CHAPTER VII

ON BOARD THE "MERIDIANA"

A large transatlantic steamer lying at the wharf on a brilliant, sunny morning just before its departure is an interesting and suggestive object to those who are fond of following suggestion to its end. One sometimes wonders if it is possible that the excitement in the dock atmosphere could ever become a thing to which one was sufficiently accustomed to be able to regard it as among things commonplace. The rumbling and rattling of waggons and carts, the loading and unloading of boxes and bales, the people who are late, and the people who are early, the faces which are excited, and the faces which are sad, the trunks and bales, and cranes which creak and groan, the shouts and cries, the hurry and confusion of movement, notwithstanding that every day has seen them all for years, have a sort of perennial interest to the looker-on.

This is, perhaps, more especially the case when the looker-on is to be a passenger on the outgoing ship; and the exhilaration of his point of view may greatly depend upon the reason for his voyage and the class by which he travels. Gaiety and youth usually appear upon the promenade deck, having taken saloon passage. Dulness, commerce, and eld mingling with them, it is true, but with a discretion which does not seem to dominate. Second-class passengers wear a more practical aspect, and youth among them is rarer and more grave. People who must travel second and third class make voyages for utilitarian reasons. Their object is

usually to better themselves in one way or another. When they are going from Liverpool to New York, it is usually to enter upon new efforts and new labours. When they are returning from New York to Liverpool, it is often because the new life has proved less to be depended upon than the old, and they are bearing back with them bitterness of soul and discouragement of spirit.

On the brilliant spring morning when the huge liner Meridiana was to sail for England a young man, who was a second-class passenger, leaned upon the ship's rail and watched the turmoil on the wharf with a detached and not at all buoyant air.

His air was detached because he had other things in his mind than those merely passing before him, and he was not buoyant because they were not cheerful or encouraging subjects for reflection. He was a big young man, well hung together, and carrying himself well; his face was square-jawed and rugged, and he had dark red hair restrained by its close cut from waving strongly on his forehead. His eyes were red brown, and a few dark freckles marked his clear skin. He was of the order of man one looks at twice, having looked at him once, though one does not in the least know why, unless one finally reaches some degree of intimacy.

He watched the vehicles, heavy and light, roll into the big shed-like building and deposit their freight; he heard the voices and caught the sentences of instruction and comment; he saw boxes and bales hauled from the dock side to the deck and swung below with the rattling of machinery

and chains. But these formed merely a noisy background to his mood, which was self-centred and gloomy. He was one of those who go back to their native land knowing themselves conquered. He had left England two years before, feeling obstinately determined to accomplish a certain difficult thing, but forces of nature combining with the circumstances of previous education and living had beaten him. He had lost two years and all the money he had ventured. He was going back to the place he had come from, and he was carrying with him a sense of having been used hardly by fortune, and in a way he had not deserved.

He had gone out to the West with the intention of working hard and using his hands as well as his brains; he had not been squeamish; he had, in fact, laboured like a ploughman; and to be obliged to give in had been galling and bitter. There are human beings into whose consciousness of themselves the possibility of being beaten does not enter. This man was one of them.

The ship was of the huge and luxuriously-fitted class by which the rich and fortunate are transported from one continent to another. Passengers could indulge themselves in suites of rooms and live sumptuously. As the man leaning on the rail looked on, he saw messengers bearing baskets and boxes of fruit and flowers with cards and notes attached, hurrying up the gangway to deliver them to waiting stewards. These were the farewell offerings to be placed in staterooms, or to await their owners on the saloon tables. Salter--the second-class passenger's name was Salter--had seen a few such offerings before on the first crossing. But there had

not been such lavishness at Liverpool. It was the New Yorkers who were sumptuous in such matters, as he had been told. He had also heard casually that the passenger list on this voyage was to record important names, the names of multi-millionaire people who were going over for the London season.

Two stewards talking near him, earlier in the morning, had been exulting over the probable largesse such a list would result in at the end of the passage.

"The Worthingtons and the Hirams and the John William Spayters," said one. "They travel all right. They know what they want and they want a good deal, and they're willing to pay for it."

"Yes. They're not school teachers going over to improve their minds and contriving to cross in a big ship by economising in everything else. Miss Vanderpoel's sailing with the Worthingtons. She's got the best suite all to herself. She'll bring back a duke or one of those prince fellows. How many millions has Vanderpoel?"

"How many millions. How many hundred millions!" said his companion, gloating cheerfully over the vastness of unknown possibilities. "I've crossed with Miss Vanderpoel often, two or three times when she was in short frocks. She's the kind of girl you read about. And she's got money enough to buy in half a dozen princes."

"There are New Yorkers who won't like it if she does," returned the other. "There's been too much money going out of the country. Her suite is crammed full of Jack roses, now, and there are boxes waiting outside."

Salter moved away and heard no more. He moved away, in fact, because he was conscious that to a man in his case, this dwelling upon millions, this plethora of wealth, was a little revolting. He had walked down Broadway and seen the price of Jacqueminot roses, and he was not soothed or allured at this particular moment by the picture of a girl whose half-dozen cabins were crowded with them.

"Oh, the devil!" he said. "It sounds vulgar." And he walked up and down fast, squaring his shoulders, with his hands in the pockets of his rough, well-worn coat. He had seen in England something of the American young woman with millionaire relatives. He had been scarcely more than a boy when the American flood first began to rise. He had been old enough, however, to hear people talk. As he had grown older, Salter had observed its advance. Englishmen had married American beauties. American fortunes had built up English houses, which otherwise threatened to fall into decay. Then the American faculty of adaptability came into play. Anglo-American wives became sometimes more English than their husbands.

They proceeded to Anglicise their relations, their relations' clothes, even, in time, their speech. They carried or sent English conventions to the States, their brothers ordered their clothes from West End tailors,

their sisters began to wear walking dresses, to play out-of-door games and take active exercise. Their mothers tentatively took houses in London or Paris, there came a period when their fathers or uncles, serious or anxious business men, the most unsporting of human beings, rented castles or manors with huge moors and covers attached and entertained large parties of shooters or fishers who could be lured to any quarter by the promise of the particular form of slaughter for which they burned.

"Sheer American business perspicacity, that," said Salter, as he marched up and down, thinking of a particular case of this order. "There's something admirable in the practical way they make for what they want. They want to amalgamate with English people, not for their own sake, but because their women like it, and so they offer the men thousands of acres full of things to kill. They can get them by paying for them, and they know how to pay." He laughed a little, lifting his square shoulders. "Balthamor's six thousand acres of grouse moor and Elsty's salmon fishing are rented by the Chicago man. He doesn't care twopence for them, and does not know a pheasant from a caper-cailzie, but his wife wants to know men who do."

It must be confessed that Salter was of the English who were not pleased with the American Invasion. In some of his views of the matter he was a little prehistoric and savage, but the modern side of his character was too intelligent to lack reason. He was by no means entirely modern, however; a large part of his nature belonged to the age in which men

had fought fiercely for what they wanted to get or keep, and when the amenities of commerce had not become powerful factors in existence.

"They're not a bad lot," he was thinking at this moment. "They are rather fine in a way. They are clever and powerful and interesting--more so than they know themselves. But it is all commerce. They don't come and fight with us and get possession of us by force. They come and buy us. They buy our land and our homes, and our landowners, for that matter--when they don't buy them, they send their women to marry them, confound it!"

He took half a dozen more strides and lifted his shoulders again.

"Beggarly lot as I am," he said, "unlikely as it seems that I can marry at all, I'm hanged if I don't marry an Englishwoman, if I give my life to a woman at all."

But, in fact, he was of the opinion that he should never give his life to any woman, and this was because he was, at this period, also of the opinion that there was small prospect of its ever being worth the giving or taking. It had been one of those lives which begin untowardly and are ruled by unfair circumstances.

He had a particularly well-cut and expressive mouth, and, as he went back to the ship's side and leaned on his folded arms on the rail again, its curves concealed a good deal of strong feeling.

The wharf was busier than before. In less than half an hour the ship was to sail. The bustle and confusion had increased. There were people hurrying about looking for friends, and there were people scribbling off excited farewell messages at the telegraph office. The situation was working up to its climax. An observing looker-on might catch glimpses of emotional scenes. Many of the passengers were already on board, parties of them accompanied by their friends were making their way up the gangplank.

Salter had just been watching a luxuriously cared-for little invalid woman being carried on deck in a reclining chair, when his attention was attracted by the sound of trampling hoofs and rolling wheels. Two noticeably big and smart carriages had driven up to the stopping-place for vehicles. They were gorgeously of the latest mode, and their tall, satin-skinned horses jangled silver chains and stepped up to their noses.

"Here come the Worthingtons, whosoever they may be," thought Salter. "The fine up-standing young woman is, no doubt, the multi-millionairess."

The fine, up-standing young woman WAS the multi-millionairess. Bettina walked up the gangway in the sunshine, and the passengers upon the upper deck craned their necks to look at her. Her carriage of her head and shoulders invariably made people turn to look.

"My, ain't she fine-looking!" exclaimed an excited lady beholder above. "I guess that must be Miss Vanderpoel, the multi-millionaire's daughter. Jane told me she'd heard she was crossing this trip."

Bettina heard her. She sometimes wondered if she was ever pointed out, if her name was ever mentioned without the addition of the explanatory statement that she was the multi-millionaire's daughter. As a child she had thought it ridiculous and tiresome, as she had grown older she had felt that only a remarkable individuality could surmount a fact so ever present.

It was like a tremendous quality which overshadowed everything else.

"It wounds my vanity, I have no doubt," she had said to her father. "Nobody ever sees me, they only see you and your millions and millions of dollars."

Salter watched her pass up the gangway. The phase through which he was living was not of the order which leads a man to dwell upon the beautiful and inspiriting as expressed by the female image. Success and the hopefulness which engender warmth of soul and quickness of heart are required for the development of such allurements. He thought of the Vanderpoel millions as the lady on the deck had thought of them, and in his mind somehow the girl herself appeared to express them. The rich up-springing sweep of her abundant hair, her height, her colouring, the

remarkable shade and length of her lashes, the full curve of her mouth, all, he told himself, looked expensive, as if even nature herself had been given carte blanche, and the best possible articles procured for the money.

"She moves," he thought sardonically, "as if she were perfectly aware that she could pay for anything. An unlimited income, no doubt, establishes in the owner the equivalent to a sense of rank."

He changed his position for one in which he could command a view of the promenade deck where the arriving passengers were gradually appearing. He did this from the idle and careless curiosity which, though it is not a matter of absolute interest, does not object to being entertained by passing objects. He saw the Worthington party reappear. It struck Salter that they looked not so much like persons coming on board a ship, as like people who were returning to a hotel to which they were accustomed, and which was also accustomed to them. He argued that they had probably crossed the Atlantic innumerable times in this particular steamer. The deck stewards knew them and made obeisance with empressement. Miss Vanderpoel nodded to the steward Salter had heard discussing her. She gave him a smile of recognition and paused a moment to speak to him. Salter saw her sweep the deck with her glance and then designate a sequestered corner, such as the experienced voyager would recognise as being desirably sheltered. She was evidently giving an order concerning the placing of her deck chair, which was presently brought. An elegantly

neat and decorous person in black, who was evidently her maid, appeared later, followed by a steward who carried cushions and sumptuous fur rugs. These being arranged, a delightful corner was left alluringly prepared. Miss Vanderpoel, after her instructions to the deck steward, had joined her party and seemed to be awaiting some arrival anxiously.

"She knows how to do herself well," Salter commented, "and she realises that forethought is a practical factor. Millions have been productive of composure. It is not unnatural, either."

It was but a short time later that the warning bell was rung. Stewards passed through the crowds calling out, "All ashore, if you please--all ashore." Final embraces were in order on all sides. People shook hands with fervour and laughed a little nervously. Women kissed each other and poured forth hurried messages to be delivered on the other side of the Atlantic. Having kissed and parted, some of them rushed back and indulged in little clutches again. Notwithstanding that the tide of humanity surges across the Atlantic almost as regularly as the daily tide surges in on its shores, a wave of emotion sweeps through every ship at such partings.

Salter stood on deck and watched the crowd dispersing. Some of the people were laughing and some had red eyes. Groups collected on the wharf and tried to say still more last words to their friends crowding against the rail.

The Worthingtons kept their places and were still looking out, by this time disappointedly. It seemed that the friend or friends they expected were not coming. Salter saw that Miss Vanderpoel looked more disappointed than the rest. She leaned forward and strained her eyes to see. Just at the last moment there was the sound of trampling horses and rolling wheels again. From the arriving carriage descended hastily an elderly woman, who lifted out a little boy excited almost to tears. He was a dear, chubby little person in flapping sailor trousers, and he carried a splendidly-caparisoned toy donkey in his arms. Salter could not help feeling slightly excited himself as they rushed forward. He wondered if they were passengers who would be left behind.

They were not passengers, but the arrivals Miss Vanderpoel had been expecting so ardently. They had come to say good-bye to her and were too late for that, at least, as the gangway was just about to be withdrawn.

Miss Vanderpoel leaned forward with an amazingly fervid expression on her face.

"Tommy! Tommy!" she cried to the little boy. "Here I am, Tommy. We can say good-bye from here."

The little boy, looking up, broke into a wail of despair.

"Betty! Betty! Betty!" he cried. "I wanted to kiss you, Betty."

Betty held out her arms. She did it with entire forgetfulness of the existence of any lookers-on, and with such outreaching love on her face that it seemed as if the child must feel her touch. She made a beautiful, warm, consoling bud of her mouth.

"We'll kiss each other from here, Tommy," she said. "See, we can. Kiss me, and I will kiss you."

Tommy held out his arms and the magnificent donkey. "Betty," he cried, "I brought you my donkey. I wanted to give it to you for a present, because you liked it."

Miss Vanderpoel bent further forward and addressed the elderly woman.

"Matilda," she said, "please pack Master Tommy's present and send it to me! I want it very much."

Tender smiles irradiated the small face. The gangway was withdrawn, and, amid the familiar sounds of a big craft's first struggle, the ship began to move. Miss Vanderpoel still bent forward and held out her arms.

"I will soon come back, Tommy," she cried, "and we are always friends."

The child held out his short blue serge arms also, and Salter watching him could not but be touched for all his gloom of mind.

"I wanted to kiss you, Betty," he heard in farewell. "I did so want to kiss you."

And so they steamed away upon the blue.