

## CHAPTER VII

### ON THE BOAT-DECK

Rising waters and a fine flying scud that whipped stingingly over the side had driven most of the passengers on the Atlantic to the shelter of their staterooms or to the warm stuffiness of the library. It was the fifth evening of the voyage. For five days and four nights the ship had been racing through a placid ocean on her way to Sandy Hook: but in the early hours of this afternoon the wind had shifted to the north, bringing heavy seas. Darkness had begun to fall now. The sky was a sullen black. The white crests of the rollers gleamed faintly in the dusk, and the wind sang in the ropes.

Jimmy and Ann had had the boat-deck to themselves for half an hour. Jimmy was a good sailor: it exhilarated him to fight the wind and to walk a deck that heaved and dipped and shuddered beneath his feet; but he had not expected to have Ann's company on such an evening. But she had come out of the saloon entrance, her small face framed in a hood and her slim body shapeless beneath a great cloak, and joined him in his walk.

Jimmy was in a mood of exaltation. He had passed the last few days in a condition of intermittent melancholy, consequent on the discovery that he was not the only man on board the Atlantic who

desired the society of Ann as an alleviation of the tedium of an ocean voyage. The world, when he embarked on this venture, had consisted so exclusively of Ann and himself that, until the ship was well on its way to Queenstown, he had not conceived the possibility of intrusive males forcing their unwelcome attentions on her. And it had added bitterness to the bitter awakening that their attentions did not appear to be at all unwelcome. Almost immediately after breakfast on the very first day, a creature with a small black moustache and shining teeth had descended upon Ann and, vocal with surprise and pleasure at meeting her again--he claimed, damn him!, to have met her before at Palm Beach, Bar Harbor, and a dozen other places--had carried her off to play an idiotic game known as shuffle-board. Nor was this an isolated case. It began to be borne in upon Jimmy that Ann, whom he had looked upon purely in the light of an Eve playing opposite his Adam in an exclusive Garden of Eden, was an extremely well-known and popular character. The clerk at the shipping-office had lied absurdly when he had said that very few people were crossing on the Atlantic this voyage. The vessel was crammed till its sides bulged, it was loaded down in utter defiance of the Plimsoll law, with Rollos and Clarences and Dwights and Twombleys who had known and golfed and ridden and driven and motored and swum and danced with Ann for years. A ghastly being entitled Edgar Something or Teddy Something had beaten Jimmy by a short head in the race for the deck-steward, the prize of which was the placing of his deck-chair next to Ann's. Jimmy had been driven from the

promenade deck by the spectacle of this beastly creature lying swathed in rugs reading best-sellers to her.

He had scarcely seen her to speak to since the beginning of the voyage. When she was not walking with Rolly or playing shuffle-board with Twombly, she was down below ministering to the comfort of a chronically sea-sick aunt, referred to in conversation as "poor aunt Nesta". Sometimes Jimmy saw the little man--presumably her uncle--in the smoking-room, and once he came upon the stout boy recovering from the effects of a cigar in a quiet corner of the boat-deck: but apart from these meetings the family was as distant from him as if he had never seen Ann at all--let alone saved her life.

And now she had dropped down on him from heaven. They were alone together with the good clean wind and the bracing scud. Rollo, Clarence, Dwight, and Twombly, not to mention Edgar or possibly Teddy, were down below--he hoped, dying. They had the world to themselves.

"I love rough weather," said Ann, lifting her face to the wind. Her eyes were very bright. She was beyond any doubt or question the only girl on earth. "Poor aunt Nesta doesn't. She was bad enough when it was quite calm, but this storm has finished her. I've just been down below, trying to cheer her up."

Jimmy thrilled at the picture. Always fascinating, Ann seemed to him at her best in the role of ministering angel. He longed to tell her so, but found no words. They reached the end of the deck, and turned. Ann looked up at him.

"I've hardly seen anything of you since we sailed," she said. She spoke almost reproachfully. "Tell me all about yourself, Mr. Bayliss. Why are you going to America?"

Jimmy had had an impassioned indictment of the Rollos on his tongue, but she had closed the opening for it as quickly as she had made it. In face of her direct demand for information he could not hark back to it now. After all, what did the Rollos matter? They had no part in this little wind-swept world: they were where they belonged, in some nether hell on the C. or D. deck, moaning for death.

"To make a fortune, I hope," he said.

Ann was pleased at this confirmation of her diagnosis. She had deduced this from the evidence at Paddington Station.

"How pleased your father will be if you do!"

The slight complexity of Jimmy's affairs caused him to pause for a moment to sort out his fathers, but an instant's reflection

told him that she must be referring to Bayliss the butler.

"Yes."

"He's a dear old man," said Ann. "I suppose he's very proud of you?"

"I hope so."

"You must do tremendously well in America, so as not to disappoint him. What are you thinking of doing?"

Jimmy considered for a moment.

"Newspaper work, I think."

"Oh? Why, have you had any experience?"

"A little."

Ann seemed to grow a little aloof, as if her enthusiasm had been damped.

"Oh, well, I suppose it's a good enough profession. I'm not very fond of it myself. I've only met one newspaper man in my life, and I dislike him very much, so I suppose that has prejudiced

me."

"Who was that?"

"You wouldn't have met him. He was on an American paper. A man named Crocker."

A sudden gust of wind drove them back a step, rendering talk impossible. It covered a gap when Jimmy could not have spoken. The shock of the information that Ann had met him before made him dumb. This thing was beyond him. It baffled him.

Her next words supplied a solution. They were under shelter of one of the boats now and she could make herself heard.

"It was five years ago, and I only met him for a very short while, but the prejudice has lasted."

Jimmy began to understand. Five years ago! It was not so strange, then, that they should not recognise each other now. He stirred up his memory. Nothing came to the surface. Not a gleam of recollection of that early meeting rewarded him. And yet something of importance must have happened then, for her to remember it. Surely his mere personality could not have been so unpleasant as to have made such a lasting impression on her!

"I wish you could do something better than newspaper work," said Ann. "I always think the splendid part about America is that it is such a land of adventure. There are such millions of chances. It's a place where anything may happen. Haven't you an adventurous soul, Mr. Bayliss?"

No man lightly submits to a charge, even a hinted charge, of being deficient in the capacity for adventure.

"Of course I have," said Jimmy indignantly. "I'm game to tackle anything that comes along."

"I'm glad of that."

Her feeling of comradeship towards this young man deepened. She loved adventure and based her estimate of any member of the opposite sex largely on his capacity for it. She moved in a set, when at home, which was more polite than adventurous, and had frequently found the atmosphere enervating.

"Adventure," said Jimmy, "is everything."

He paused. "Or a good deal," he concluded weakly.

"Why qualify it like that? It sounds so tame. Adventure is the biggest thing in life."

It seemed to Jimmy that he had received an excuse for a remark of a kind that had been waiting for utterance ever since he had met her. Often and often in the watches of the night, smoking endless pipes and thinking of her, he had conjured up just such a vision as this--they two walking the deserted deck alone, and she innocently giving him an opening for some low-voiced, tender speech, at which she would start, look at him quickly, and then ask him haltingly if the words had any particular application. And after that--oh, well, all sorts of things might happen. And now the moment had come. It was true that he had always pictured the scene as taking place by moonlight and at present there was a half-gale blowing, out of an inky sky; also on the present occasion anything in the nature of a low-voiced speech was absolutely out of the question owing to the uproar of the elements. Still, taking these drawbacks into consideration, the chance was far too good to miss. Such an opening might never happen again. He waited till the ship had steadied herself after an apparently suicidal dive into an enormous roller, then, staggering back to her side, spoke.

"Love is the biggest thing in life!" he roared.

"What is?" shrieked Ann.

"Love!" bellowed Jimmy.



He wished a moment later that he had postponed this statement of faith, for their next steps took them into a haven of comparative calm, where some dimly seen portion of the vessel's anatomy jutted out and formed a kind of nook where it was possible to hear the ordinary tones of the human voice. He halted here, and Ann did the same, though unwillingly. She was conscious of a feeling of disappointment and of a modification of her mood of comradeship towards her companion. She held strong views, which she believed to be unalterable, on the subject under discussion.

"Love!" she said. It was too dark to see her face, but her voice sounded unpleasantly scornful. "I shouldn't have thought that you would have been so conventional as that. You seemed different."

"Eh?" said Jimmy blankly.

"I hate all this talk about Love, as if it were something wonderful that was worth everything else in life put together. Every book you read and every song that you see in the shop-windows is all about Love. It's as if the whole world were in a conspiracy to persuade themselves that there's a wonderful something just round the corner which they can get if they try hard enough. And they hypnotise themselves into thinking of nothing else and miss all the splendid things of life."

"That's Shaw, isn't it?" said Jimmy.

"What is Shaw?"

"What you were saying. It's out of one of Bernard Shaw's things, isn't it?"

"It is not." A note of acidity had crept into Ann's voice. "It is perfectly original."

"I'm certain I've heard it before somewhere."

"If you have, that simply means that you must have associated with some sensible person."

Jimmy was puzzled.

"But why the grouch?" he asked.

"I don't understand you."

"I mean, why do you feel that way about it?"

Ann was quite certain now that she did not like this young man nearly as well as she had supposed. It is trying for a strong-minded, clear-thinking girl to have her philosophy

described as a grouch.

"Because I've had the courage to think about it for myself, and not let myself be blinded by popular superstition. The whole world has united in making itself imagine that there is something called love which is the most wonderful happening in life. The poets and novelists have simply hounded them on to believe it. It's a gigantic swindle."

A wave of tender compassion swept over Jimmy. He understood it all now. Naturally a girl who had associated all her life with the Rollos, Clarences, Dwights, and Twombleys would come to despair of the possibility of falling in love with any one.

"You haven't met the right man," he said. She had, of course, but only recently: and, anyway, he could point that out later.

"There is no such thing as the right man," said Ann resolutely, "if you are suggesting that there is a type of man in existence who is capable of inspiring what is called romantic love. I believe in marriage. . . ."

"Good work!" said Jimmy, well satisfied.

". . . But not as the result of a sort of delirium. I believe in it as a sensible partnership between two friends who know each

other well and trust each other. The right way of looking at marriage is to realise, first of all, that there are no thrills, no romances, and then to pick out some one who is nice and kind and amusing and full of life and willing to do things to make you happy."

"Ah!" said Jimmy, straightening his tie, "Well, that's something."

"How do you mean--that's something? Are you shocked at my views?"

"I don't believe they are your views. You've been reading one of these stern, soured fellows who analyse things."

Ann stamped. The sound was inaudible, but Jimmy noticed the movement.

"Cold?" he said. "Let's walk on."

Ann's sense of humour reasserted itself. It was not often that it remained dormant for so long. She laughed.

"I know exactly what you are thinking," she said. "You believe that I am posing, that those aren't my real opinions."

"They can't be. But I don't think you are posing. It's getting on

for dinner-time, and you've got that wan, sinking feeling that makes you look upon the world and find it a hollow fraud. The bugle will be blowing in a few minutes, and half an hour after that you will be yourself again."

"I'm myself now. I suppose you can't realise that a pretty girl can hold such views."

Jimmy took her arm.

"Let me help you," he said. "There's a knothole in the deck. Watch your step. Now, listen to me. I'm glad you've brought up this subject--I mean the subject of your being the prettiest girl in the known world--"

"I never said that."

"Your modesty prevented you. But it's a fact, nevertheless. I'm glad, I say, because I have been thinking a lot along those lines myself, and I have been anxious to discuss the point with you. You have the most glorious hair I have ever seen!"

"Do you like red hair?"

"Red-gold."

"It is nice of you to put it like that. When I was a child all except a few of the other children called me Carrots."

"They have undoubtedly come to a bad end by this time. If bears were sent to attend to the children who criticised Elijah, your little friends were in line for a troupe of tigers. But there were some of a finer fibre? There were a few who didn't call you Carrots?"

"One or two. They called me Brick-Top."

"They have probably been electrocuted since. Your eyes are perfectly wonderful!"

Ann withdrew her arm. An extensive acquaintance of young men told her that the topic of conversation was now due to be changed.

"You will like America," she said.

"We are not discussing America."

"I am. It is a wonderful country for a man who wants to succeed. If I were you, I should go out West."

"Do you live out West?"

"No."

"Then why suggest my going there? Where do you live?"

"I live in New York."

"I shall stay in New York, then."

Ann was wary, but amused. Proposals of marriage--and Jimmy seemed to be moving swiftly towards one--were no novelty in her life. In the course of several seasons at Bar Harbor, Tuxedo, Palm Beach, and in New York itself, she had spent much of her time foiling and discouraging the ardour of a series of sentimental youths who had laid their unwelcome hearts at her feet.

"New York is open for staying in about this time, I believe."

Jimmy was silent. He had done his best to fight a tendency to become depressed and had striven by means of a light tone to keep himself resolutely cheerful, but the girl's apparently total indifference to him was too much for his spirits. One of the young men who had had to pick up the heart he had flung at Ann's feet and carry it away for repairs had once confided to an intimate friend, after the sting had to some extent passed, that the feelings of a man who made love to Ann might be likened to the emotions which hot chocolate might be supposed to entertain

on contact with vanilla ice-cream. Jimmy, had the comparison been presented to him, would have endorsed its perfect accuracy. The wind from the sea, until now keen and bracing, had become merely infernally cold. The song of the wind in the rigging, erstwhile melodious, had turned into a damned depressing howling.

"I used to be as sentimental as any one a few years ago," said Ann, returning to the dropped subject. "Just after I left college, I was quite maudlin. I dreamed of moons and Junes and loves and doves all the time. Then something happened which made me see what a little fool I was. It wasn't pleasant at the time, but it had a very bracing effect. I have been quite different ever since. It was a man, of course, who did it. His method was quite simple. He just made fun of me, and Nature did the rest."

Jimmy scowled in the darkness. Murderous thoughts towards the unknown brute flooded his mind.

"I wish I could meet him!" he growled.

"You aren't likely to," said Ann. "He lives in England. His name is Crocker. Jimmy Crocker. I spoke about him just now."

Through the howling of the wind cut the sharp notes of a bugle. Ann turned to the saloon entrance.



"Dinner!" she said brightly. "How hungry one gets on board ship!"

She stopped. "Aren't you coming down, Mr. Bayliss?"

"Not just yet," said Jimmy thickly.