; it will not be for long; and when I come back I shall have forgotten my follies and learnt wisdom.’ Lord, how easy we

think it in our youth to learn wisdom! ‘And you will be proud to see me, and love me better than ever, for I shall deserve it better.’

Then my mother wrung her hands together and sighed, and tried to speak, but she could not; and she turned away from us and moved further back into the room. I made a step forward, but the stranger caught me by the shoulder, and swinging me round, guided me to the door; and at the door we stood in silence together for some seconds, staring out into the street.

‘Have patience, lad,’ he whispered into my ear; ‘it is a good woman’s weakness, and it will pass soon. She knows and I know that it is best for you to go.’

I could say nothing, for my heart was too full with the joy of going and with grief for my mother’s grief. But I felt in my soul that I must go, or else I should never come to any good in this world, which, after all, would break my mother’s heart more surely and sadly.

Presently we heard her voice, a little trembling, call on Mr. Amber by his name, and we went slowly back together. Already, as I stood by that stalwart gentleman and timed my step to his stride, I began to feel as if I had known him all my life, and had loved him as we love some dear kin.

I do not know how I can quite express what I then felt, and felt ever after, in his company – a kind of exultation, such as martial music stirs in any manly bosom, or as we draw in from the breath of some brave ballad. It would be impossible, surely, to feel aught but courageous in such cheerful, valiant, self-reliant fellowship.

CHAPTER VII

CAPTAIN MARMADUKE'S PLAN

Seated in the back parlour, with his chair tilted slightly back, Captain Marmaduke Amber set forth his scheme to us – perhaps I should say to me, for my mother had heard it all, or most of it, already, and paid, I fancy, but little heed to its repetition. For all the attention I paid, I gained, I fear me, but a very vague idea of Captain Marmaduke's purpose. I was far too excited to think of anything clearly beyond the fact that I was actually going a-travelling, and that the jovial gentleman with the ruddy face and the china-blue eyes was my good angel. Still, I gathered that Captain Amber would be a colonist – a gentleman-adventurer; after a new fashion, and not for his own ends.

It was, indeed, a kind of Utopia which Captain Amber dreamt of founding in a far corner of the world, beneath the Southern Cross. The Captain had taken it into his gallant head that the old world was growing too small and its ways too evil for its people, and that much might be done in the way of the regeneration of human society under softer surroundings and beneath purer skies. His hope, his belief, was that if a colony of earnest human beings were to be founded, established upon true principles of justice and of virtue, it might set an example which would spread and spread until at last it should regenerate the earth.

It was a noble scheme indeed, prompted by a kindly and honourable nature, and I must say that it sounded very well as the periods swelled from Captain Amber's lips. For Captain Amber was a scholar and a gentleman as well as a man of action, and he spoke and wrote with a certain florid grace that suited him well, and that impressed me at the time very profoundly. It seemed to me that Captain Amber was not merely one of the noblest of men – which indeed he was, as I was to learn often and often afterwards – but also one of the wisest, and that his scheme of colonisation was the scheme of a statesman and a philosopher.

How precisely the thing was to be done, and why Captain Marmaduke seemed so confident of finding a new Garden of Eden or Earthly Paradise at the other end of the world, I did not rightly comprehend then; nor, indeed, have I striven much to comprehend since. But I gathered this much – that Captain Marmaduke had retired from the service to carry out his fancy; that he had bought land of the Dutch in the Indies; that he had plenty of money at his command; and that the enterprise was all at his charges. One thing was quite certain – Captain Marmaduke had got a ship, and a good one too, now riding at anchor in Sendennis harbour; and in Sendennis Captain Marmaduke only meant to stay long enough to get together a few more folk to complete his company and his colony. I was to come along, not as a colonist, unless I chose, but as a kind of companion to Lancelot, to learn all the tricks of the sailor's trade, and to return when Captain Marmaduke, having fairly established his colony, set out

on his return voyage.

For it seemed that if I had forgotten, or seemed to have forgotten, Lancelot, he had not forgotten me, but had carried me in his thoughts through all the months that had grown to years since last we met. Thus, when Captain Amber first began to carry out his dream of a colony, Lancelot begged him to give me a share in the adventure. For Lancelot remembered well my hunger and thirst for travel, and had sworn to help me to my heart's desire. And it seemed to him that in this enterprise of his uncle's lurked my chance of seeing a little of the world.

Captain Amber, who loved Lancelot better than any being in the world save one, promised that if I were willing, and seemed a lad of spirit, I should go along with Lancelot and himself to help build the colony at the butt end of the world. As the ship was to sail from Sendennis – that being Captain Amber's native place – he promised Lancelot that he would seek me out, and see if I pleased him, and if the plan pleased me. And I, on fire with the thought of getting away from Sendennis and feeling the width of the world – all I wanted to know was how soon we might be starting.

'A fortnight is our longest delay,' the Captain said; 'we sail sooner if we can. Report yourself to me to-morrow morning between eleven and noon. You will find me at the Noble Rose. You know where that is, I suppose?'

Now, as the Noble Rose was the first inn in Sendennis, and one that the town was proud of, I naturally knew of its

whereabouts, though I was not so well acquainted with it as with a certain other and more ill-favoured hostelry that shall be nameless. The Noble Rose was in favour with the country gentry and the gentlemen of the Chisholm Hunt, and it would scarcely have welcomed a tradesman's son within its walls as readily as the rascalion Skull and Spectacles did. But I felt that I should be welcomed anywhere as the friend of Captain Marmaduke Amber, for as a friend I already began to regard him. So I assured him that I would duly present myself to him at the Noble Rose on the morrow, between eleven of the clock and noon.

'That's right, lad,' he said; and then, turning to my mother, he took her worn hand in his strong one, and, to my surprise and pleasure, kissed it with a reverential courtesy, as if she had been a Court lady.

As Captain Marmaduke turned to go I caught at his hand.

'Where is Lancelot?' I asked; 'is he here in Sendennis?' For in the midst of all the joy and wonder of this sea business my heart was on fire to see that face again.

Captain Marmaduke laughed.

'If he were in Sendennis at this hour he would be here, I make no doubt. He is in London, looking after one or two matters which methought he could manage better than I could. But he will be here in good time, and it is time for me to be off. Remember, my lad, to-morrow,' and with a bow for my mother and a bear's grip for me he passed outside the shop, leaving my mother and me staring at each other in great amazement. But

for all my amazement the main thought in my mind was of a certain picture of a girl's face that lay, shrined in a cedar-wood box, hidden away in my room upstairs. And so it happened that though my lips were busy with the name of Lancelot my brain was busy with the name of Marjorie.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COMPANY AT THE NOBLE ROSE

The next morning I was up betimes; indeed, I do not think that I slept very much that night, and such sleep as I did have was of a disturbed sort, peopled with wild sea-dreams of all kinds. In my impatience it seemed to me as if the time would never come for me to keep my appointment with Captain Marmaduke; but then, as ever, the hands of the clock went round their appointed circle, and at half-past eleven I was at my destination. The Noble Rose stood in the market square. It was a fine place enough, or seemed so to my eyes then, with its pillared portal and its great bow-windows at each side, where the gentlemen of quality loved to sit of fine evenings drinking their ale or their brandy, and watching the world go by.

In the left-hand window as I came up I saw that the Captain was sitting, and as I came up he saw me and beckoned me to come inside.

With a beating heart I entered the inn hall, and was making for the Captain's room when a servant barred my way.

'Now then, where are you posting to?' he asked, with an insolent good-humour. 'This is a private room, and holds private company.'

‘I know that,’ I answered, ‘but it holds a friend of mine, whom I want to see and who wants to see me.’

The man laughed rudely. ‘Very likely,’ he said, ‘that the company in the Dolphin are friends of yours,’ and then, as I was still pressing forward, he put out his hand as if to stay me.

This angered me; and taking the knave by the collar, I swung him aside so briskly that he went staggering across the hall and brought up ruefully humped against a settle. Before he could come at me again the door of the Dolphin opened, and Captain Marmaduke appeared upon the threshold. He looked in some astonishment from the rogue scowling on the settle to me flushed with anger.

‘Heyday, lad,’ he said, ‘are you having a bout of fisticuffs to keep your hand in?’

‘This fellow,’ I said, ‘tried to hinder me from entering yonder room, and I did but push him aside out of my path.’

‘Hum!’ said Captain Marmaduke, ‘twas a lusty push, and cleared your course, certainly. Well, well, I like you the better, lad, for not being lightly balked in your business.’ And therewith he led me into the Dolphin.

There was a sea-coal fire in the grate, for the day was raw and the glow welcome. Beside the fire an elderly gentleman sat in an arm-chair. He had a black silk skull-cap on his head, and his face was wrinkled and his eyes were bright, and his face, now turned upon me, showed harsh. I knew of course that he was Lancelot’s other uncle, he who would never suffer that I should set foot

within his gates. Indeed, his face in many points resembled that of his brother – as much as an ugly face can resemble a fair one. There was a likeness in the forehead and there was a likeness in the eyes, which were something of the same china-blue colour, though of a lighter shade, and with only cold unkindness there instead of the genial kindness of the Captain's.

A man stood on the other side of the open fireplace, a man of about forty-five, of something over the middle height and marvellously well-built. He was clad in what, though it was not distinctly a seaman's habit, yet suggested the ways of the sea, and there was a kind of foppishness about his rig which set me wondering, for I was used to a slovenly squalor or a slovenly bravery in the sailors I knew most of. He was a handsome fellow, with dark curling hair and dark eyes, and a dark skin that seemed Italian.

I have heard men say that there is no art to read the mind's complexion in the face. These fellows pretend that your villain is often smooth-faced as well as smooth-tongued, and pleases the eye to the benefit of his mischievous ends. Whereas, on the other hand, many an honest fellow is damned for a scoundrel because with the nature of an angel he has the mask of a fiend. In which two fancies I have no belief. A rogue is a rogue all the world over, and flies his flag in his face for those who can read the bunting. He may flatter the light eye or the cold eye, but the warm gaze will find some lurking line by the lip, some wryness of feature, some twist of the devil's fingers in his face, to betray him. And as

for an honest man looking like a rogue, the thing is impossible. I have seen no small matter of marvels in my time – even, as I think, the great sea serpent himself, though this is not the time and place to record it – but I have never seen the marvel of a good man with a bad man’s face, and it was my first and last impression that the face of Cornelys Jensen was the face of a rogue.

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