'TWIXT LAND AND SEA
TALES

Life is a tragic folly,
Let us mock at life and be jolly,
Or droop into melancholy:
Bring me a branch of holly:
Life is a tragic folly.

A. Symons

To

CAPTAIN C. M. MARRIS

LATE MASTER AND OWNER
OF THE
ARABY MAID: ARCHIPELAGO TRADER
IN MEMORY OF THOSE
OLD DAYS OF ADVENTURE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE ONLY BOND between these three stories is so to speak geographical, for their scene, be it land, be it sea, is situated in the same region, which may be called the region of the Indian Ocean with its off-shoots and prolongations north of the equator, even as far as the Gulf of Siam. In point of time they belong to the period immediately after the publication of that novel with the awkward title *Under Western Eyes*, and, as far as the life of the writer is concerned, their appearance in a volume marks a definite change in the fortunes of his fiction. For there is no denying the fact that *Under Western Eyes* found no favour in the public eye whereas the novel called *Chance* which followed *'Twixt Land and Sea* was received on its first appearance by many more readers than any other of my books.

This volume of three tales was also well received both publicly and privately and from a publisher's point of view. This little success was a most timely tonic for my enfeebled bodily frame. For this may indeed be called the book of a man's convalescence, at least as to three fourths of it; because "The Secret Sharer," the middle story, was written much earlier than the other two.

For in truth the memories of *Under Western Eyes* are associated with the memory of a severe illness which seemed to wait like a tiger in the jungle on the turn of a path to jump on me the moment the last words of that novel were written. The memory of an illness is very much like the memory of a nightmare. On emerging from it in a much enfeebled state I was inspired to direct my tottering steps towards the Indian Ocean, a complete change of surroundings and atmosphere from the Lake of Geneva, as nobody would deny. Begun so languidly and with such a fumbling hand that the first twenty pages or more had to be thrown into the waste-paper basket, "A Smile of Fortune," the most purely Indian Ocean story of the three, has ended by becoming what the reader will see. I will only say for myself that I have been patted on the back for it by most unexpected persons, personally unknown to me, the chief of them

of course being the editor of a popular illustrated magazine who published it serially in one mighty instalment. Who will dare say after this that the change of air had not been an immense success?

The origins of the middle story, "The Secret Sharer," are quite other. It was written much earlier and was published first in *Harper's Magazine* during the early part, I think, of 1911. Or perhaps the latter part? My memory on that point is hazy. The basic fact of the tale I had in my possession for a good many years. It was in truth the common possession of the whole fleet of merchant ships trading to India, China and Australia: a great company the last years of which coincided with my first years on the wider seas. The fact itself happened on board a very distinguished member of it, *Cutty Sark* by name and belonging to Mr Willis, a notable ship-owner in his day, one of the kind (they are all underground now) who used to see personally his ships start on their voyages to those distant shores where they showed worthily the honoured house-flag of their owner. I am glad I was not too late to get at least one glimpse of Mr Willis on a very wet and gloomy morning watching from the pier head of the New South Dock one of his clippers starting on a China Voyage – an imposing figure of a man under the invariable white hat so well known in the Port of London, waiting till the head of his ship had swung down stream before giving her a dignified wave of a big gloved hand. For all I know it may have been the *Cutty Sark* herself though certainly not on that fatal voyage. I do not know the date of the occurrence on which the scheme of "The Secret Sharer" is founded; it came to light and even got into newspapers about the middle eighties, though I had heard of it before, as it were privately, among the officers of the great wool fleet in which my first years in deep water were served. It came to light under circumstances dramatic enough I think, but which have nothing to do with my story. In the more specially maritime part of my writings this bit of presentation may take its place as one of my two Calm-pieces. For, if there is to be any classification by subjects, I have done two Storm-pieces in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and in "Typhoon"; and two Calm-pieces: this one and *The Shadow Line*, a book which belongs to a later period.

Notwithstanding their autobiographical form the above two stories are not the record of personal experience. Their quality, such as it is, depends on something larger if less precise: on the character, the vision, the sentiment of the first twenty independent

years of my life. And the same may be said of the "Freya of the Seven Isles." I was considerably abused for writing that story, on the ground of its cruelty, both in public prints and in private letters. I remember one from a man in America who was quite furiously angry. He told me with curses and imprecations that I had no right to write such an abominable thing which, he said, had gratuitously and intolerably harrowed his feelings. It was a very interesting letter to read. Impressive too. I carried it for some days in my pocket. Had I the right? The sincerity of the anger impressed me. Had I the right? Had I really sinned as he said or was it only that man's madness? Yet there was a method in his fury. . . . I composed in my mind a violent reply, a reply of mild argument, a reply of lofty detachment; but they never got on paper in the end and I have forgotten their phrasing. The very letter of the angry man has got lost somehow; and nothing remains now but the pages of the story, which I cannot recall and would not recall if I could.

But I am glad to think that the two women in this book – Alice, the sullen, passive victim of her fate, and the actively individual Freya, so determined to be the mistress of her own destiny – must have evoked some sympathies; because of all my volumes of short stories this was the one for which there was the greatest immediate demand.

J. C.

1920.

'TWIXT LAND AND SEA

A SMILE OF FORTUNE
HARBOUR STORY

A SMILE OF FORTUNE

THE SUN WAS no more than half an hour above the sea horizon; I had just gone below after spending the best part of the night on deck; but before I had time to arrange my aching legs comfortably on the couch a metallic, buzzing voice filled my cabin mysteriously with the glad tidings:

"I see the land now, sir."

It was the voice of Mr Charles Burns my chief-officer speaking down to me from the poop with his face buried in the cowl of the big ventilator.

"Whereabouts do you make it?" I cried jumping up briskly.

"Nearly right ahead. A little bit on the port bow."

My cheerful vociferation "Good landfall Mr Burns" was acknowledged by a hollow buzzing in the room as from a hoarse ghost "H'm yes" and a grim little laugh, not very pleasant.

It was not that Mr Burns was a malevolent person. I would not have kept him with me for more than a passage if that had been the case. And we had been together now for two years or more. A pretty good slice of life as life at sea goes. He might have been devoted to me; of that I am not certain to this day. Sentiment is all very well and I would not disparage its value. His great point however was his efficiency. It was worth any amount of mere devotion to duty and far above rubies in price.

Our first coming together had been rather unusual. When I joined the ship (in an eastern port) to take command, I did not find him on board. He was ashore with a bad fever in the hospital, a gloomy, little house in a gloomy, little, overgrown compound. Of course I went to see how he was getting on directly the cares of business permitted. Seeing an utter stranger by his bedside he knew that it could be no one else but the new captain; and the very first words he said to me, putting out a wasted feverish hand, were: "For God's sake don't leave me to die in this hole." Our good Consulate Doctor looked horror-struck at the mere idea of him being moved.

The request was clearly preposterous. But you should have heard the tone! It haunted me. His deep-seated conviction that he must die if I left him behind was irresistible. His despairing entreaties forced upon me the responsibility of saying: "Very well. I promise you that you shall go to sea in the ship." Thereupon he went off into a dead faint. Very encouraging! And the Consulate Doctor became extremely angry; he went so far as to write me a distinctly stiff official letter of remonstrance. But he was a good fellow and actually turned up himself to superintend the removal he disapproved of so strongly. He did it with grim, silent solicitude of a particularly relentless kind. He hardly would shake hands at parting.

Mr Burns turned out a confoundedly fractious invalid. In due course he revealed himself as the most fretful of convalescents. I didn't mind that so much. For many days the poor fellow was almost too weak to speak. He lay in my own deck-chair made fast to the rail, wrapped up in my own rugs, ghastly like one risen from the dead, looking on at the work of the ship and the conduct of the voyage, and visibly fretting himself with the inward criticism of all these proceedings in which he could take no part. The last worry he gave me was by insisting with mulish obstinacy on returning to duty before he was really fit for it. He came on deck one gloomy afternoon, winding a woolen comforter round his neck with shaking hands and looking so determined to look properly after the ship that I only bit my lip and turned my back on him. In fact short of putting my convalescent in irons (or some such violent act of authority) I don't see what I could have done. Yet to clap him in irons after six weeks of anxious nursing was an extreme too comical to be considered for a moment.

All this might have been the effect of his devotion; yet in the course of time I discovered that Mr Burns had acquired somehow a conviction that as a commander of a ship and as a man I had the disadvantage of being generally unlucky, the defect of being reckless, and the stupidity of being too good-natured.

How, why, wherefore this conviction – goodness only knows. It might have been the legacy of these fretful days of his convalescence. Anyway it was there. He knew better than to express it in so many words. And for my part after having disputed him inch by inch as it were to the Pale Death, I was not willing to throw him and his efficiency away. It would have been ridiculous and

perhaps even weak to do so, I thought. Sometimes his idiosyncrasy even amused me.

Lingering for a moment in my cabin I could hear him moving about overhead. His irregular footsteps now slow, now hurried, stopping short sometimes to begin again abruptly, interpreted, reflected the nervous temperament of the man.

When I came on deck he put down the binoculars on the skylight and pointed forward with his extended arm, murmuring "There it is, sir."

After a while, not at once but after my eyes had become adjusted to the infinite brilliance of the morning, I made out the land we had been aiming at for so many days – a mere effect of faint blue shadow between the great, level glitter of the blue sea and the arch of the sky, luminous and blue.

It was a well known Island; known for centuries. The more enthusiastic of its inhabitants delighted in calling it in picturesque and hackneyed phrase: The Pearl of the Indian Ocean. A very good name. Let us call it The Pearl. There it was, indistinguishable from the darkling and mysterious vapours that arise sometimes on the clear-cut edge of the sea horizon, except that it did not change its place.

A mere bit of mist! But I had its engraved shape well fixed on my mind through long contemplations of the chart. It was a pear-shaped pearl of an island, distilling much sweetness upon the world.

It is but a fanciful manner of telling you that first-rate sugar-cane is cultivated there. All the Pearl's population lives by it and for it. Sugar is their daily bread; it is the food of their thoughts, the article of their faith, the aliment of their hopes, the sustenance of their charity. And I myself was coming to them in search of a cargo of sugar, in the hope of the crop having been good and of the freights being high.

That very circumstance spoiled for me the satisfaction natural to a shipmaster at the end of a passage. Matters of business are repugnant to a sailor generally. Sea life unfits one for the battle of commercial wits. To take a ship out to sea, to carry her safely across the sea, to bring her in from sea "all well," as the language of signals has it, is part of a trading operation, certainly, but the part most removed from the trading spirit. The whole inspiration of the call for the sea is altogether unworldly in that sense. A man who