



XXII

TRISTRAM SHEEPHANKS did not find grief to improve upon acquaintance; the sufferer from an incurable malady may become inured to bodily pain, but mental agony seemed to grow daily less bearable. Despite every attempt to conceal his plight from Alba, he sometimes looked so unusually glum at meals that she became slightly perturbed, and began wondering what would happen if Podler dallied much longer over the preparations for elopement. That Fabre—he had seen them together, and he was just the sort of man who would never let pass a rebuff—or, at least, one from a woman. Could he have said something to Tristram already? Really it was high time they were off. What on earth was James playing at?

James was looking before he leapt; and the more he looked, the more he hesitated. One morning when he awoke feeling a trifle livery, he asked himself, over a glass of hot magnesium sulphate, whether, after all, she was worth the sacrifice of a probable C.B. By eleven, however, the mood dissolved like a morning mist and he was able to greet Alba when he called on her with unabated enthusiasm and soothe her with the promise that in exactly four days they should embark on the *Empress of Polynesia*, where he had already secured a cabin.

On quitting the house, he met Tristram, flitting shadow-like up the short causeway, back from a solitary walk.

‘ Ah ! ’ his voice had grown no less shadowy than his appearance, ‘ Podler, don’t forget to-morrow ’.

Once a week Mr. Podler received lessons in sailing from his captain, and was improving most laudably, except that he still tended to put the *Caccubioni* into the wind too much on a fine tack, if it blew at all; owing to a half-conscious fear of her huge mainsail. Tristram’s reminder disconcerted him, the week’s lesson being thrust out of his mind by more urgent matters. He overcame his immediate reaction, which prompted him to plead business. If Fabre had said anything, as was not improbable, the excuse would look rather fishy ; it was better to propitiate and incidentally keep an eye on Tristram as far as was practicable, till they were safe out of the country.

‘ Right you are : I’ll be there, rain or shine. I’m getting quite an old salt, Her, Her ! What d’you think of the weather ? ’

Both regarded the sky, the north-western half of which was radiantly serene. From the south-east, however, pale fasces and plumes like threads of spun glass protruded themselves from an arc of filmy pearl that dropped down to the horizon. At a greatly lower altitude grey, furry nebulae were forming over a high promontory and whirling swiftly inland ; though the leaves were motionless and the sea but lazily tuneful, a strong breeze was evidently blowing some four hundred feet or so above them.

‘ If you ask me ’, said Sheepshanks, ‘ I should say it was going to rain to-night and probably blow, but the odds are that the worst’ll be over by to-morrow, and there’ll be nothing but a bit of a swell. But we don’t mind that, do we ? ’

‘ Rather not ; old sea-dogs like us. Avast there ! ’ replied Podler with a jauntiness that sat ill upon him.

To drown for this ignoble buffoon, to die that Alba might solace herself with an ape! It was less heroic to die for the whole world; one got at least some post-humous notoriety for that. To Podler he exclaimed.

'To-morrow then, at ten sharp'. On the dead, sultry air he heard his voice launch itself, hollow as a coffin vomiting upward at the last trump its fat dust and pitifully gaunt, stained bones. He thought of a woodcut by one of the grim, South German masters of the fifteenth century—Jörg Syrlin, perhaps, of a drunken holiday party; one of the roysterers had staggered away, and was leaning over the inevitable plaited wattle fence of late mediaeval art, relieving, with a face of mortal horror, the wretchedness of his queasy stomach. So would he stagger away to belch out his soul into the waters.

The savage morning glare waned quickly, as the film slid like oil across the whole hemisphere of the sky. By one o'clock the sun, surrounded by a halo, was reduced to a wan and apocalyptic portent, and in another hour's time thicker layers of cloud had screened him for good. The whole district felt uncomfortable and bad-tempered in the sticky heat, the fretful screaming of infants hanging in the closeness of every alley.

Then the glazed skin of the sea began to contract in shuddering goose-flesh as the breeze, climbing down from the middle heights, ruffled it to a blackish burr. By three every wire in Totsuka had voiced its Aeolian moan, and the fishing sampans hoisted their rectangular sails, and went scuttling for the mole, as yet but half-laden with octopus, mackerel, and whining, rainbow-finned gurnards. The first spit of rain was flung horizontally on the town; paper umbrellas were turned inside out and wrecked in the hands of their battling owners. Up whisked the skirts of kimono, exposing in every hue

between nigger-brown and raw sausage-pink, stubby legs and curiously bulging calves.

Undine Vocadlo, her orange bathing-cloak trailed stiffly behind her at right angles, insisted on entering the surf, to revel in the grandeur of convulsed nature ; Mr. Fargo, standing nervously on the beach while the wind, not he, devoured his cigar, prayed to the god of the Soft-shell Baptists that he might not be called on to go in and rescue her. Fortunately the sea was as yet at the choppy stage ; but the typhoon seemed to be herding before it a flock of jelly-fish that wound amorously their poisoned streamers round the firm thighs of Undine, who, after repeating several times the word spelt 'Ouch !' in comic pictures, dashed out, covered with red weals.

By dusk every window in Osakai was plastered with sand and salt ; the jerry-built township quivered horribly in the storm, and tiles began to crash earthwards. The rain gutters of the Takai Hotel broke from their fastenings with a harp-like sound, and were seen next day half buried in the wreckage of a fuchsia bed. Wires snapped one after the other, crackling with minute lightnings as they touched the ground ; the top of Mr. Sheepshanks's tamarisk was carried away, his morning glories reduced to pathetic black threads. All this was hardly surprising when one considered that the official forecast in the *Argus* had been : ' A high pressure area of 798 millimetres exists in the neighbourhood of the Bonin Islands. Sunshine and light N.E. breezes are likely to prevail for some days on the Main Island '. The weather took a persistent delight in flouting authority ; and whatever might be predicted by the meteorologists of Ohtemachi, it was always pretty safe to expect the precise opposite.

Mr. Sheepshanks lay awake and listened to the screeching and howling without. At first, self-pity at

the misery of being driven, hounded out of life and the simple, warm pleasures that were his right as much as anyone else's, had brought on a violent access of crying. To this terror succeeded at the thought that he would be dead in twelve or thirteen hours—and now another minute of that slender margin had gone. At length, driven frantic by the march of time, he determined to go to Alba's room, grovel on the floor if necessary, plead for mercy and respite.

Padding barefooted across the floor, he slid back the paper wall. Alba was snoring gently with a sound that expressed infinite peace and comfort. There must be some pity, some humanity left in her; she loved someone else, she was in poor health, it was true, but that couldn't surely dam up all compassion.

'Alba!'

A peevish rustling of the bed-clothes and a grunt registered the first shot. But it proved ineffective for, with a sigh, she turned over on the other side and silence ensued. He called more loudly,

'Alba!'

She came to herself in a panic, feeling rather sick and feverish, to realise after a minute that Tristram was addressing her.

'What is it?' she demanded savagely.

'I can't sleep, Alba, I can't sleep'.

'Oh, can't you? Well, I *can*. It's just like your inconsiderateness to come and wake me up when you know I'm not well and must have sleep. But you don't care. Now for God's sake let me have a little peace. Out with you: off you go!'

She settled down with a truculent bump, and Tristram, a wounded animal, crawled back to his lair. For a second he contracted every muscle so capable in his body and said vehemently, 'Bitch!' But he did not dare

shout it ; he was too cowed at present to assert himself in any way, and collapsed on to the bed, where he gnawed the sheets for a while.

The typhoon, tearing and whistling past at the height of its intensity, blew hot and straight out of the tropics, till half an hour before dawn, when it began to veer. There came a touch of the North, of freshness that conferred on him a few hours' unhappy sleep ; from which he awoke in confused pain, wondering why he felt bruised and desperate. There followed the bitter realisation that there were now three hours of misery to go, and then the final chill.

The sky had regained its fiery blue, but beneath it the coast lay battered and suffering ; seaweed torn from the shallow bay was being piled in bronzen ridges by slow breakers, labouring titanically against the stiffish land-wind, which swept immense cream-coloured plumes of spray off their crests.

'You've got a fine day for it anyhow', some fatuous person might say. Long before that white-hot disc had whirled off the screen of heaven, a pair of sightless eyes would be turned towards the greened-over image of it that filtered down, rocking and distorted, through the unquiet waters.

Mr. Sheepshanks consulted the thermometer, which had fallen ; the barometer, which leapt upwards as he tapped. He stepped into the débris of the garden to see if the wind's strength had abated, and noticed the condition of his tamarisk ; a trace of symbolism, of sympathetic magic there. It blew strong and cool off the land ; not at all the sort of day on which one would sail for pleasure or safety. For the sake of appearances he must take a reef in the *Caccubioni's* vast sail ; but even then there would be no difficulty in staging the necessary accident. In short, the conditions were ideal ; not

enough weather to make it seem suspiciously foolhardy to put out to sea, but quite enough, especially three miles out or so, to be dangerous.

He was unable to bear the thought of breakfast, but it occurred to him that some of Alba's drugs might possibly dull the anguish of his last hours. On second thoughts he decided that he must keep his brain clear; fuddled with veronal he would probably make a mess of the delicate task of drowning himself, but not his supplanter.

Before Alba stirred he had left the house, to which he looked back for the last time; in a few hours those wooden cubes, those palpable dimensions would cease to exist. There would be nothing.

At such an hour as eight in the morning there was but little danger of meeting one's acquaintances in the open, and so he passed without molestation to the harbour. Seating himself on the mole, he began to study minutely the sea, that weapon which, without fuss or litter, would very soon put an end to his troubles. It struck him as being, like life, blindly rapacious, impelled to destroy by agencies of which it knew nothing. It, Alba, Podler, were all of a piece, automatically forcing him out of the world. The rolling, flexible skin of this machine or monster gleamed magnificently, like Alba's hair, in the sun. Not a boat was to be seen anywhere, nor would be until the swell had subsided. The air, after the recent sultriness, was almost uncomfortably cold, but the water would be warm and soothing; by that much would the rude shock of death be mitigated. He would slip in and find it pleasant, as though he was diving; but then with dismay he would find that the weight, which he would contrive to attach without Podler's notice, prevented him rising when a strain developed on his head and chest. He would be terrified, and would try to yell, but the

water would rush in ; there would be a painful moment of struggling, of feeling that he was going to burst ; and then nothing.

At a quarter to ten by his watch he walked along the wooden stage to the moorings; he had now, he reckoned, just three quarters of an hour to live. He hoisted two-thirds of the mainsail and tied the reefing points, one after the other. This done, he set about baling the water that had collected overnight.

He was half-way through this task when Mr. Podler's voice arrested him ; the man stood there with his hands in his pockets gazing dubiously out to sea. He was evidently far from relishing the prospect of entrusting his life to the elements and Sheepshanks ; no doubt, with the elopement immediately ahead, he was inclined to take good care of himself.

' Here, I say ', he protested, ' it's blowing a bit, isn't it ' ?

' Oh, it's nothing really ; nothing to be afraid of '. Podler flinched slightly. ' I've taken a reef in, and, as a matter of fact, the wind's weakening every minute. I shouldn't be surprised if we found it rather slow tacking home '.

Together they adjusted the floor-boards, hoisted sail and cast off. A small knot of Japanese gathered to see the foreign idiots hit the mole, or run ashore, or similarly make fools of themselves ; but the *Caccubioni* slipped with nice precision through the harbour mouth. ' Goot-o-bye ' ! screamed the little boys, some of whom flung pebbles, stimulated by the sight of foreigners rushing in where natives feared to tread. It was indeed good-bye ; inexorably the land slid past, the good solid earth, pine-dark, rich, infinitely lovable, upon which the sole of Tristram's foot would never again rest. Before the stern wind the boat leapt forward, demanding the

whole of his strength against the tiller to keep her on her course.

Mr. Ditchling arrived on the quay while they were still well in sight. He had found in Mr. Griffiths a possible buyer of his yacht, which had now become a mere extravagance ; and was intending to bale and clean it up so that its smart appearance might persuade Griffiths to agree to the rather stiff price he intended to ask. He stared stupidly at the sail, a white triangle flashing intermittently every time they rose from a distant and desolate sea-valley to tremble upon a crest.

‘ Why, that’s one of the fleet surely ’, he said at length and, examining the group at moorings, concluded that it was the *Caccubioni*. The *Caccubioni* ! and the wind was freshening, as Tristram had known well enough.

‘ I expect they’ll turn turtle before they’ve done ’. And then Mr. Ditchling began to think. Sheepshanks was bound to get into trouble, the ass ! and there was no other boat out to help him if he did. Ditchling wasn’t going to risk it in his little cockle-shell—no fear ! But if at the same time he could manage to do something with a helpful look and without danger to himself, he might get favourably talked about—and that was the way back to a good standing. But what ?

The sight of Mr. Takamatsu’s motor-boat, plunging and rattling its chain, inspired him, and he bolted at once for the millionaire’s awful concrete palace. Takamatsu, at the doorway, dismissing an early visitor, gave him a sour look, but he was not deterred.

‘ I say, Takamatsu, do you know what’s happened ? Sheepshanks has gone out for a sail. It’s sheer suicide in this gale, especially as he can’t swim. What about taking your motor-boat and chasing him ? Someone ought to stand by ’.

Mr. Takamatsu’s face cleared. ‘ The stupid foreigners ;

it serves him right if he was died. Wait a mo-ment ; I myself come '. He bounced into the house, whence he issued with an extremely brass-bound yachting-cap, a pair of binoculars and a big flask.

'The motor', he shouted, pulling Ditchling towards the garage, where the bonnet of a car gleamed. They were at the quay in a minute, but meanwhile the white triangle had disappeared.

'Lord ! I hope we're not too late '.

'Nonsense !' said Mr. Takamatsu testily, 'you cannot kill the fool '.

The broad-beamed, turtle-bowed motor-boat roared out of the harbour, making a magnificent blue stench. Soon she was bumping and shooting most uncomfortably against the bright green tumuli of the bay ; but Mr. Takamatsu twinkled all over with pleasure, excitement and vanity at his prowess. Ditchling clung on desperately with one hand, peering ahead with the binoculars. He wasn't twinkling by any means, but reflected that if this sort of thing went on much longer he would be sick, he, the descendant of Vikings, in front of a Japanese.

'Hullo ! there they are, still above water '. He had picked up a forlorn slit of white, bowing and wincing at every buffet of the tigerish waves.

'Is zat soo ?' yelled Takamatsu, exhilarated by the hopping from crest to crest amid the champagne-like seething of the wind-shorn sea beneath a furiously brilliant sun. The water presented ranks of serrated edges, bottle-green jagged blades, tufts of effervescent whiteness, as it were, devilishly animate vegetation, dancing upon the hills that wallowed as they gave it birth. Through all this lubbub the motor-boat overhauled, leap by leap, the staggering peak of the sail.

'Hullo !' reported Ditchling through teeth clenched to subdue rising qualms, 'there's two of them. Of

course, the other one'll be Podler. I remember now, Sheepshanks gives him weekly lessons'.

'Ah! then he is learning something!'

The wind began to come in rabid squalls, after one of which Ditchling observed, looking rather green, 'These things come from a point or so north of what the wind did when it blew steady. There'll be trouble with that mainsail in a minute unless they can get it across gently by wearing; but as far as I can see Sheepshanks is sticking to the same old course. He must be mad'.

'Of course he is, sir; I know that'.

Five minutes later a 'model' squall swept by them, whitening all the area that it covered. Mr. Ditchling followed the onslaught intently.

'They'll gybe when it gets them. No, they won't. Good Lord! they have though... they're over, by Jove!'

The white peak had disappeared; the empty sea tossed and writhed triumphantly up to the horizon where it seemed to spit impudently in the face of its Creator.

'They gone down, perhaps', said Takamatsu calmly, without swerving from the course. 'We salvage some corpse, yes?'

'Well, those little boats don't generally sink when they capsize; expect we shall find them sitting on the keel. Hullo! there's something; that's the *Caccubioni* all right. But I don't see anyone on her. Funny; they can't both have gone down. Podler swims like a fish'.

He continued to peer as the boat surged forward.

'Ah! there's someone. I can see a black head moving. I should say it was one of them on the hull leaning out and trying to help the other up. That's what it looks like; Podler, I suppose, saving Sheepshanks. I expect he'll get a medal for that'.

The *Caccubioni* was floating on her side, sails in the

water, a forlorn figure perched astride of her—as the naked eye could distinguish.

‘Poor old Pod— no, by Jove, it isn’t; it’s Sheepshanks!’

Mr. Sheepshanks, drenched and bedraggled, his head crowned with sticky wisps of hair and seaweed, rode up and down disconsolately, like a refined Neptune. As the motor-boat sprang towards him, Mr. Ditchling hailed,

‘All right, Sheepshanks? What’s Podler doing?’

Sheepshanks shook his head and pointed downwards. It was impossible to catch what he said. ‘Ow’, they heard, ‘ow’.

‘Yes, what’s that?’ Takamatsu had reversed the engine, Ditchling leaning forth with a hook.

‘... Drowned’, Tristram was saying between shivering spasms, ‘... must have hit his head... couldn’t get him’.

‘Drowned? Good God, how awful! Catch hold, Sheepshanks, and bring along the main sheet or something, if you can. Drowned; how awful!’

‘Perhaps he under sail’, suggested Takamatsu. ‘We lift sail, yes, and look-see’.

They made the boat fast, and managed after several failures to right her. But of Podler there was no trace; water had indeed compelled man, and had compelled this one effectually out of the way of further mischief. If drowning is a gentle death, his prognostication at the Sheepshankses’ breakfast-table had come true.

Mr. Sheepshanks, shivering much and moaning slightly, was huddled, manifesting a tendency to collapse, in the stern of the motor-boat. ‘I couldn’t get him; hit his head, you know, I expect’, he would repeat at intervals.

‘That’s all right; you did all you could; we saw

you?', comforted Ditchling in an absent tone. He was not disposed to take much more interest in the matter, being pre-occupied with nausea and the composition of a good tale to pitch to Miss Walker, who would write him up for the *Argus*.

Takamatsu, annoyed at his inactivity, broke in rather sharply, 'give him brandy, quick. You have brandy, Sheepshank; Martell; ver' old'.

Tristram sucked gratefully and leaned back in a gentle drunken warmth. Ditchling got hold of the flask and, braving the resentful look of Mr. Takamatsu, took a good swig at it. Fortified, he climbed on to the *Caccubioni* and began to bale; without the brandy he could never have done it.

At length the procession started for home, the two boats playing hide-and-seek between the ridges. It was fortunate that the wind had begun to drop.

A moderate crowd had collected on the mole, since the news had spread through the Misses Takamatsu, and the foreign contingent were anxious not to miss what promised to be a sensational ending to the season. Someone having already started the rumour that Sheepshanks was drowned, Miss Walker applied herself to the task of consoling Alba, who seemed rather irritated by these attentions than otherwise. Noriko and Yoshiko had skimmed down, tern-like, to the sea's edge some time since, and were peering anxiously across the pale crests for a glimpse of papa.

'Pretty little dears', thought M. Fabre, who was not at all interested in papa or Mr. Sheepshanks, save that he mildly regretted the latter's death as having robbed him of a chance of reporting the skirmish of the other evening, and so of getting *oie* back on Alba.

As the boats hove in sight there rose a buzz of delicious anticipation.

‘Look!’ squealed Mrs. Ditchling shrilly, ‘there’s a corpse in the motor-boat. I can see a corpse! Which is it?’

‘Shut up, you blasted fool!’ Mr. Kurrie-Lewer growled furiously, with a nudge that half took the wind out of her. Alba was standing a few yards off.

Mrs. Smith-Ditchling, the charming and popular hostess, attracted all eyes as she appeared on the scene of the disaster, simply but ravishingly clad in white Fuji silk, trimmed with provocative edgings of old rose . . . so she had been dreaming; and it was at least thirty seconds before she realised that this brutal address had been meant for her. Kurrie-Lewer was a swine—doubly so, because she knew she had been making a fool of herself.

‘Where’s Podler?’ Alba heard Kurrie-Lewer mutter the question into Ditchling’s ear; and Ditchling was looking scared and awkward.

‘Gone, I’m afraid; no trace of him’.

She turned and wandered off as naturally as she could, but Tristram saw a change, as though she was suddenly dropping to pieces; old age seemed to descend pentecostally upon her. Everyone else was far too eager to get a sight of what, to their utter disappointment, turned out not to be a corpse after all.

They bundled Sheepshanks into Mr. Takamatsu’s car, and in five minutes he found himself before the house, of which he had lately taken so tragic a farewell.

‘Please don’t come in’, he begged with something of desperation. ‘Alba’s had a bad turn and wouldn’t be fit to see anyone’.

Entering the house, he quavered to the servant to heat a bath for him. He got into a yukata, took a stiff dose of quinine and whisky, and mounted the stairs. In the room next to his he heard Alba’s bed creak. What was

she doing and what would she do? Live with him now, or bolt?

Overcoming a strong repugnance, he stole toward the paper door. It was due to him and to her to declare that every effort had been made to save Podler. Putting his head into her room, he saw her flung like a bundle of clothes across the bed, her skirt up to her neck.

She raised her head at the noise; her face was curiously sallow, mottled with dull red and creased from contact with sheet and pillow. She began to croak hoarsely like an old crow. What was she saying—?

‘Get out, you filthy bas . . .’

Tristram, not waiting for the conclusion of the word, popped back into his room, ‘thoroughly informed.

