

CHAPTER V

LANDFALL

I

THERE are some strange ways of earning a living, and it does not follow that the cleverest earn the best or easiest; a man may be a half-wit, yet possess a touch of cunning or a strain of shrewdness that enables him to defeat more balanced competitors. There are men who possess an intuitive gift, often quite unknown to themselves, which, in its operation upon affairs, results in their being called lucky. Among the many fallacies we learn in the schoolroom is the one that hard work means success. I know successful men who are fundamentally lazy, and ceaselessly industrious men who are confirmed failures. Men are rather like plants; some grow in an arid soil and are choked in a rich; some require a prepared ground and are sensitive to environment; and some, the weeds, flourish in our midst, and are not wholly to be despised.

My companion of the jetty episode was in the verandah café the following morning, and I took a chair next to his, while I watched the stern dip and rise and heard the wind scream over a troubled sea. In her corner, back to the world, sat the Duchess, the shuttle hand plying its craft; the Countess had not yet made an appearance. I had discovered after breakfast the de Montfort Wellington-Solomons, whose trunks overflowed into one of the companion-ways. They

were a party of five, father, mother, two daughters, and a son. At a glance the Solomon predominated over the de Montfort Wellington portions, and I could not help wondering why good honest Solomons, bearing the hall-mark of their race in an unmistakable degree, should provoke derision by adding names so steeped in English history. Mr. de Montfort Wellington-Solomon was well dressed. His daughters possessed that frank lasciviousness of young Jewesses, and were extremely beautiful and smart.

My jetty companion as I sat down near him was busily sticking stamps in an album. In reply to my query whether he collected stamps, he informed me that it was his business. He had a small stamp shop in the shadow of St. Paul's, which drew to its counter some of the highest born and most distinguished figures in the land, passionate philatelists. I learned how a man may reach the highest rank, yet die disappointed because he failed to gain a certain stamp for his collection.

I could hardly credit some of the things I learned from my agreeable companion, a young man who had roamed about the world and pursued a dozen odd callings. He was now on his way to New York to show a collector there a stamp worth twelve thousand five hundred dollars.

"Is there such a stamp?" I asked, amazed.

For an answer he drew out a wallet, and from a small transparent envelope produced a faded stamp.

"There it is," he answered, passing it to me.

"For goodness' sake don't let it blow away!" I exclaimed, declining to take it, for the wind was squally.

He laughed and returned the stamp to his wallet.

"Yes—I think he'll buy. They can't decline a stamp when they see it—it's too much for them."

"Collector's mania?" I asked.

But he would not accept that idea.

"He's a connoisseur. He's rich, and he wants it for his collection."

"And are you really making this trip to America on the chance of selling one stamp?" I asked.

"Yes—if he doesn't buy I'll have enjoyed the voyage. I love the sea."

"I don't," I answered. "I'm sitting here in the cold air simply because I daren't go in. The warm air upsets me. Will you stay long in New York?"

"No—not now. If the King dies I'll fly down to the West Indies."

We had received wireless news overnight that King George was seriously ill at Sandringham. I could not see the connection between the King's possible death and a flight to the West Indies.

He explained. There was a certain small island in the Caribbean Sea, British, which was just issuing a new postage stamp. "It's an odd place. It's got about twelve white people, the rest are black. There's a post office on the island, and one store. Its revenue's eight hundred pounds a year and its expenditure is six hundred."

"That's a good trade balance!"

"It's not trade; there isn't any," said my companion. "The revenue's derived from postage stamps. Collectors all over the world buy them. Well, if the King dies, the new issue of Jubilee stamps will be withdrawn as soon as they have official notice. If I can get down there first I shall be just in time to snap up this Jubilee issue, which will soon become rare."

I learned other strange stories of his business; of misprints

that got into distribution and were tracked down like criminals, of collectors who were desperate thieves, of a man found dead with hunger, and a collection worth twenty thousand dollars stuffed in his mattress. Morning after morning we sat in the open verandah café, the Duchess in one corner with only the flying hand and the top of her head visible, ourselves in the other, and talked of strange things in the world of stamps.

Did I know that the first postal service in New York and the first postage stamp issued there were the work of an Englishman, Henry Windsor, who issued a three-cent stamp in 1843? I learned one surprising thing after another. Yet his passion was not collecting stamps, it was cricket.

My new friend shortened the voyage. With his singular lore he came near to being the only cure for seasickness I had encountered. It is one of the attractions of a voyage that for a brief period one experiences proximity with men of various callings and adventures, and gossip is varied and rich in surprise.

II

For three days after leaving Madeira I struggled valiantly with a rising sea. I was never comfortable, but the solar pad did ward off complete surrender. But an evening came when, half-way through dressing for dinner, I decided it was wiser to get into pyjamas than into a stiff shirt. Seascale, coming into the stateroom to tidy up, under the impression that I was amid food and music, stared at me for a moment and then exclaimed, almost jubilantly, "I expected this, sir. There's a strong gale working up. I'm not too happy myself."

He asked me what I would like to eat. I replied, "Nothing." It was an effort to speak.

"I shouldn't let your stomach rattle, sir," he said, coaxingly. I felt too ill to resent his horrible suggestion. He stood looking at me gravely, like a hospital case, or perhaps he was studying my frontal sinus.

"Please turn out the light, and leave me alone!" I said, firmly.

The light went out, the door closed. The ship gave a most frightful heave, going up and up, and then down and down. I decided that eventual sunshine in Florida was not worth this present misery at sea. I would never, never cross the Atlantic again—except for coming back, which I should have to do. My bright idea of escaping foul weather, and crossing by a southerly course, in sunshine, was not being fulfilled. We were in a bad storm, there had been no sunshine. Altogether with this detour to Madeira, I should be ten days crossing the Atlantic, whereas it could be done direct in five. In future I would go direct and risk the storms of a northerly winter crossing. But I was never going to cross the Atlantic again; one suffered too much.

On Tuesday it would be all over. Saturday, Sunday, Monday—Tuesday morning. I would spend Tuesday in New York, leave Tuesday night for Miami, and reach there on Thursday morning at half-past seven. In less than one week I should be in Miami, perhaps sitting in a garden, in the warm tropical night. Somehow I must live until Tuesday.

I tried hard to imagine it, to escape present misery, and reflected on the mystery of time. One's life was stretched out over a calendar. You opened the page of a diary and you were due, on a certain forward date, to do something in a certain place. The clock ticked on. You opened the diary again one day, and you had done that something, and it was all a little unreal, for the experience of it had become no

more than a matter of memory. I recalled how, as an imaginative youth, I had sometimes played with the idea that I had been Prime Minister, and was now an old man, in retirement, looking back. I am certain my emotion was just as real as a real ex-Prime Minister would have experienced. The Time Machine is the most baffling and wonderful of all mysteries.

The door opened, the light was switched on. Little Mountain stood there, terribly bright and full of life. He had been sent to ask if I would like to be visited. I was missed at the dinner table by the Staff-Captain and the American. They sent their compliments and the enquiry.

I did not want to be visited, but I did not want to be alone. I decided to be visited.

"Why aren't you in bed?" I demanded of the page.

"I'm not sick, sir."

"I mean, isn't it your bedtime?—it's past nine o'clock. What time do you get up?"

"Six o'clock, sir."

"Goodness gracious, when do you sleep?"

"You don't get much sleep on board ship, sir. But this is better than coming home."

"Why?"

"Well, going to New York we get an hour extra every night, but coming back we lose an hour—that's why the return voyage's so hard on the stewards, sir."

This aspect of their labours had never struck me.

"But we get a good sleep at home, unless the ship turns round at once, like in New York," explained Mountain.

"Can I get you anything, sir?"

"Nothing—good night."

"Good night, sir. I'll tell them you'll see them, sir."

He left the light on. I stared at the brown lifebelt resting on the top of the wardrobe, and at the illustration of a man fitting the thing on, and tying the tapes in front. It always seemed to me that lifebelts were not belts at all, but almost collars, so high up did they fit. I never really believed they would keep one's mouth above water. If the boat began to sink now, should I really get up, fit that lifebelt on, and scramble up to the dark cold deck? No, I would not. I was too miserable to live. But one is never miserable enough to die, so I probably should put on the ungainly thing and make an effort for survival.

Little Mountain had given me yet another aspect of life on board ship for the crew. I have noticed that sailors are often sickly-looking people, and since by sailors to-day we mean engineers, boiler-room men, and stewards, for the actual navigating officers, and seamen are a small minority, they probably have as little fresh air and sunshine as colliers. Their duties are mostly performed in enclosed and artificially lit spaces. Some of them, the cabin stewards, led a mole-like existence in long tunnels along which they scurried to the particular boxes grandiloquently termed staterooms. They slept in dark berths low in the ship, and ate in an underworld of pipes and adjacent to the kitchen. No wonder such sailors were white-faced and tired.

Yet stewards seemed to like the life. Even Seascale, I felt, could not conceive any other form of existence that would please him more. Little Mountain appeared to enjoy every moment. He was blithe, and had a mouse-like quickness. There was always a smile from the dining saloon steward, and infallible patience with the whims of a stomach at sea.

A knock at the door broke my disorderly reflections on life afloat. My visitors had arrived. The Countess, I learned,

had surpassed herself with a new creation at dinner. It made the American usurp my seat to obtain the better view. The Battle-Axe was missing from the table.

III

The next morning I managed to get to the verandah café, and found my companion still sticking stamps in his album. Towards noon, Her Grace appeared, and the steward tucked her up, her back to the world. But the shuttle hand was still. There was a high sea running. The Countess sat faithfully by, reading a book. There was no conversation. Just before the bugle sounded for lunch there was news that set us all talking and carried our minds back to England. King George was gravely ill. The bulletins made no attempt to hide concern for his condition. The specialists were in attendance at Sandringham. The anxiety that was felt at home had caught us in mid-Atlantic.

All day we beat against a strong head-wind, and on the following morning, Saturday, we were in the midst of a gale, but the air was warm. Thus far I had not really suffered public disgrace as a sailor. I had been able to retire discreetly, but my fall was almost encompassed by the Purser. Invited to his cabin for a cocktail, and in animated conversation with a very beautiful young Austrian lady, I did not realise what was happening to me until I happened to catch sight of her husband's face. It was a ghastly colour, and he suddenly rose and left hurriedly.

His condition rapidly brought me to earth, or more correctly to deck. Stammering thanks for the hospitality, I rushed out of the cabin in search of cold air. The Purser's cabin was situated right for'ard in the ship's bow, and the tremendous plunging had quite undone the Austrian and

myself. When, on Sunday, I received an invitation from the Staff-Captain, I carefully enquired into the location of his cabin before accepting. Such are the pitfalls that await the bad sailor.

We were now in the Gulf Stream, and everything on board had a warm stickiness. As a boy I had always listened to the story of the Gulf Stream issuing from the Mexican Gulf, running up the North American coast, and then setting off across the Atlantic as an entertaining myth. I privately declined the explanation that we, in England, escaped Arctic winters, such as gripped New York State and the Newfoundland coast, wholly because the Gulf Stream, after its Atlantic passage, was still warm, and accommodatingly ran round the coasts of Great Britain, enveloping us like an efficient steam-heating system. Yet here we were, on a January day, sitting on deck, with a temperature of 63° Fahr. And not six hundred miles away New York, because the Gulf Stream quitted the American coast, was in deep winter's grip, with a temperature of 27° .

A bank of cold water, known as "the cold wall," separates the Gulf Stream from the east coast of U.S.A. as it streams northwards to a region south of the Newfoundland Bank. The moment one leaves the stream and runs into "the cold wall" the temperature falls with a bump, and one no longer sits in the verandah café, or walks the promenade deck without an overcoat. The atmosphere becomes almost Arctic in a few hours.

The Gulf Stream, however, is not really entitled to its name. Only a small fraction of the water comes out of the Gulf of Mexico. It is mostly water that is banked up in the Caribbean Sea and north of the Great Antilles, whence it flows northwards, out through the strait between Florida

and the Bahamas. It could more correctly be called the Florida Stream, and, since we in the British Isles eventually benefit by this, it is not unreasonable to assert that we enjoy some of the results of Florida sunshine.

IV

On Monday morning we were in the middle of a storm, and my discomfort was increased by the information that the *Princess of Connaught* would be some twelve hours late in arriving at New York on Tuesday. Towards noon another bulletin on the board confirmed our gloomy forebodings about the King. His life, we were informed, was peacefully drawing to a close in the presence of the Royal family.

The news filled the ship with gloom. Mr. de Montfort Wellington-Solomon seemed deeply depressed. If the King died he would be unable to continue his holiday to Nassau, where he was bound. Did we know how long the Court would be in mourning? No one knew.

All of us were a little impressed by Mr. Wellington-Solomon's enquiry. Was it possible, after all, that he was one of those mysterious powers at Court, that he had influence? Those rumours of sinister Jewish influence, about which the man at one's club is always so eloquent, began to come to mind.

Mr. de Montfort Wellington-Solomon became so perturbed that he was driven to approach the Duchess on the subject. She should know. I witnessed the approach, which was most courteously made, and most courteously rebuffed. Mr. Wellington-Solomon, having sighted the back of the Duchess in the most sheltered corner of the garden deck, to which she had now moved, removed the cap he was wear-

ing, approached, and coughed to make her aware of his presence.

"Pardon me, Your Grace—but I feel sure you will be able to tell me how long the Court will go into mourning for the King's death."

The embroidery hand stopped, the ducal head turned slightly to observe the interruption, and then a calm voice asked:

"But is the King dead?"

"Oh, no, Duchess—but it seems highly probable," explained Mr. Wellington-Solomon.

"I shall continue to hope for the best," replied the Duchess.

The embroidery hand shot out again, the head turned and was bent over the pattern. Mr. Wellington-Solomon, conscious that he had been dismissed, said, "Of course, of course, thank you!" bowed, and withdrew. The Battle-Axe had been in swift action.

Shortly after dinner the Captain approached the Duchess and the Countess in an alcove where they drank coffee. He carried a sheaf of wireless cables and presented them. We had little doubt what they were about. At the sight of this, poor Mr. Wellington-Solomon, sitting in the next alcove with his family, became visibly perturbed. It was something more than loyalty that made him stand up, turn round twice, stamp out his cigar, and then sit down, murmuring audibly, "It's really quite preposterous! One ought to know. It's quite as important to me as to anyone else on the ship!"

Having made this remark, he looked round at us all, as though he expected us to join in a protest against the Captain's subservience to rank. We had a moment of alarm, for as the Captain retreated from the ducal alcove, after a long

and serious consultation, it seemed as if Mr. Wellington-Solomon was going to challenge the Captain to deliver up the cables in his hand. It would have been a complete error, and Mr. Wellington-Solomon suddenly recovered himself on the brink of catastrophe.

At eleven o'clock all our anxiety was ended. The steward wrote up a message on the news board. "King George V died at 10.55 p.m. at his Sandringham home, in a state of coma."

There was very little talk on board that night, the dancing in the lounge ceased. In silence our ship drew near to the coast of America.

v

The storm had abated the next morning. The air was icy, the sea calm. No one attempted to sit in the verandah café. My postage-stamp companion was now determined to fly at once from New York down to Kingston, Jamaica, and then on to his small island. "I may be just able to snap up that Jubilee issue before they cancel it. They won't have the news of the King's death before I get there. It's a stroke of luck for me," he said, and then, fearing his remark had given me a wrong impression, "Of course, I'd rather the dear old King had lived—he was the greatest philatelist of all of us—but there it is."

One other gentleman was quite visibly affected. Mr. de Montfort Wellington-Solomon wore an expression of profound gloom. He had not been very communicative all through the voyage, but now he talked to everyone, for whom he had the same question, or questions. How long would it be before they buried the King? How long would the

Court be in mourning? He had learned there was a liner returning to England the day after he reached New York. He would go back on it. His wife and family were very much upset. "I've told them to go on and enjoy themselves, but I must go back," he said, smoothing the taffrail with a diamonded hand.

"You hope to be at the funeral? I don't think you'll be in time," I said.

"Do they bury kings so quickly? I hoped they waited," said Mr. Wellington-Solomon.

I could hold in my curiosity no longer.

"You are a Court official?" I asked. "You will be wanted?"

He gave me a quick, birdlike glance.

"Oh dear, no," he answered, his hand rubbing the taffrail. "You see, it's very important to me. I'm a wholesale draper—and we ought to have a large stock of mourning. I'm not sure we'll have enough, or be in time. It's most unfortunate being away at a moment like this. You think they'll bury the King soon?"

"Very soon!" I said, unsympathetically. "But you'll be in time for Court mourning."

"Yes, yes," he agreed. "But I'm worried about my stock. I didn't foresee this—we have a big line in crape. I'll have to go home."

I left him looking dolefully out to sea. In *Julius Caesar*, I recalled, the deaths of kings and princes troubled the heavens. It seemed the haberdashers were also perturbed. All those trunks and bags would now have to be transported back again to England. A crisis in crape had curtailed the holiday of the de Montfort Wellington-Solomons.

Well, I thought, one can be quite mistaken in people. There was the Duchess, for instance. In the last twelve hours, as we drew near New York, she had become quite a different person. She had a smile for everybody, she chatted and walked briskly about, and was dressed smartly and no longer looked dowdy at the side of the chic little Countess. It was from the latter that I learned the reason of this transformation.

"She's so miserable, poor dear, on board ship. She's felt sick every minute of the journey, and she can't bear to face anybody when she's feeling like that. So long as she keeps her head down and doesn't look at the sea, she can struggle through."

So that was why she turned her back on us. I thought it was social superiority, and it was really stomach inferiority.

"Friday night won the prize," I said to the Countess.

She gazed at me with her dark vivacious eyes.

"The prize? I don't understand."

"In nine nights you have worn nine 'creations,'" I explained. "You have given us immense pleasure, and made all the women struggle desperately against not coming in to dinner, no matter how ill they felt. Was Friday night's Molyneux or Paquin?"

"No! Patou! How awful of you to watch me like that!"

"Nonsense—you liked it. You didn't wear all those creations for the Duchess."

"Of course not!" she replied, laughing. "Poor Aline didn't know what I was wearing."

"Then for whom?"

"I really haven't thought about it."

"The bright armour of attack in Palm Beach?" I queried.

"Really, you are ridiculous!" she exclaimed.

But I noticed her lovely eyes were lit with pleasure, and I ventured to thank her for brightening up a dreary passage.

VI

One must not write about the approach to New York, by night, up the Hudson. It is one of the 'high spots' of the film world. Those cliffs of masonry, those precipices pierced with windows, as regular as a sheet of postage stamps, the ferry boats like fireflies, flitting to the New Jersey shore, the Statue of Liberty—the European's cockshy at which he slings the jests of a sophisticated mind, which thinks that Liberty should not hold a torch, but a bunch of dollar notes—the dark, ice-packed Hudson River, the skyscrapers supporting in mid-heaven their diadems of lights or solitary stars, and, lastly the long, open dockside shed which is the soil of America and the seat of Customs.

The gangway is down, the stewards are tipped, the Press swarm up, the baggage goes out, the icy air nips one, increasing the excitement of this landing by night. The Duchess appears, *à la Russe*, with astrakhan Muscovite hat and coat, with high leather snow-boots, immense muff, and a spray of orchids pressed to her bosom. She almost makes one listen for the jingle of horse bells as her *troika* sweeps into sight. The lovely Austrian, the beauty of the boat, with the Countess a close second, is greeted by friends. We are twelve hours late. All our plans are awry.

We proceed under the arc lights to the lettered sections of the cold shed where the Custom officers examine our baggage. Above us towers the black side of the liner, our discarded but trusty home for ten days. The baggage is marked. It slides down the escalator, while we follow in the elevator. There is a line of hurrying taxis, and as I am

bumped from dark dockland across Manhattan into the core of this new civilisation, I look at a photograph and read the name of my taxi driver, "William Sobieski," wondering what chain of events brought him from Poland, a poor peasant emigrant or the impoverished descendant of proud kings, to drive yellow taxis down snow-laden streets for twenty cents a mile.

American hotels are enough to make a man leave home. When you hire a room and bath, you command for a few dollars a service such as Solomon never knew, harem apart. At a quarter to eleven, after that brisk drive through New York, I was in a bedroom on the twenty-first floor, in that tropical steam heat which allows you to proceed from bath to bed without fear of a chill en route. The lateness of the *Princess of Connaught* had robbed me of the day I had planned in New York, for shopping and getting my railroad ticket. I had to decide quickly whether I should leave New York next morning, or delay my departure for a day.

A glance at the evening paper decided my plans. "Cold Spell to Increase—Two deaths in Brooklyn," I read. I could go straight from hotel to train without exposing myself to the open air if I went the next morning. I picked up the telephone. "I'll call you back," replied the clerk, when I had asked for a booking on the Florida Express called *The Tamiami*. Was the name a misprint, I asked. Was it the *To Miami* Express? No. Tamiami was correct. Five minutes later I possessed a berth in *The Tamiami*, leaving at ten o'clock.

By ten o'clock next morning I had had breakfast, my shirts laundered, my suit pressed, and following a 'bell hop,' so called in these hotels where no bell is ever heard and no

page boy ever hops, through a subterranean passage came into a hall that was like St. Peter's, Rome. I passed a grille, where a coloured porter took charge of me, and went down a chute into the steel 'tube' that was *The Tamiami Express*.

A few minutes later all the doors of the tube closed. There was not a crevice open anywhere, for we were travelling 'air conditioned,' that is, cold air was drawn in at one end of the train, cleaned, warmed, and passed through the carriages. For the first time in my life I was able to blow my nose after travelling a thousand miles and not find my handkerchief like a chimney-sweep's.

The train silently slid out of the station. I looked at my watch. It was ten-fifteen. The earthly stage of my journey to Florida had begun. I entered my steel tube in the grip of icy winter. I should emerge from it in the heat and sunshine of midsummer; to-morrow afternoon at 3.30 p.m. to be precise. The dreaded passage was over. The real holiday had begun. I felt no regret for not having seen New York. I had seen it four times before, and whether I saw it now or saw it in the future, it would still be unfinished.

For the next six hours I saw nothing but blinding sunshine, wastes of dirty snow and grey stretches of water. Even Washington lay in an icy grip. I began to feel doubtful about Florida. Could it be that only twenty-four hours away the world and his wife were bathing in the blue ocean? A glance across at a fellow-passenger reassured me. On the top of a leather bag lay a pith helmet. That struck the authentic tropical note.