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THE BANDBOX

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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THE BANDBOX

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BY LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

THE BANDBOX
CYNTHIA-OF-THE-MINUTE
NO MAN'S LAND
THE FORTUNE HUNTER
THE POOL OF FLAME
THE BRONZE BELL
THE BLACK BAG
THE BRASS BOWL
THE PRIVATE WAR
TERENCE O'ROURKE

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"Now, sir!" she exclaimed, turning

FRONTISPIECE. *See Page 83*

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THE BANDBOX

BY

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

AUTHOR OF "THE BRASS BOWL," "THE BLACK BAG"
"CYNTHIA-OF-THE-MINUTE," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

ARTHUR I. KELLER

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1912

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Jun 4/13

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TO

LEWIS BUDDY III

Dec 6

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THE BANDBOX

I

INTRODUCING MR. IFF

AT half-past two of a sunny, sultry afternoon late in the month of August, Mr. Benjamin Staff sat at table in the dining-room of the Authors' Club, moodily munching a morsel of cheese and a segment of cast-iron biscuit and wondering what he must do to be saved from the death-in-life of sheer ennui.

A long, lank gentleman, surprisingly thin, of a slightly saturnine cast: he was not only unhappy, he looked it. He was alone and he was lonely; he was an American and a man of sentiment (though he did n't look *that*) and he wanted to go home; to sum up, he found himself in love and in London at one and the same time, and felt precisely as ill at ease in the one as in the other of these, to him, exotic circumstances.

Inconceivable as it may seem that any rational man should yearn for New York in August, that and nothing less was what Staff wanted with all his heart. He wanted to go home and swelter and be swindled

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by taxicab drivers and snubbed by imported head-waiters; he wanted to patronise the subway at peril of asphyxiation and to walk down Fifth Avenue at that witching hour when electric globes begin to dot the dusk of evening — pale moons of a world of steel and stone; he wanted to ride in elevators instead of lifts, in trolley-cars instead of trams; he wanted to go to a ball-game at the Polo Grounds, to dine dressed as he pleased, to insult his intelligence with a roof-garden show if he felt so disposed, and to see for himself just how much of Town had been torn down in the two months of his exile and what they were going to put up in its place. He wanted, in short, his own people; more specifically he wanted just one of them, meaning to marry her if she'd have him.

Now to be homesick and lovesick all at once is a tremendously disturbing state of affairs. So influenced, the strongest men are prone to folly. Staff, for instance, had excellent reason to doubt the advisability of leaving London just then, with an unfinished play on his hands; but he was really no more than a mere, normal human being, and he did want very badly to go home. If it was a sharp struggle, it was a short one that prefaced his decision.

Of a sudden he rose, called for his bill and paid it, called for his hat and stick, got them, and resolutely —

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yet with a furtive air, as one who would throw a dogging conscience off the scent — fled the premises of his club, shaping a course through Whitehall and Charing Cross to Cockspur Street, where, with the unerring instinct of a homing pigeon, he dodged hastily into the booking-office of a steamship company.

Now Mystery is where one finds it, and Romantic Adventure is as a rule to be come upon infesting the same identical premises. Mr. Staff was not seeking mysteries and the last rôle in the world in which he could fancy himself was that of Romantic Adventurer. But in retrospect he can see quite clearly that it was there, in the humdrum and prosaic setting of a steamship booking-office, that he first stumbled (all unwittingly) into the toils of his Great Adventure.

When he entered, there was but one other person on the outer or public side of the booking-counter; and he, sticking close in a far corner and inaudibly conferring with a clerk, seemed so slight and unpretending a body that Staff overlooked his existence altogether until circumstances obliged him to recognise it.

The ignored person, on the other hand, showed an instant interest in the appearance of Mr. Staff. You might have thought that he had been waiting for the latter to come in — absurd as this might seem, in view

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of the fact that Staff had made up his mind to book for home only within the last quarter-hour. None the less, on sight of him this other patron of the company, who had seemed till then to be of two minds as to what he wanted, straightened up and bent a freshened interest on the cabin-plot which the clerk had spread out upon the counter for his advisement. And a moment after Staff had audibly stated his wishes, the other prodded a certain spot of the chart with a thin and fragile forefinger.

"I'll take this one," he said quietly.

"Upper'r lower?" enquired his clerk.

"Lower."

"Then-Q," said the clerk. . . .

Meanwhile Staff had caught the eye of an impregnable young Englishman behind the counter; and, the latter coming forward, he opened negotiations with a succinct statement:

"I want to book on the Autocratic, sailing tomorrow from Liverpool, if I'm not mistaken."

"Quite so," said his clerk, not without condescension. "For yourself, may I awsk?"

"For myself alone."

"Then-Q." The clerk fetched a cabin-plot.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said, removing a pencil from behind his ear the better to make his meaning clear,

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"there's not much choice. It's quite late to book, you know; and this is the rush season for westbound traffic; everything's just about full up."

"I understand; but still you can make room for me somewhere, I hope."

"Oh, yes. Quite so, indeed. It's only a question of what you'd like. Now we have a *cabine de luxe* —"

"Not for me," said Staff firmly.

"Then-Q. . . . The only other accommodation I can offer you is a two-berth stateroom on the main-deck."

"An outside room?"

"Yes, sir. You can see for yourself. Here it is: berths 432 and 433. You 'll find it quite cosy, I 'm sure."

Staff nodded, eyeing the cubicle indicated by the pencil-point.

"That 'll do," said he. "I 'll take it."

"Then-Q. Upper 'r lower berth, sir?"

"Both," said Staff, trying not to look conscious — and succeeding.

"Both, sir?" — in tones of pained expostulation.

"Both!" — reiterated in a manner that challenged curiosity.

"Ah," said the clerk wearily, "but, you see, I thought I understood you to say you were alone."

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"I did; but I want privacy."

"I see. Then-Q." — as who should say: *Another mad Amayrican.*

With this the clerk took himself off to procure a blank ticket.

While he waited, Staff was entertained by snatches of a colloquy at the far end of the counter, where the other patron was being catechised as to his pedigree by the other booking-clerk. What he heard ran something to the following effect:

"What did you say the name was, sir?"

"*The* name?"

"If you please —"

"What name?"

"Your name, sir."

"I did n't say, did I?"

"No, sir."

"Ah! I thought not."

Pause; then the clerk, patiently: "Do you mind giving me your name, sir, so that I may fill in your ticket?"

"I'd r'ally rather not; but seein' as it's you and you make a point of it — Iff."

Pause. . . . "Beg pardon?"

"Iff."

"If what, sir?"

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"I-double-F, Iff: a name, not a joke. I–F–F — William Howard Iff. W. H. Iff, Whiff: joke."

"Ow-w?"

"But you need n't laugh."

With dignity: "I was not intending to laugh, sir."

Staff could hardly refrain from refreshing himself with a glance at the individual so singularly labelled. Appraising him covertly, he saw a man whose stature was quite as much shorter than the normal as his own was longer, but hardly less thin. Indeed, Staff was in the habit of defining his own style of architecture as Gothic, and with reasonable excuse; but reviewing the physical geography of Mr. Iff, the word *emaciation* bobbed to the surface of the literary mentality: Iff was really astonishingly slight of build. Otherwise he was rather round-shouldered; his head was small, bird-like, thinly thatched with hair of a faded tow colour; his face was sensitively tinted with the faintest of flushes beneath a skin of natural pallor, and wore an expression curiously naïve and yet shrewd — an effect manufactured by setting the eyes of a child, round and dimly blue, in a mask of weathered maturity.

Now while Staff was receiving this impression, Mr. Iff looked sharply round; their glances crossed. Primarily embarrassed to be caught rudely staring, Staff was next and thoroughly shocked to detect a distinct

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if momentary eclipse of one of Mr. Iff's pale blue eyes. Bluntly, openly, deliberately, Mr. Iff winked at Mr. Staff, and then, having accomplished his amazement and discomfiture, returned promptly, twinkling, to the baiting of his clerk.

"Your age, sir?"

Mr. Iff enquired in simple surprise: "Do you really care to know?"

"It's required, sir, by the —"

"Oh, well — if I must! But, mind you, strictly as man to man: you may write me down a freeborn American citizen, entitled to vote and more'n half white."

"*Beg* pardon?"

"I say, I am an adult —"

"Oh!" The clerk wrote; then, bored, resumed: "Married or single, please?"

"I'm a spinster —"

"O-w?"

"Honestly — neither married nor unmarried."

"Then-Q" — resignedly. "Your business — ?"

But here Staff's clerk touched the exasperated cate-chist on the shoulder and said something inaudible. The response, while equally inaudible, seemed to convey a sense of profound personal shock. Staff was conscious that Mr. Iff's clerk glanced reproachfully in

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his direction, as if to suggest that he would n't have believed it of him.

Divining that he and Mr. Iff were bargaining for the same accommodations, Staff endeavoured to assume an attitude of distinguished obliviousness to the entire proceeding; and would have succeeded but for the immediate and impatient action of Mr. Iff.

That latter, seizing the situation, glanced askance at dignified Mr. Staff, then smiled a whimsical smile, cocked his small head to one side and approached him with an open and ingenuous air.

"If it's only a question of which berth," said he, "I'm quite willing to forfeit my option on the lower, Mr. Staff."

That gentleman started and stared.

"Oh, lord, man!" said Iff tolerantly — "as if your portrait had n't been published more times than you can remember! — as if all the world were unaware of Benjamin Staff, novelist!"

There was subtle flattery in this; and flattery (we are told) will warm the most austere of authors — which Staff was not. He said "Oh!" and smiled his slow, wry smile; and Mr. Iff, remarking these symptoms of a thaw with interest and encouragement, pressed his point.

"I don't mind an upper, really — only chose the

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lower because the choice was mine, at the moment. If you prefer it —"

"The trouble is," Staff interrupted, "I want the whole room."

"Oh! . . . Friend with you?"

"No; but I had some notion of doing a little work on the way over."

"Writing? I see. But if that's all — !" Mr. Iff routed a negligible quibble with an airy flirt of his delicate hand. "Trust me; you'll hardly ever be reminded of my existence — I'm *that* quiet. And besides, I spend most of my time in the smoking-room. And I don't snore, and I'm never seasick. . . . By the way," he added anxiously, "do or are you?"

"Never —"

"Then we'll get along famously. I'll cheerfully take the upper, and even should I tumble out on top of you, you'd never know it: my weight is nothing — hardly that. Now what d'you say? Is it a go?"

"But — I don't know you — "

"Business of making a noise like an Englishman!" commented Mr. Iff with bitter scorn.

"— well enough to accept such a favour from you. I'll take second choice myself — the upper, I mean."

"You won't; but we'll settle that on shipboard," said Mr. Iff promptly. "As for knowing me — busi-

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ness of introducing myself. Mr. Staff, I want you to shake hands with my friend, Mr. Iff. W. H. Iff, Whiff: sometimes so-called: merry wheeze based on my typographical make-up; once a joke, now so grey with age I generally pull it myself, thus saving new acquaintances the mental strain. Practical philanthropy — what? Whim of mine."

"Indeed?"

"Believe *me*. You've no notion how folks suffer in the first throes of that giddy pun. And then when it falls flat — naturally *I* can't laugh like a fool at it any longer — *blooie!*" said Mr. Iff with expression — "like that — *blooie!* — they *do* feel so cheap. Wherefore I maintain I do humanity a service when I beat it to that moth-eaten joke. You follow me?"

Staff laughed.

"Then it's all settled. Good! We shan't be in one another's way. You'll see."

"Unless you talk in your sleep, too."

Mr. Iff looked unspeakable reproach. "You'll soon get accustomed to me," he said, brightening — "won't mind my merry prattle any more'n the song of a giddy humming-bird."

He turned and saw their booking-clerks in patient waiting behind the counter. "Ah, there you are, eh? Well, it's all settled. . . ."

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Thus was the thing accomplished.

And shortly thereafter these two paused in parting at the door.

"Going my way?" enquired Mr. Iff.

Staff named whatever destination he had in mind.

"Sorry. I go t'other way. Take care of yourself. See you tomorrow."

"Good-bye," said Staff, and took himself briskly off.

But Mr. Iff did not at once go in the opposite direction. In fact, he moved no more than a door or two away, and then stopped, apparently fascinated by an especially stupid shop-window show.

He had very quick eyes, had Mr. Iff, so alert and observant that they had made him alive to a circumstance which had altogether escaped Staff's notice — a trifling incident that took place just as they were on the point of parting.

While still they were standing in the doorway, a motor-cab, plunging down Haymarket, had swooped in a wide curve as if meaning to pull in at the curb in front of the steamship company's office. The cab carried a solitary passenger — a remarkably pretty young woman — and on its roof a remarkably large and ornate bandbox.

It was, in fact, the bandbox which had first fixed the interest of Mr. Iff. Only an introspective vision, indeed,

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such as that of the imaginative and thoughtful Mr. Staff, could have overlooked the approach of a band-box so big and upstanding, so profusely beflowered and so prominently displayed.

Now before the cab could stop, its fare, who had been bending forward and peering out of the window as if anxious to recognise her destination, started still farther forward, seized the speaking-tube and spoke into its mouthpiece in a manner of sharp urgency. And promptly the driver swerved out from the curb and swung his car away down Pall Mall.

If it was mere inquisitiveness that held Mr. Iff rooted to the spot, gaping at that uninteresting window show, it served to discover him in the guise of an admirably patient person. Fully fifteen minutes elapsed before the return of the motor-cab was signalled unmistakably by the blatant bandbox bobbing back high above the press of traffic. And when this happened, Mr. Iff found some further business with the steamship company, and quietly and unobtrusively slipped back into the booking-office.

As he did so the cab stopped at the curb and the pretty young woman jumped out and followed Mr. Iff across the threshold — noticing him no more than had Mr. Staff, to begin with.

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II

THE BANDBOX

IN the playhouses of France, a hammering on the stage alone heralds the rising of the curtain to disclose illusory realms of romance. Precisely so with Mr. Staff, upon the door of whose lodging, at nine o'clock the next morning, a knocking announced the first overt move against his peace of mind.

At that time, Staff, all unconscious of his honourable peril, was standing in the middle of the floor of the inner room (his lodgings comprised two) and likewise in the approximate geographical centre of a chaotic assemblage of assorted wearing apparel and other personal impedimenta.

He was wondering, confusedly, how in thunderation he was to manage to cram all that confounded truck into the limited amount of trunk space at his command. He was also wondering, resentfully in the names of a dozen familiar spirits, where he had put his pipe: it's simply maddening, the way a fellow's pipe will persist in getting lost at such critical times as when he's

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packing up to catch a train with not a minute to spare. . . . In short, so preoccupied was Staff that the knocking had to be repeated before he became objectively alive to it.

Then, confidentially, he said: "What the devil *now?*"

In louder tones calculated to convey an impression of intense impatience, he cried: "Come *in!*"

He heard the outer door open, and immediately, upon an impulse esoteric even in his own understanding, he chose to pretend to be extravagantly busy — as busy as by rights he should have been. For a minute or longer he acted most vividly the part of a man madly bent on catching his train though he were to perish of the attempt. And this despite a suspicion that he played to a limited audience of one, and that one unappreciative of the finer phases of everyday histrionic impersonation: an audience answering to the name of Milly, whose lowly station of life was that of housemaid-in-lodgings and whose imagination was as ill-nourished and sluggish as might be expected of one whose wages were two-and-six a week.

Remembering this in time, the novelty of make-believe palled on Staff. Not that alone, but he could hear Milly insisting in accents not in the least apologetic: "Beg pardon, sir . . ."

He paused in well-feigned surprise and looked enquir-

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ingly over his shoulder, as though to verify a surmise that somebody had spoken. Such proving to be the case, he turned round to confront Milly — Milly true to type, wearing a grimy matutinal apron, an expression half sleepy, half sullen, and a horrid soot smudge on her ripe, red, right cheek.

In this guise (so sedulously does life itself ape the conventions of its literature and drama) Milly looked as lifelike as though viewed through the illusion of footlights. Otherwise, as Staff never failed to be gratified to observe, she differed radically from the stock article of our stage. For one thing, she refrained from dropping her *aitches* and stumbling over them on her first entrance in order merely to win a laugh and so lift her little rôle from the common rut of "lines" to the dignity of "a bit." For another, she seldom if ever brandished that age-honoured wand of her office, a bedraggled feather-duster. Nor was she by any means in love with the tenant of the fust-floor-front.

But though Staff was grateful for Milly because of this strong and unconventional individuality of hers, he wasn't at all pleased to be interrupted, and he made nothing whatever of the ostensible excuse for the interruption; the latter being a very large and brilliantly illuminated bandbox, which Milly was offering him in pantomime.

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"It have just come," said Milly calmly, in response to his enquiring stare. "Where would you wish me to put it, sir?"

"Put what?"

Milly gesticulated eloquently with the bandbox.

"That thing?" said Staff with scorn.

"Yessir."

"I don't want you to put it anywhere. Take it away."

"But it's for you, sir."

"Impossible. Some mistake. Please don't bother — just take it away. There's a good girl."

Milly's disdain of this blandishment was plainly visible in the added elevation of her already sufficiently tucked-up nose.

"Beg pardon, sir," she persisted coldly, "but it's got your nime on it, and the boy as left it just now asked if you lived here."

Staff's frown portrayed indignation, incredulity and impatience.

"Mistake, I tell you. I have n't been buying any millinery. Absurd!"

"Beg pardon, sir, but you can see as it's addressed to you."

It was: the box being held out for examination, Staff saw plainly that it was tagged with a card inscribed in

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fashionably slapdash feminine handwriting with what was unquestionably the name and local address of Benjamin Staff, Esq.

Because of this, he felt called upon to subject the box to more minute inspection.

It was nothing more nor less than the everyday milliners' hat-box of commerce: a capacious edifice of stout pasteboard neatly plastered with wall-paper in whose design narrow stripes of white alternated with aggressive stripes of brown, the whole effectively setting off an abundance of purple blossoms counterfeiting no flower known to botanists. And one gibbous side was further decorated with bold black script advertising the establishment of its origin.

"*Maison Lucille, New Bond Street, West,*" Staff read aloud, completely bewildered. "But I never heard of the d— the place!"

Helplessly he sought Milly's eyes, and helpfully Milly rose to the occasion.

"Nossir," said she; and that was all.

"I know nothing whatever about the thing," Staff declared severely. "It's all a mistake. Take it away — it'll be sent for as soon as the error's discovered."

A glimmer of intelligence shone luminous in Milly's eyes. "Mebbe," she suggested under inspiration of

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curiosity — "Mebbe if you was to open it, you'd find a note or — or something."

"Bright girl!" applauded Staff. "You open it. I'm too busy — packing up — no time —"

And realising how swiftly the golden minutes were fleeting beyond recall, he cast desperately about for his pipe.

By some miracle he chanced to find it, and so resumed packing.

Behind him, Milly made noises with tissue-paper.

Presently he heard a smothered "O sir!" and looked round to discover the housemaid in an attitude of unmitigated adoration before what he could not deny was a perfect dream of a hat — the sort of a hat that only a woman or a society reporter could do justice to. In his vision it bore a striking resemblance to a Gainsborough with all modern improvements — as most big hats do to most men. Briefly, it was big and black and trimmed with an atmosphere of costly simplicity, a monstrous white "willow" plume and a huge buckle of brilliants. It impressed him, hazily, as just the very hat to look ripping on an ash-blonde. Aside from this he was aware of no sensation other than one of aggravated annoyance.

Milly, to the reverse extreme, was charmed to distraction, thrilled to the core of her and breathless —

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though by no means dumb. Women are never dumb with admiration.

"O sir!" she breathed in ecstasy — "it's a real creashun!"

"Daresay," Staff conceded sourly. "Did you find a note?"

"And the price-tag, sir — it says *twen*-ty five pounds!"

"I hope there's a receipted bill, then. . . . Do you see anything remotely resembling a note — or something?"

With difficulty subduing her transports — "I'll see, sir," said Milly.

Grunting with exasperation, Staff bent over a trunk and stuffed things into it until Milly committed herself to the definite announcement: "I don't seem to find nothing, sir."

"Look again, please."

Again Milly pawed the tissue-paper.

"There ain't nothing at all, sir," she declared finally.

Staff stood up, thrust his hands into his pockets and champed the stem of his pipe — scowling.

"It is a bit odd, sir, isn't it? — having this sent to you like this and you knowing nothing at all about it!"

Staff said something indistinguishable because of the obstructing pipe-stem.

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"It's perfectly beautiful, sir — a won'erful hat, really."

"The devil fly away with it!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"I said, I'm simply crazy about it, myself."

"Oh, did you, sir?"

"Please put it back and tie it up."

"Yessir." Reluctantly Milly restored the creation to its tissue-paper nest. "And what would you wish me to do with it now, sir?" she resumed when at length the ravishing vision was hidden away.

"Do with it?" stormed the vexed gentleman. "I don't care what the d—ickens you do with it. It is n't my hat. Take it away. Throw it into the street. Send it back to the place it came from. Give it . . . or, wait!"

Pausing for breath and thought, he changed his mind. The hat was too valuable to be treated with disrespect, no matter who was responsible for the mistake. Staff felt morally obligated to secure its return to the Maison Lucille.

"Look here, Milly . . ."

"Yessir?"

"I'll just telephone . . . No! Half a minute!"

He checked, on the verge of yielding to an insane impulse. Being a native of New York, it had been his

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instinctive thought to call up the hat-shop and demand the return of its delivery-boy. Fortunately the instinct of a true dramatist moved him to sketch hastily the ground-plot of the suggested tragedy.

In *Act I* (*Time: the Present*) he saw himself bearding the telephone in its lair — that is, in the darkest and least accessible recess of the ground-floor hallway. In firm, manful accents, befitting an intrepid soul, he details a number to the central operator — and meekly submits to an acidulated correction of his Amurrikin accent.

Act II (*fifteen minutes have elapsed*): He is clinging desperately to the receiver, sustained by hope alone while he attends sympathetically to the sufferings of an English lady trying to get in communication with the Army and Navy Stores.

Act III (*ten minutes later*): He has exhausted himself grinding away at an obsolete rotary bell-call. Abruptly his ears are enchanted by a far, thin, frigid moan. It says: "*Are* you theah?" Responding savagely "NO!" he dashes the receiver back into its hook and flings away to discover that he has lost both train and steamer. Tag line: For this is London in the Twentieth Century. *Curtain: End of the Play*. . . .

Disenchanted by consideration of this tentative synopsis, the playwright consulted his watch. Already

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the incident of the condemnable bandbox had eaten up much invaluable time. He would see himself doomed to unending perdition if he would submit to further hindrance on its behalf.

"Milly," said he with decision, "take that . . . thing down-stairs, and tell Mrs. Gigg to telephone the hat-shop to call for it."

"Yessir."

"And after that, call me a taxi. Tell it to wait. I'll be ready by ten or know —"

Promptly retiring, Milly took with her, in addition to the bandbox, a confused impression of a room whose atmosphere was thick with flying garments, in the wild swirl of which a lanky lunatic danced weirdly, muttering uncouth incantations. . . .

Forty minutes later (on the stroke of ten) Mr. Staff, beautifully groomed after his habit, his manner (superbly nonchalant) denying that he had ever known reason why he should take a single step in haste, followed his trunks down to the sidewalk and, graciously bidding his landlady adieu, presented Milly with a keepsake in the shape of a golden coin of the realm.

A taxicab, heavy-laden with his things, fretted before the door. Staff nodded to the driver.

"Euston," said he; "and a shilling extra if you drive like sin."

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"Right you are, sir."

In the act of entering the cab, Staff started back with bitter imprecations.

Mrs. Gigg, who had not quite closed the front door, opened it wide to his remonstrant voice.

"I say, what's this bandbox doing in my cab? I thought I told Milly — "

"Sorry, sir; I forgot," Mrs. Gigg interposed—"bein' that flustered — "

"Well?"

"The woman what keeps the 'at-shop said as 'ow the 'at was n't to come back, sir. She said a young lidy bought it yestiddy ahfternoon and awsked to 'ave it sent you this mornin' before nine o'clock."

"The deuce she did!" said Staff blankly.

"An' the young lidy said as 'ow she'd write you a note explynin'. So I tells Milly not to bother you no more abaht it, but put the 'at-box in the keb, sir — wishin' not to 'inder you."

"Thoughtful of you, I 'm sure. But did n't the — ah — woman who keeps the hat-shop mention the name of the — ah — person who purchased the hat?"

By the deepening of its corrugations, the forehead of Mrs. Gigg betrayed the intensity of her mental strain. Her eyes wore a far-away look and her lips moved, at first silently. Then — "I ain't sure, sir, as she did

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nime the lidy, but *if* she did, it was somethin' like Burnside, I fancy — or else Postlethwayt."

"Nor Jones nor Brown? Perhaps Robinson? Think, Mrs. Gigg! Not Robinson?"

"I 'm sure it may 'ave been eyether of them, sir, now you puts it to me pl'in."

"That makes everything perfectly clear. Thank you so much."

With this, Staff turned hastily away, nodded to his driver to cut along, and with groans and lamentations squeezed himself into what space the bandbox did not demand of the interior of the vehicle.

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III

TWINS

ON the boat-train, en route for Liverpool, Mr. Staff found plenty of time to consider the affair of the foundling bandbox in every aspect with which a lively imagination could invest it; but to small profit. In fact, he was able to think of little else, with the damned thing smirking impishly at him from its perch on the opposite seat. He was vexed to exasperation by the consciousness that he could n't guess why or by whom it had been so cavalierly thrust into his keeping. Consequently he cudgelled his wits unmercifully in exhaustive and exhausting attempts to clothe it with a plausible *raison d'être*.

He believed firmly that the Maison Lucille had acted in good faith; the name of Staff was too distinctive to admit of much latitude for error. Nor was it difficult to conceive that this or that young woman of his acquaintance might have sent him the hat to take home for her — thus ridding herself of a cumbersome package and neatly saddling him with all the bother of getting the thing through the customs. But . . . !

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Who was there in London just then that knew him well enough so to presume upon his good nature? None that he could call to mind. Besides, how in the name of all things inexplicable had anybody found out his intention of sailing on the Autocratic, that particular day? — something of which he himself had yet to be twenty-four hours aware!

His conclusions may be summed up under two heads: (a) there was n't any answer; (b) it was all an unmitigated nuisance. And so thinking, divided between despair and disgust, Mr. Staff gave the problem up against his arrival on board the steamship. There remained to him a single gleam of hope: a note of explanation had been promised; he thought it just possible that it might have been sent to the steamship rather than to his lodgings in London.

Therefore, the moment he set foot aboard the ship, he consigned his hand-luggage to a steward, instructing the fellow where to take it, and hurried off to the dining-saloon where, upon a table round which passengers buzzed like flies round a sugar-lump, letters and telegrams for the departing were displayed. But he could find nothing for Mr. Benjamin Staff.

Disappointed and indignant to the point of suppressed profanity, he elbowed out of the thronged saloon just in time to espy a steward (quite another steward: not

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him with whom Staff had left his things) struggling up the main companionway under the handicap of several articles of luggage which Staff did n't recognise, and one which he assured himself he did: a bandbox as like the cause of all his perturbation as one piano-case resembles another.

Now if quite out of humour with the bandbox and all that appertained thereunto, the temper of the young man was such that he was by no means prepared to see it confiscated without his knowledge of consent. In two long strides he overhauled the steward, plucked him back with a peremptory hand, and abashed him with a stern demand:

"I say! where the devil do you think you 're going, my man?"

His man showed a face of dashed amazement.

"Beg pardon, sir! Do you mean *me*?"

"Most certainly I mean you. That 's my bandbox. What are you doing with it?"

Looking guiltily from his face to the article in question, the steward flushed and stammered — culpability incarnate, thought Staff.

"Your bandbox, sir?"

"Do you think I 'd go charging all over this ship for a silly bandbox that was n't mine?"

"But, sir — "

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"I tell you, it's mine. It's tagged with my name. Where 's the steward I left it with?"

"But, sir," pleaded the accused, "this belongs to this lidy 'ere. I 'm just tikin' it to 'er stiteroom, sir."

Staff's gaze followed the man's nod, and for the first time he became aware that a young woman stood a step or two above them, half turned round to attend to the passage, her air and expression seeming to indicate a combination of amusement and impatience.

Precipitately the young man removed his hat. Through the confusion clouding his thoughts, he both foreglimpsed humiliation and was dimly aware of a personality of force and charm: of a well-poised figure cloaked in a light pongee travelling-wrap; of a face that seemed to consist chiefly in dark eyes glowing lambent in the shadow of a wide-brimmed, flopsy hat. He was sensitive to a hint of breeding and reserve in the woman's attitude; as though (he thought) the contretemps diverted and engaged her more than he did who was responsible for it.

He addressed her in a diffident and uncertain voice: "I beg pardon. . . ."

"The box is mine," she affirmed with a cool and even gravity. "The steward is right."

He choked back a counterclaim, which would have been unmannerly, and in his embarrassment did some-

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thing that he instantly realised was even worse, approaching downright insolence in that it demanded confirmation of her word: he bent forward and glanced at the tag on the bandbox.

It was labelled quite legibly with the name of Miss Eleanor Searle.

He coloured, painfully contrite. "I 'm sorry," he stammered. "I — ah — happen to have with me the precise duplicate of this box. I didn 't at first realise that it might have a — ah — twin."

The young woman inclined her head distantly.

"I understand," she said, turning away. "Come, steward, if you please."

"I'm very sorry — very," Staff said hastily in intense mortification.

Miss Searle did not reply; she had already resumed her upward progress. Her steward followed, openly grinning.

Since it is not considered good form to kick a steward for knowing an ass when he meets one, Staff could no more than turn away, disguise the unholy emotions that fermented in his heart, and seek his stateroom.

"It *had* to be me!" he groaned.

Stateroom 432–433 proved to be very much occupied when he found it — chiefly, to be sure, by the bandbox, which took up most of the floor space. Round it

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were grouped in various attitudes of dejection sundry other pieces of travelling-gear and Mr. Iff. The latter was sitting on the edge of the lower berth, his hands in his pockets, his brow puckered with perplexity, his gaze fixed in fascination to the bandbox. On Staff's entrance he looked up.

"Hello!" he said crisply.

"Afternoon," returned Staff with all the morose dignity appropriate to severely wounded self-esteem.

Iff indicated the bandbox with a delicate gesture.

"No wonder," he observed mildly, "you wanted the ship to yourself."

Staff grunted irritably and, picking his way through and over the mound of luggage, deposited himself on the transom opposite the berths.

"A present for the missis, I take it?" pursued Iff.

"You might take it, and welcome, for all of me. . . . Only it is n't mine. *And* I am not married."

"Pardon!" murmured Mr. Iff. "But if it is n't yours," he suggested logically, "what the deuce-and-all is it doing here?"

"I'm supposed to be taking it home for a friend."

"Ah! I see. . . . A very, *very* dear friend, of course. . . . ?"

"You 'd think so, would n't you?" Staff regarded the bandbox with open malevolence. "If I had my

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way," he said vindictively, "I'd lift it a kick over the side and be rid of it."

"How you do take on, to be sure," Iff commented placidly. "If I may be permitted to voice my inmost thought: you seem uncommon' peeved."

"I am."

"Could I soothe your vexed soul in any way?"

"You might tell me how to get quit of the blasted thing."

"I'll try, if you'll tell me how you got hold of it."

"Look here!" Staff suddenly aroused to a perception of the fact that he was by way of being artfully pumped. "Does this matter interest you very much indeed?"

"No more, apparently, than it annoys you. . . . And it is quite possible that, in the course of time, we *might* like to shut the door. . . . But, as far as that is, I don't mind admitting I 'm a nosey little beast. If you feel it your duty to snub me, my dear fellow, by all means go to it. I don't mind — and I dessay I deserve it."

This proved irresistible; Staff's humour saved his temper. To the twinkle in Iff's faded blue eyes he returned a reluctant smile that ended in open laughter.

"It 's just this way," he explained somewhat to his own surprise, under the influence of an unforeseen

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gush of liking for this good-humoured wisp of a man — "I feel I 'm being shamelessly imposed upon. Just as I was leaving my rooms this morning this hat-box was sent to me, anonymously. I assume that some cheeky girl I know has sent it to me to tote home for her. It 's a certificated nuisance — but that is n't all. There happens to be a young woman named Searle on board, who has an exact duplicate of this infernal contraption. A few moments ago I saw it, assumed it must be mine, quite naturally claimed it, and was properly called down in the politest, most crushing way imaginable. Hence this headache."

"So!" said Mr. Iff. "So that is why he does n't love his dear little bandbox! . . . A Miss Earle, I think you said?"

"No — Searle. At least, that was the name on her luggage."

"Oh — Searle, eh?"

"You don't happen to know her, by any chance?" Staff demanded, not without a trace of animation.

"Who? Me? Nothing like that," Iff disclaimed hastily.

"I just thought you might," said Staff, disappointed.

For some moments the conversation languished. Then Staff rose and pressed the call-button.

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"What 's up?" asked Iff.

"Going to get rid of this," said Staff with an air of grim determination.

"Just what I was going to suggest. But don't do anything hasty — anything you'll be sorry for."

"Leave that to me, please."

From his tone the assumption was not unwarrantable that Staff had never yet done anything that he had subsequently found cause to regret. Pensively punishing an inoffensive wrist, Iff subsided.

A steward showed himself in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?"

"Are you our steward?" asked Staff.

"Yes, sir."

"Your name?"

"Orde, sir."

"Well, Orde, can you stow this thing some place out of our way?"

Orde eyed the bandbox doubtfully. "I dessay I can find a plice for it," he said at length.

"Do, please."

"Very good, sir. Then-Q." Possessing himself of the bandbox, Orde retired.

"And now," suggested Iff with much vivacity, "s'pose we unpack and get settled."

And they proceeded to distribute their belong-

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ings, sharing the meagre conveniences of their quarters with the impartiality of courteous and experienced travellers. . . .

It was rather late in the afternoon before Staff found an opportunity to get on deck for the first time. The hour was golden with the glory of a westering sun. The air was bland, the sea quiet. The Autocratic had settled into her stride, bearing swiftly down St. George's Channel for Queenstown, where she was scheduled to touch at midnight. Her decks presented scenes of animation familiar to the eyes of a weathered voyager.

There was the customary confusion of petticoats and sporadic displays of steamer-rugs along the ranks of deck-chairs. Deck-stewards darted hither and yon, wearing the harassed expressions appropriate to persons of their calling — doubtless to a man praying for that bright day when some public benefactor should invent a steamship having at least two leeward sides. A clatter of tongues assailed the ear, the high, sweet accents of American women predominating. The masculine element of the passenger-list with singular unanimity — like birds of prey wheeling in ever diminishing circles above their quarry — drifted imperceptibly but steadily aft, toward the smoking-room. The two indispensable adjuncts to a successful voyage had already put in their appearance: *item*, the Pest,

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an overdressed, overgrown, shrill-voiced female-child, blundering into everybody's way and shrieking impertinences; *item*, a short, stout, sedulously hilarious gentleman who oozed public-spirited geniality at every pore and insisted on buttonholing inoffensive strangers and demanding that they enter an embryonic deck-quoit tournament — in short, discovering every known symptom of being the Life and Soul of the Ship.

Staff dodged both by grace of discretion and good fortune, and having found his deck-chair, dropped into it with a sigh of content, composing himself for rest and thought. His world seemed very bright with promise, just then; he felt that, if he had acted on impetuous impulse, he had not acted unwisely: only a few more hours — then the pause at Queenstown — then the brief, seven-day stretch across the Atlantic to home and Alison Landis!

It seemed almost too good to be true. He all but purred with his content in the prospect.

Of course, he had a little work to do, but he did n't mind that; it would help immensely to beguile the tedium of the voyage; and all he required in order to do it well was the moral courage to shut himself up for a few hours each day and to avoid as far as possible social entanglements. . . .

At just about this stage in his meditations he was

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somewhat rudely brought back to earth — or, more properly, to deck.

A voice shrieked excitedly: "*Why*, Mr. Staff!"

To be precise, it miscalled him "Stahf": a shrill, penetrating, overcultivated, American voice making an attempt only semi-successful to cope with the broad vowels of modern English enunciation.

Staff looked up, recognised its owner, and said beneath his breath: "O Lord!" — his soul crawling with recognition. But nothing of this was discernible in the alacrity with which he jumped up and bent over a bony but bedizened hand.

"Mrs. Ilkington!" he said.

"R'ally," said the lady, "the world *is* ve-ry small, is n't it?"

She was a lean, angular, inordinately vivacious body whose years, which were many more than forty, were making a brave struggle to masquerade as thirty. She was notorious for her execrable taste in gowns and jewelry, but her social position was impregnable, and her avowed mission in life was to bring together Society (meaning the caste of money) with the Arts (meaning those humble souls content to sell their dreams for the wherewithal to sustain life).

Her passion for bromidioms always stupefied Staff — left him dazed and witless. In the present in-

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stance he could think of nothing by way of response happier than that hoary banality: "This is indeed a surprise."

"Flatterer!" said Mrs. Ilkington archly. "*I'm* not surprised," she pursued. "I might have known *you'd* be aboard this vessel."

"You must be a prophetess of sorts, then," he said, smiling. "I did n't know I was going to sail, myself, till late yesterday afternoon."

"Deceiver," commented the lady calmly. "Why can't you men *ever* be candid?"

Surprise merged into some annoyance. "What do you mean?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh, but two can play at that game," she assured him spiritedly. "If you won't be open with me, why should I tell all I know?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're driving at, Mrs. Ilkington."

"Would it improve your understanding" — she threatened him gaily with a gem-encrusted forefinger — "if I were to tell you I met a certain person in Paris last week, who talked to me about you?"

"It would not," said he stiffly. "Who — ?"

"Oh, well, if you *won't* be frank!" Mrs. Ilkington's manner implied that he was a bold, bad butterfly,

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but that she had his entomological number, none the less. "Tell me," she changed the subject abruptly, "how goes the *great* play?"

"Three acts are written," he said in weariness of spirit, "the fourth —"

"But I thought you were n't to return to America until it was *quite* finished?"

"Who told you that, please?"

"Never mind, sir! How about the fourth act?"

"I mean to write it *en voyage*," said he, perplexed. From whom could this woman possibly have learned so much that was intimate to himself?

"You have it all mapped out, then?" she persisted.

"Oh, yes; it only needs to be put on paper."

"R'ally, then, it's true — is n't it — that the writing is the least part of play construction?"

"Who told you that?" he asked again, this time amused.

"Oh, a *very* prominent man," she declared; and named him.

Staff laughed. "A too implicit belief in that theory, Mrs. Ilkington," said he, "is responsible for the large number of perfectly good plays that somehow never get written — to say nothing of the equally large number of perfectly good playwrights who somehow never get anywhere."

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"Clever!" screamed the lady. "But aren't you wasteful of your epigrams?"

He could cheerfully have slain her then and there; for which reason the civil gravity he preserved was all the more commendable.

"And now," he persisted, "won't you tell me with whom you were discussing me in Paris?"

She shook her head at him reprovingly. "You don't *know?*"

"No."

"You can't guess?"

"Not to save me."

"R'ally?"

"Honestly and truly," he swore, puzzled by the undertone of light malice he thought to detect in her manner.

"Then," said she with decision, "*I'm* not going to get myself into trouble by babbling. But, if you promise to be *nice* to me all the way home — ?" She paused.

"I promise," he said gravely.

"Then — if you happen to be at the head of the companion-ladder when the tender comes off from Queenstown tonight — I promise you a *huge* surprise."

"You won't say more than that?" he pleaded.

She appeared to debate. "Yes," she announced

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mischievously; "I 'll give you a leading hint. The person I mean is the purchaser of the Cadogan collar."

His eyes were blank. "And what, please, is the Cadogan collar?"

"You don't mean to tell me you 've never *heard* of it?" She paused with dramatic effect. "Incredible! Surely, everybody knows about the Cadogan collar, the most magnificent necklace of pearls in the world!"

"Everybody, it seems, but myself, Mrs. Ilkington."

"R'ally!" she cried, and tapped his arm playfully. "You are as stupid as most brilliant men!"

A bugle sang through the evening air. The lady started consciously.

"Heavens!" she cried. "Time to dress for dinner: I must *fly!* . . . Have you made your table reservation yet?"

"Yes," he said hastily.

"Then *do* see the second-steward at once and get transferred to our table; we have just one vacant chair. Oh, but you *must;* you 've promised to be nice to me, you know. And I do so want you to meet one of my protégées — such a *sweet* girl — a Miss Searle. I 'm sure you 'll be crazy about her — at least, you would be if there were no Alison Landis in your cosmos. Now,

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do attend to that right away. Remember you 've promised."

Staff bowed as she fluttered away. In his heart he was thoroughly convinced that this were a sorry scheme of things indeed did it not include a special hell for Mrs. Ilkingtons.

What had she meant by her veiled references to this mysterious person in Paris, who was to board the steamer at Queenstown? How had she come by so much personal knowledge of himself and his work? And what did she know about his love for Alison Landis?

He swore thoughtfully, and went below to dress, stopping on the way to make arrangements with the second-steward to have his seat changed, in accordance with his exacted promise.

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IV

QUEENSTOWN

IMMEDIATELY he had allowed himself to be persuaded, Staff felt sure he should not have agreed to change his seat to the table occupied by Mrs. Ilkington's party, especially if he meant sincerely to try to do any real work aboard the Autocratic; and it was n't long after he had taken his place for the first dinner that he was convinced that he had blundered beyond remedy or excuse.

The table was round and seated seven, though when the party had assembled there remained two vacant places. Staff was assigned the chair on Mrs. Ilkington's right and was sensitive to a not over subtle implication that his was the seat of honour. He would cheerfully have exchanged it for a place on the lady's left, which would have afforded a chance to talk to Miss Searle, to whom he earnestly desired to make an explanation and such amends as she would permit. But a male person named Bangs, endowed with impressive self-assurance, altogether too much good-looks (measured

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by the standards of the dermatological institute advertisements) and no excess baggage in the way of intellect, sat on Mrs. Ilkington's left, with Miss Searle beyond him. The latter had suffered Staff to be presented to her with (he fancied) considerable repressed amusement. Not that he blamed her, but . . .

His position was rendered unhappy to the verge of being impossible, however, by the lady on his own right, a Mrs. Thataker: darkly temperamental and buxom, a divorcée and (she lost no time in telling him) likewise a playwright. True, none of her plays had ever been produced; but that was indisputably due to a managerial conspiracy; what she really needed was a friend at court—some clever man having "the ear of the manager." (Staff gathered that a truly clever man could warm up a play and pour it into the ear of the managers like laudanum and sweet-oil.) With such a man, he was given to understand, Mrs. Thataker would n't mind collaborating; she had manuscripts in her steamer-trunk which were calculated to prove a number of things . . .

And while he was easing away and preparing to run before the wind to escape any such hideous complication, he was abruptly brought up all-standing by the information that the colour of the lady's soul was pink. She knew this to be a fact beyond dispute, because she

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never could do her best work save when garbed exclusively in pink. She enumerated several articles of wearing apparel not customarily discussed between comparative strangers but which — always provided they were pink — she held indispensable to the task of dramatic composition.

In his great agony, happening to glance in Miss Searle's direction, he saw her with head bent and eyelids lowered, lips compressed, colour a trifle heightened, shoulders suspiciously a-quiver.

Incongruously, the impression obtruded that they were unusually handsome shoulders.

For that matter, she was an unusually handsome young woman: tall, fair, with a face featured with faint, exquisite irregularity, brown eyes and brows in striking contrast to the rich golden colour of her hair; well-poised and balanced — sure but not too conscious of herself . . .

Staff heard himself saying "Beg pardon?" to a third repetition of one of Mrs. Thataker's gratuitous revelations.

At this he took fright, drew back into his reserve for the remainder of the meal, and as soon as he decently could, made his excuses and fled to join Iff in the smoking-room. . . .

He found the little man indulging his two passions;

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he was drinking whiskey-and-sodas and playing bridge, both in the most masterly fashion. Staff watched the game a while and then, the opportunity offering, cut in. He played till ten o'clock, at which hour, wearied, he yielded his seat to another, leaving Mr. Iff the victor of six rubbers and twelve whiskey-and-sodas. As Staff went out on deck the little man cut for the seventh and ordered the thirteenth. Neither indulgence seemed to have had any perceptible effect upon him.

Staff strolled forward, drinking in air that seemed the sweeter by contrast with the reeking room he had just quitted. The wind had freshened since nightfall; it blew strong and cool, but not keen. And there was more motion in the seas that sang overside, wrapped in Cimmerian blackness. The sky had become overcast; there were no stars: only the 'longshore lights of Ireland twinkled, small, bright, incredibly distant over the waters. The decks were softly aglow with electric lights, lending a deeper shade of velvety denseness to the night beyond the rails.

He had n't moved far forward when his quick sight picked out the shimmer of a woman's hair, like spun gold, about amidships in the rank of deck-chairs. He made sure it was Miss Searle; and it was. She sat alone, with none near her, her head resting against the back of the chair, her face turned a trifle forward; so that

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she was unaware of his approach until he stopped before her.

"Miss Searle —" he began diffidently.

She looked up quickly and smiled in what he thought a friendly way.

"Good evening," said she; and moved her body slightly in the deck-chair, turning a little to the left as if expecting him to take the vacant chair on that hand.

He did so without further encouragement, and abruptly found himself wholly lacking words wherewith to phrase what he had in mind to say. In such emergency he resorted to an old, tried and true trick of his and began to talk on the first subject, unrelated to his dilemma, that popped into his head.

"Are you a good sailor?" he enquired gravely.

The girl nodded. "Very."

"Not afraid of seasickness?"

"No. Why?"

"Because," said Staff soberly, "I 've been praying for a hurricane."

She nodded again without speaking, her eyes alone questioning.

"Mrs. Thataker," he pursued evenly, "confided to me at dinner that she is a very poor sailor indeed."

Miss Searle laughed quietly. "You desire a punishment to fit the crime."

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"There are some crimes for which no adequate punishment has ever been contrived," he returned, beginning to see his way, and at the same time beginning to think himself uncommonly clever.

"Oh!" said Miss Searle with a little laugh. "Now if you 're leading up to a second apology about that question of the bandbox, you need n't, because I 've forgiven you already."

He glanced at her reproachfully. "You just naturally had to beat me to that, did n't you?" he complained. "All the same, it *was* inexcusable of me."

"Oh, no; I quite understood."

"You see," he persisted obstinately, "I really did think it was my bandbox. I actually have got one with me, precisely like yours."

"I quite believed you the first time."

Something in her tone moved him to question her face sharply; but he found her shadowed eyes inscrutable.

"I half believe you know something," he ventured, perplexed.

"Perhaps," she nodded, with an enigmatic smile.

"What do you know?"

"Why," she said, "it was simple enough. I happened to be in Lucille's yesterday afternoon when a hat was ordered delivered to you."

"You were! Then you know who sent it to me?"

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"Of course." Her expression grew curious. "Don't you?"

"No," he said excitedly. "Tell me."

But she hesitated. "I 'm not sure I ought . . ."

"Why not?"

"It 's none of my affair — "

"But surely you must see . . . Listen: I 'll tell you about it." He narrated succinctly the intrusion of the mysterious bandbox into his ken, that morning. "Now, a note was promised; it must have miscarried. Surely, there can be no harm in your telling me. Besides, I 've a right to know."

"Possibly . . . but I 'm not sure I 've a right to tell. Why should I be a spoil-sport?"

"You mean," he said thoughtfully — "you think it 's some sort of a practical joke?"

"What do you think?"

"*Hmm-mm*," said Staff. And then, "I don't like to be made fun of," he asserted, a trace sulkily.

"You are certainly a dangerously original man," said Miss Searle — "almost abnormal."

"The most unkindest slam of all," he murmured.

He made himself look deeply hurt. The girl laughed softly. He thought it rather remarkable that they should enjoy so sympathetic a sense of humour on such short acquaintance. . . .

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"But you forgive me?"

"Oh, yes," he said generously; "only, of course, I could n't help feeling it a bit — coming from *you*."

"From me?" Miss Searle sat up in her deck-chair and turned to him. "Mr. Staff! you 're not flirting with me?"

"Heaven forfend!" he cried, so sincerely that both laughed.

"Because," said she, sinking back, "I must warn you that Mrs. Ilkington has been talking . . ."

"Oh," he groaned from his heart — "damn that woman!"

There was an instant of silence; then he stole a contrite look at her immobile profile and started to get up.

"I — Miss Searle," he stammered — "I beg your pardon . . ."

"Don't go," she said quietly; "that is, unless you want to. My silence was simply sympathetic."

He sat back. "Thank you," he said with gratitude; and for some seconds considered the case of Mrs. Ilkington, not charitably but with murder in his bosom. "Do you mean," he resumed presently, "she has — ah — connected my name with —"

"Yes," nodded the girl.

"'Something lingering in boiling oil,'" he mused aloud, presently. . . . "What staggers me is how she

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found out; I was under the impression that only the persons most concerned knew about it."

"Then it 's true? You are engaged to marry Miss Landis? Or is that an impertinent question?" Without pause the girl answered herself: "Of course it is; only I could n't help asking. Please forget I spoke —"

"Oh, I don't mind," he said wearily; "now that Mrs. Ilkington has begun to distribute handbills. Only . . . I don't know that there 's a regular, hard-and-fast engagement: just an understanding."

"Thank you," said Miss Searle. "I promise not to speak of it again." She hesitated an instant, then added: "To you or anybody else."

"You see," he went on after a little, "I 've been working on a play for Miss Landis, under agreement with Jules Max, her manager. They want to use it to open Max's newest Broadway theatre late this autumn. That 's why I came across — to find a place in London to bury myself in and work undisturbed. It means a good deal to me — to all of us — this play. . . . But what I 'm getting at is this: Alison — Miss Landis — did n't leave the States this summer; Mrs. Ilkington (she told me at dinner) left New York before I did. So how in Heaven's name — ?"

"I had known nothing of Mrs. Ilkington at all,"

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said Miss Searle cautiously, "until we met in Paris last month."

He was conscious of the hint of uneasiness in her manner, but inclined to assign it to the wrong cause.

"I trust I have n't bored you, Miss Searle — talking about myself."

"Oh, no; indeed no. You see —" she laughed — "I quite understand; I keep a temperament of my own — if you should happen to wonder why Mrs. Ilkington interests herself in me. I 'm supposed to have a voice and to be in training for grand opera."

"Not really?"

And again she laughed. "I 'm afraid there is n't any cure for me at this late date," she protested; "I 've gone so far I must go farther. But I know what you mean. People who sing *are* difficult. However . . ." She stirred restlessly in her chair, then sat up.

"What is that light over there?" she asked. "Do you know?"

Staff's gaze sought the indicated direction. "Roches Point, I imagine; we 're about due at Queenstown . . ."

"As late as that?" The girl moved as if to rise. Staff jumped up and offered her a hand. In a moment she was standing beside him. "I must go below," said she. "Good night."

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"You won't tell me who it was in Lucille's, yesterday?" he harked back pleadingly.

She shook her head gaily as she turned forward to the main companionway entrance: "No; you must find out for yourself."

"But perhaps it is n't a practical joke?"

"Then — *perhaps* — I shall tell you all — sometime."

He paused by the raised door-sill as she stepped within the superstructure. "Why not stop up and see the tender come off?" he suggested. "It might be interesting."

She flashed him a look of gay malice. "If we 're to believe Mrs. Ilkington, you 're apt to find it more interesting than I. Good night."

"Oh — good night!" he muttered, disturbed; and turned away to the rail.

His troubled vision ranged far to the slowly shifting shore lights. The big steamship had come very close inshore — as witness the retarded speed with which she crept toward her anchorage — but still the lights, for all their singular brightness, seemed distant, incalculably far away; the gulf of blackness that set them apart exaggerated all distances tenfold. The cluster of sparks flanked by green and red that marked the hovering tender appeared to float at an infinite remove,

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invisibly buoyed upon the bosom of a fathomless void of night.

Out of this wind-swept waste of impenetrable darkness was to come the answer to these many questions that perplexed him — perhaps. Something at least would come to influence him; or else Mrs. Ilkington's promise had been mere *blague*. . . . Then what?

Afterwards he assured himself that his stupidity had been unparalleled inconceivable. And indeed there seems to be some colour of excuse for this drastic stricture, self-inflicted though it were.

Below him, on the main deck, a squad of deckhands superintended by a petty officer was rigging out the companion-ladder.

Very suddenly — it seemed, because of the immense quiet that for all its teeming life enveloped the ship upon the cessation of the engine's song — the vessel hesitated and then no longer moved. From forward came the clank of chains as the anchor cables were paid out. Supple to wind and tide, the Autocratic swung in a wide arc, until the lights of the tender disappeared from Staff's field of vision.

Before long, however, they swam silently again into sight; then slowly, cautiously, by almost imperceptible stages the gap closed up until the tender ranged alongside and made fast to her gigantic sister.

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Almost at once the incoming passengers began to mount the companion-ladder.

Staff promptly abandoned his place at the rail and ran down to the main-deck. As he approached the doorway opening adjacent to the companion-ladder he heard a woman's laugh out on the deck: a laugh which, once heard, was never to be forgotten: clear, sweet, strong, musical as a peal of fairy bells.

He stopped short; and so did his breath for an instant; and so, he fancied, did his heart. This, then, was what Mrs. Ilkington had hinted at! But one woman in all the world could laugh like that . . .

Almost at once she appeared, breaking through the cluster of passengers on the deck and into the lighted interior with a swinging, vigorous manner suggestive of intense vitality and strength. She paused, glancing back over her shoulder, waiting for somebody: a magnificent creature, splendidly handsome, wonderfully graceful, beautiful beyond compare.

"Alison!" Staff breathed hoarsely, dumfounded.

Though his exclamation could by no means have carried to her ears, she seemed to be instantly sensitive to the vibrations of his emotion. She swung round, raking her surroundings with a bright, curious glance, and saw him. Her smile deepened adorably, her eyes

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brightened, she moved impulsively toward him with outflung hands.

"Why," she cried — "Why, Staff! Such a surprise!"

Nothing could have been more natural, spontaneous and unaffected. In an instant his every doubt and misgiving was erased — blotted out and as if it had never been. He caught and held her hands, for the moment speechless. But his eyes were all too eloquent: under their steadfast sincerity her own gaze wavered, shifted and fell. She coloured consummately, then with a gentle but determined manner disengaged her hands.

"Don't," she said in the low, intimate voice she knew so well how and when to employ — "don't! People are looking . . ." And then with a bewildering shift, resuming her former spirit: "Of all things wonderful, Staff — to meet you here!"

She was acting — masking with her admirable art some emotion secret from him. He knew this — felt it intuitively, though he did not understand; and the knowledge affected him poignantly. What place had dissimulation in their understanding? Why need she affect what she did not feel — with him?

Distressed, bewildered, he met evasion with native straightforwardness.

"I 'm stunned," he told her, holding her eyes

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with a grave, direct gaze; "I 'm afraid I don't understand. . . . How does this happen?"

"Why, of course," she said, maintaining her artificial elation — "I infer — you 've finished the play and are hurrying home. So — we meet, dear boy. Is n't it delightful?"

"But you 're here, on this side —?"

"Oh, just a flying trip. Max wanted me to see Bisson's new piece at the Porte St. Martin. I decided to go at the last moment — caught the Mauretania on eight hours' notice — stayed only three days in Paris — booked back on this tub by telegraph — travelled all day to catch it by this wretched, roundabout route. And — and there you are, my dear."

She concluded with a gesture charmingly ingenuous and disarming; but Staff shook his head impatiently.

"You came over — you passed through London twice — you stayed three days in Paris, Alison — and never let me know?"

"Obviously." She lifted her shoulders an inch, with a light laugh. "Have n't I just said as much? . . . You see, I did n't want to disturb you: it means so much to — you and me, Staff — the play."

Dissatisfied, knitting his brows faintly, he said: "I wonder . . .!"

"My dear!" she protested gaily, "you positively

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must not scowl at me like that! You frighten me; and besides I 'm tired to death — this wretched rush of travelling! Tomorrow we 'll have a famous young pow-wow, but tonight —! Do say good night to me, prettily, like a dear good boy, and let me go. . . . It 's sweet to see you again; I 'm wild to hear about the play. . . . Jane!" she called, looking round.

Her maid, a tight-mouthed, unlovely creature, moved sedately to her side. "Yes, Miss Landis."

"Have my things come up yet?" The maid responded affirmatively. "Good! I 'm dead, almost. . . ."

She turned back to Staff, offering him her hand and with it, bewitchingly, her eyes: "Dear boy! Good night."

He bent low over the hand to hide his dissatisfaction: he felt a bit old to be treated like a petulant, teasing child. . . .

"Good night," he said stiffly.

"What a bear you are, Staff! Can't you wait till tomorrow? At all events, you must. . . ."

Laughing, she swept away, following her maid up the companion stairs. Staff pursued her with eyes frowning and perplexed, and more leisurely with his person.

As he turned aft on the upper deck, meaning to go

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to the smoking-room for a good-night cigarette — absorbed in thought and paying no attention to his surroundings — a voice saluted him with a languid, exasperating drawl: "Ah, Staff! How-d'-ye-do?"

He looked up, recognising a distant acquaintance: a man of medium height with a tendency toward stoutness and a taste for extremes in the matter of clothes; with dark, keen eyes deep-set in a face somewhat too pale, a close-clipped grey moustache and a high and narrow forehead too frankly betrayed by the derby he wore well back on his head.

Staff nodded none too cordially. "Oh, good evening, Arkroyd. Just come aboard?"

Arkroyd, on the point of entering his stateroom, paused long enough to confirm this surmise. "Beastly trip — most tiresome," he added, frankly yawning. "Don't know how I should have stood it if it had n't been for Miss Landis. You know her, I believe? Charming girl — charming."

"Oh, quite," agreed Staff. "Good night."

His tone arrested Arkroyd's attention; the man turned to watch his back as Staff shouldered down the alleyway toward the smoking-room. "I say!" commented Mr. Arkroyd, privately. "A bit hipped — what? No necessity for being so bally short with a chap. . . ."

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The guess was only too well founded: Staff was distinctly disgruntled. Within the past ten minutes his susceptibilities had been deeply wounded. Why Alison should have chosen to slight him so cavalierly when in transit through London passed his comprehension. . . . And the encounter with Arkroyd comforted him to no degree whatever. He had never liked Arkroyd, holding him, for all his wealth, little better than a theatre-loafer of the Broadway type; and now he remembered hearing, once or twice, that the man's attentions to Alison Landis had been rather emphatic.

Swayed by whim, he chose to avoid the smoking-room, after all — having little wish to be annoyed by the chatter of Mr. Iff — and swung out on deck again for a half-hour of cigarettes and lonely brooding. . . .

But his half-hour lengthened indefinitely while he sat, preoccupied, in the deck-chair of some total stranger. By definite stages, to which he was almost altogether oblivious, the Autocratic weighed anchor, shook off her tender and swung away on the seven-day stretch. As definitely her decks became bare of passengers. Presently Staff was quite a solitary figure in the long array of chairs.

Two bells rang mellowly through the ship before

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he roused, lifted himself to his feet and prepared to turn in, still distressed and wondering — so much so that he was barely conscious of the fact that one of the officers of the vessel was coming aft, and only noticed the man when he paused and spoke.

"I say — this is Mr. Staff, is n't it?"

Staff turned quickly, searching his memory for the name and status of the sturdy and good-looking young Englishman.

"Yes," he said slowly, "but —"

"I 'm Mr. Manvers, the purser. If I 'm not mistaken, you crossed with us this spring?"

"Oh, yes; I did. How-d'-you-do?" Staff offered his hand.

"Sure I recognised you just now — saw you on the main-deck — talking to Miss Landis, I believe."

"Yes . . . ?"

"Beg pardon; I don't wish to seem impertinent; but may I ask, do you know the lady very well?"

Staff's eyes clouded. "Why . . ."

"Knew you 'd think me impertinent; but it is some of my business, really. I can explain to your satisfaction. You see" — the purser stepped nearer and lowered his voice guardedly — "I was wondering if you had much personal influence with Miss Landis. I 've just had a bit of a chat with her,

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and she won't listen to reason, you know, about that collar."

"Collar?" Staff repeated stupidly.

"The Cadogan collar, you know — some silly pearl necklace worth a king's ransom. She bought it in Paris — Miss Landis did; at least, so the report runs; and she does n't deny it, as a matter of fact. Naturally that worries me; it 's a rather tempting proposition to leave lying round a stateroom; and I asked her just now to let me take care of it for her — put it in my safe, you know. It 'd be a devilish nasty thing for the ship, to have it stolen." The purser paused for effect. "Would you believe it? She would n't listen to me! Told me she was quite capable of taking care of her own property! Now if you know her well enough to say the right word . . . it 'd be a weight off my mind, I can tell you!"

"Yes, I can imagine so," said Staff thoughtfully. "But — what makes you think there 's any possibility —"

"Well, one never knows what sort of people the ship carries — as a rule, that is. But in this instance I 've got good reason to believe there 's at least one man aboard who would n't mind lifting that collar; and he 's keen enough to do it prettily, too, if what they tell of him is true."

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"Now you 're getting interesting. Who is this man?"

"Oh, quite the swell mobsman — Raffles and Arsène Lupin and all that sort of thing rolled into one. His name 's Ismay — Arbuthnot Ismay. Clever — wonderful, they say; the police have never been able to fasten anything on him, though he 's been known to boast of his jobs in advance."

"You told Miss Landis this?"

"Certainly — and she laughed."

This seemed quite credible of the lady. Staff considered the situation seriously for a moment or two.

"I 'll do what I can," he said at length; "though I 'm not hopeful of making her see it from your point of view. Still, I will speak to her."

"That 's good of you, I 'm sure. You could n't do more."

"You 're positive about this Ismay?" Staff pursued. "You could n't be mistaken?"

"Not I," asserted the purser confidently. "He crossed with us last year — the time Mrs. Burden Hamman's jewels disappeared. Ismay, of course, was suspected, but managed to prove every kind of an alibi."

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"Queer you should let him book a second time," commented Staff.

"Rather; but he 's changed his name, and I don't imagine the chaps in Cockspur Street know him by sight."

"What name does he travel under now?"

The purser smiled softly to himself. "I fancy you won't be pleased to learn it," said he. "He 's down on the passenger-list as Iff — W. H. Iff."

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WHEN Staff went below a little later, he was somewhat surprised to find his stateroom alight, — surprised, because he had rather expected that Mr. Iff would elect to sleep off his potations in darkness.

To the contrary, the little man was very much awake, propped up in his berth with a book for company, and showed no effects whatever of over-indulgence, unless that were betrayed by a slightly enhanced brightness of the cool blue eyes which he brought to bear upon his roommate.

"Good morning!" he piped cheerfully. "What on earth got you up so early? The bar's been closed an hour and more."

"Is that why you came to bed?" enquired Staff.

"Sure," agreed Mr. Iff complacently.

Staff quietly began to shed his clothing and to insert his spare frame into pajamas. Iff lay back and stared reflectively at the white-painted overhead girders.

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"Got to slip it to you," he observed presently, "for perfect mastery of the dignified reserve thing. I never knew anybody who could better control his tumultuous emotions."

"Thanks," said Staff drily as he wound up his watch.

"Anything 'special troubling you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You talk so darn much."

"Sorry if I 'm keeping you awake," said Staff politely.

"Oh, I don't mean to seem to beef about it, only . . . I was wondering if by any chance you 'd heard the news?"

"What news?"

"About me."

"About you!" Staff paused with his fingers on the light-switch.

"About my cute little self. May I look now?" Iff poked his head over the edge of the upper berth and beamed down upon Staff like a benevolent, blond magpie. "Have n't you heard the rumour that I 'm a desperate character?"

"Just what do you mean?" demanded Staff, eyeing the other intently.

"Oh, simply that I overheard the purser discuss-

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ing me with his assistant. He claims to recognise in me a bold bad man named Ismay, whose specialty is pulling off jobs that would make Sherlock Holmes ask to be retired on a pension."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Are you Ismay?"

A broad, mocking grin irradiated the little man's pinched features. "Don't ask me," he begged: "I might tell you."

Staff frowned and waited a minute, then, receiving no further response to his enquiry, grunted "Good night," turned off the light and got into his berth.

A moment later the question came out of the darkness overhead: "I say — what do *you* think?"

"Are you Iff or Ismay — you mean?"

"Aye, lad, aye!"

"I don't know. It 's for you to say."

"But if you thought I was Ismay you 'd shift quarters, would n't you?"

"Why?"

"Because I might pinch something of yours."

"In the first place," said Staff, yawning, "I can't shift without going into the second cabin — and you know it: the boat 's full up. Secondly, I 've

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nothing you could steal save ideas, and you have n't got the right sort of brains to turn them to any account."

"That ought to hold me for some time," Iff admitted fairly. "But I 'm concerned about your sensitive young reputation. Suppose I were to turn a big trick this trip?"

"As for instance — ?"

"Well, say I swipe the Cadogan collar."

"Then I 'd stand just so much the better chance of catching you red-handed."

"Swell notion you 've got of the cunning of the Twentieth Century criminal, I must say. D' you for an instant suppose my work 's so coarse that you could detect grits in it?"

"Then you *are* Ismay?"

"My son," said the other solemnly, "your pertinacity shan't go unrewarded: I will be frank with you. You shall know all. I am Iff — the eternal question."

"Oh, go to thunder!" said Staff indignantly.

But as he slipped off to sleep he could hear the man overhead chuckling quietly, beneath his breath. . . .

The next few days would have provided him with ample opportunity in which to ponder the question

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of his roommate's identity, had Staff chosen so to occupy his time. As it happened, Heaven was kind to the young man, and sent a gale of sorts, which, breaking upon the Autocratic the following morning, buffeted her for three days and relegated to their berths all the poor sailors aboard, including the lady with the pink soul and underthings. Of Mrs. Thataker, indeed, Staff saw nothing more until just before the vessel docked in New York. He was n't heartless by any manner of means; he was, as a matter of fact, frankly sorry for the other poor passengers; but he could n't help feeling there was a lot of truth in the old saw about an ill wind. . . .

Otherwise the bad weather proved annoying enough in several ways. To begin with, Alison Landis herself was anything but a good sailor, and even Miss Searle, though she missed no meals, did n't pretend to enjoy the merciless hammering which the elements were administering to the ship. Alison retired to her suite immediately after the first breakfast and stuck religiously therein until the weather moderated, thus affording Staff no chance to talk with her about the number of immediately interesting things on his mind. While Miss Searle stayed almost as steadily in her quarters, keeping out of harm's way and reading, she told

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Staff when they met at meals. Mrs. Ilkington, of course, disappeared as promptly as Mrs. Thataker. In consequence of all of which, Staff found himself thrown back for companionship on Bangs, who bored him to the point of extinction, Arkroyd, whom he did n't like, and Iff, who kept rather out of the way, dividing his time between his two passions and merely leering at the younger man, a leer of infinite cunning and derision, when chance threw them together.

In despair of finding any good excuse for wasting his time, then, Mr. Staff took unto himself pens, ink, paper and fortitude and — surprised even himself by writing that fourth act and finishing his play. Again — an ill wind!

And then, as if bent on proving its integral benevolence so far as concerned Mr. Staff, the wind shifted and sighed and died — beginning the operation toward sundown of the third day out from Queenstown. The morning of the fourth day dawned clear and beautiful, with no wind worth mentioning and only a moderate sea running — not enough to make much of an impression on the Autocratic. So pretty nearly everybody made public appearance at one time or another during the morning, and compared notes about their historic sufferings, and

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quoted the stewardess who had been heard to say that this was the worst westbound passage the boat had ever made, and regained their complexions, and took notice of the incipient flirtations and — well, settled down in the usual way to enjoy an ocean voyage.

Staff, of course, was on deck betimes, with an eye eager for first sight of Alison and another heedful of social entanglements which might prevent him from being first and foremost to her side when she did appear. But for all his watchfulness and care, Mrs. Ilkington forestalled him and had Alison in convoy before Staff discovered her; and then Arkroyd showed up and Mrs. Ilkington annexed him, and Bangs was rounded up with one or two others and made to pay court to Mrs. Ilkington's newly snared celebrity and . . . Staff went away and sulked like a spoiled child. Nor did his humour become more cheerful when at lunch he discovered that Mrs. Ilkington had kept two seats at their table reserved for Miss Landis and Arkroyd. It had been a prearranged thing, of course; it had been Alison with whom Mrs. Ilkington had talked about him in Paris; and evidently Alison had been esquired by Arkroyd there. Staff did n't relish the flavour of that thought. What right had Arkroyd

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to constitute himself Alison's cavalier on her travels? For that matter, what right had Alison to accept him in such a capacity? . . . Though, of course, Staff had to remind himself that Alison was in reality not bound in any way. . . .

But he had his reward and revenge after lunch. As the party left the table Alison dropped behind to speak to him; and in interchange of commonplaces they allowed the others to distance them beyond earshot.

"You 're a dear," the young woman told him in a discreet tone as they ascended the companionway.

"I 'm bound to say," he told her with a faint, expiring flicker of resentment, "that you hardly treat me like one."

Her eyes held his with their smiling challenge, half provocative, half tender; and she pouted a little, prettily. In this mood she was always quite irresistible to Staff. Almost against his will his dignity and his pose of the injured person evaporated and became as if they had never been.

"Just the same," she declared, laughing, "you are a dear — if you *don't* deserve to be told so."

"What have I done?" he demanded guiltily — knowing very well on what counts he was liable to indictment.

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"Oh, nothing," said Alison — "nothing whatever. You 've only been haughty and aloof and icy and indifferent and everything else that men seem to consider becoming to them when they think they 're neglected."

"You certainly don't expect me to *like* seeing Arkroyd at your side all the time?"

"Oh!" she laughed contemptuously — "Arkroyd!" And she dismissed that gentleman with a fine sweeping gesture. "Can I help it if he happens to travel on the same ship?"

They halted at the top of the steps.

"Then it was accidental — ?" he asked seriously.

"Staff!" The young woman made an impatient movement. "If I did n't like you — *you* know how much — upon my word I 'd snub you for that. You are a bear!"

"A moment ago I was a dear."

"Oh, well, I 'm fond of all sorts of animals."

"Then I advise your future husband to keep you away from zoos."

"Oh, Staff! But would n't you want me to come to see you once in a while?"

He jerked up one hand with the gesture of a man touched in a fencing-bout. "You win," he laughed. "I should 've known better. . . ."

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But she made her regard tender consolation for his discomfiture. "You have n't told me about the play — our play — *my* play?"

"It 's finished."

"Not really, Staff?" She clasped her hands in a charmingly impulsive way. He nodded, smiling. "Is it good?"

"You 'll have to tell me that — you and Max."

"Oh — Max! He 's got to like what I like. When will you read it to me?"

"Whenever you wish."

"This afternoon?"

"If you like."

"Oh, good! Now I 'm off for my nap — only I know I shan't sleep, I 'm so excited. Bring the 'script to me at two — say, half-past. Come to my sitting-room; we can be alone and quiet, and after you 've finished we can have tea together and talk and — talk our silly heads off. You darling!"

She gave him a parting glance calculated to turn any man's head, and swung off to her rooms, the very spirit of grace incarnate in her young and vigorous body.

Staff watched her with a kindling eye, then shook his head as one who doubts — as if doubting his own worthiness — and went off to his own stateroom to

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run over the type-script of his fourth act: being fortunate in having chosen a ship which carried a typist, together with almost every other imaginable convenience and alleged luxury of life ashore.

Punctual to the minute, manuscript under his arm, he knocked at the door of the sitting-room of the *suite de luxe* occupied by the actress. Her maid admitted him and after a moment or two Alison herself came out of her stateroom, in a wonderful Parisian tea-gown cunningly designed to render her even more bewilderingly bewitching than ever. Staff thought her so, beyond any question, and as unquestionably was his thought mirrored in his eyes as he rose and stood waiting for her greeting — very nearly a-tremble, if the truth 's to be told.

Her colour deepened as she came toward him and then, pausing at arm's length, before he could lift a hand, stretched forth both her own and caught him by the shoulders. "My dear!" she said softly; and her eyes were bright and melting. "My dear, dear boy! It 's so sweet to see you." She came a step nearer, stood upon her tiptoes and lightly touched his cheek with her lips.

"Alison . . . !" he cried in a broken voice.

But already she had released him and moved away, with a lithe and gracious movement evading his arms.

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"No," she told him firmly, shaking her head: "no more than that, Staff. You must n't — I won't have you — carry on as if we were children — *yet*."

"But Alison — "

"No." Again she shook her head. "If I want to kiss you, I 've a perfect right to; but that does n't give you any licence to kiss me in return. Besides, I 'm not at all sure I 'm really and truly in love with you. Now do sit down."

He complied sulkily.

"Are you in the habit of kissing men you don't care for?"

"Yes, frequently," she told him, coolly taking the chair opposite; "I 'm an actress — if you 've forgotten the fact."

He pondered this, frowning. "I don't like it," he announced with conviction.

"Neither do I — always." She relished his exasperation for a moment longer, then changed her tone. "Do be sensible, Staff. I 'm crazy to hear that play. How long do you mean to keep me waiting?"

He knew her well enough to understand that her moods and whims must be humoured like a — well, like any other star's. She was pertinaciously temperamental: that is to say, spoiled; beautiful women are so, for the most part — invariably so, if on the stage.

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