

## **Chapter XXXIX.**

The charm of the Mediterranean dwells in the unforgettable flavour of my early days, and to this hour this sea, upon which the Romans alone ruled without dispute, has kept for me the fascination of youthful romance. The very first Christmas night I ever spent away from land was employed in running before a Gulf of Lions gale, which made the old ship groan in every timber as she skipped before it over the short seas until we brought her to, battered and out of breath, under the lee of Majorca, where the smooth water was torn by fierce cat's-paws under a very stormy sky.

We--or, rather, they, for I had hardly had two glimpses of salt water in my life till then--kept her standing off and on all that day, while I listened for the first time with the curiosity of my tender years to the song of the wind in a ship's rigging. The monotonous and vibrating note was destined to grow into the intimacy of the heart, pass into blood and bone, accompany the thoughts and acts of two full decades, remain to haunt like a reproach the peace of the quiet fireside, and enter into the very texture of respectable dreams dreamed safely under a roof of rafters and tiles. The wind was fair, but that day we ran no more.

The thing (I will not call her a ship twice in the same half-hour) leaked. She leaked fully, generously, overflowing, all over-- like a basket. I took an enthusiastic part in the excitement caused by that last infirmity of noble ships, without concerning myself much with the why or the wherefore. The surmise of my maturer years is that, bored by her interminable life, the venerable antiquity was simply yawning with ennui at every seam. But at the time I did not know; I knew generally very little, and least of all what I was doing in that galere.

I remember that, exactly as in the comedy of Moliere, my uncle asked the precise question in the very words--not of my confidential valet, however, but across great distances of land, in a letter whose mocking but indulgent turn ill concealed his almost paternal anxiety. I fancy I tried to convey to him my (utterly unfounded) impression that the West Indies awaited my coming. I had to go there. It was a sort of mystic conviction--something in the nature of a call. But it was difficult to state intelligibly the grounds of this belief to that man of rigorous logic, if of infinite charity.

The truth must have been that, all unversed in the arts of the wily Greek, the deceiver of gods, the lover of strange women, the evoker of bloodthirsty shades, I yet longed for the beginning of my own obscure Odyssey, which, as was proper for

a modern, should unroll its wonders and terrors beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The disdainful ocean did not open wide to swallow up my audacity, though the ship, the ridiculous and ancient galere of my folly, the old, weary, disenchanted sugar-waggon, seemed extremely disposed to open out and swallow up as much salt water as she could hold. This, if less grandiose, would have been as final a catastrophe.

But no catastrophe occurred. I lived to watch on a strange shore a black and youthful Nausicaa, with a joyous train of attendant maidens, carrying baskets of linen to a clear stream overhung by the heads of slender palm-trees. The vivid colours of their draped raiment and the gold of their earrings invested with a barbaric and regal magnificence their figures, stepping out freely in a shower of broken sunshine. The whiteness of their teeth was still more dazzling than the splendour of jewels at their ears. The shaded side of the ravine gleamed with their smiles. They were as unabashed as so many princesses, but, alas! not one of them was the daughter of a jet-black sovereign. Such was my abominable luck in being born by the mere hair's breadth of twenty-five centuries too late into a world where kings have been growing scarce with scandalous rapidity, while the few who remain have adopted the uninteresting manners and customs of simple millionaires. Obviously it was a vain hope in 187- to see the ladies of a royal household walk in chequered sunshine, with baskets of linen on their heads, to the banks of a clear stream overhung by the starry fronds of palm-trees. It was a vain hope. If I did not ask myself whether, limited by such discouraging impossibilities, life were still worth living, it was only because I had then before me several other pressing questions, some of which have remained unanswered to this day. The resonant, laughing voices of these gorgeous maidens scared away the multitude of humming-birds, whose delicate wings wreathed with the mist of their vibration the tops of flowering bushes.

No, they were not princesses. Their unrestrained laughter filling the hot, fern-clad ravine had a soulless limpidity, as of wild, inhuman dwellers in tropical woodlands. Following the example of certain prudent travellers, I withdrew unseen--and returned, not much wiser, to the Mediterranean, the sea of classic adventures.