

THE CYPRIAN

BY LYMAN BRYSON

I

AN English woman, Mrs. Clomb, and her tall soldierly husband got on at Smyrna. I noticed them as our boat slipped out in the sparkling afternoon light; they were standing at the rail, eyes fixed on the flat-edged promenade of the water front. There was something politely acquiescent in his attitude as if he thought that, being an officer and a gentleman, he might be expected to enjoy the view. She was of less willing temper, and there was in her gaze a challenge to the tawdry buff and white plastered houses that made a pleasant mass of lightness on the tan slope of Mount Pagus. She could not easily be pleased. As we drew away, the greater mountains came up behind to frame Pagus and the shimmering town. The shadows were the dead-black clusters of cypress in the graveyards. One dark watching tree beside the crumbling wall of the citadel showed where the tomb of Polycarp hung in Christian martyr's blessing over the pagan crowds. As she surveyed this beauty, Mrs. Clomb's fine aquiline profile was tilted up, the coiled weight of her incongruously rich brown hair hung back, and her lips were parted in a half-disdainful smile.

She was seated opposite me in the dining-saloon, but she conversed only with her husband. I had a chance to study her handsome, clean-lined face, bitten with the acidity of Indian garrison personalities. Her husband served her and listened to her, giving me the impression that he did not un-

derstand all she said but would be gallantly dangerous to anyone who did not appreciate her. He made a gesture or two of friendliness toward me, but she would not follow.

It was difficult to find people worth talking to in that limping old boat, unless a man dared go down upon the after deck where the real Asian travelers were gathered in a flaunting mob. The Moslem families had partitioned off little spaces with their vivid curtains; within these improvised homes women sat with black-lace veils thrown up from their faces and smoked lazily, indifferent to me, an unbeliever, staring down at them from above. Syrians of every sort quarreled volubly, Jews, with stringy earlocks, argued and prayed; a little group of Arab pilgrims bound for Mecca sang in endless nasal whines. That would have been a place for making acquaintances, but I had not the equipment for descending into such a cockpit of tongues.

When I mentioned to a neighbor at lunch one day that I had been on Cyprus, Mrs. Clomb became suddenly aware of my existence. In the afternoon her husband came, slightly apologetic, and led me forward to her deck chair to be interrogated. Had I been on Cyprus recently? Was I informed as to the condition of the island since the war? This was in the year 1920; she seemed not quite sure that I, being an American, knew there had been a war. Unfortunately my visit had been brief

and unobservant; I could not answer many of her questions.

'My brother is there,' she explained, 'my younger brother, Captain Mortimer Ladd — in charge of the constabulary at Larnagusta. He was shipped home from the Somme and begged this post out here. Wanted to carry on, you know' — she thought it necessary to announce even the most obvious British virtues to me — 'although he could scarcely walk and they told him he'd have to try to straighten the town out with no help from anybody. There was n't likely to be another British person in the place.'

I could imagine him, shattered but eager, a slender small chap probably, and, like her, thin-faced and handsome.

She continued her confidences. 'We are going there to persuade him to come home.' Her gray eyes were turned on me searchingly. 'Do you know any reason why a young man should want to stay in that place after his work was finished?'

I was amazed at this confession of anxiety; it showed how serious the problem was, how long the heroic prodigal must have stood out against the demand that he give up his task, no longer essential, and come back to his own people. Mrs. Clomb had spent her own two decades in India, but that, of course, was different. Having once admitted her difficulties to me she wanted to discuss them. I suggested that Captain Ladd might have got interested in the antiquities of the place, a wonderfully rich field for research.

'No, he's not a student,' was her terse dismissal of that. 'My oldest brother, the one we lost at Loos, was a tutor at Cambridge, but Mortimer never went in for anything but English poetry — and very modern at that. Is the city itself so fascinating?'

I could not remember that it was. I remarked that Aphrodite emerged from

the sea foam on the north side of the island; there was no vestige of her presence in the arid south. Colonel Clomb replied blandly that the goddess of love had frequented these waters a long time ago. I inquired if Captain Ladd might have made friends in the town.

'Natives?' There was more cool, amused surprise in her answer than contempt, but it silenced me. I looked out over the dazzling blue sparkle of the Mediterranean, studied a distant brown promontory across the rail, felt the hot silence of the air along the deck, and kept my peace.

Many such conversations were shared with them as we slid down the coast in painful sunshine, past Chios, Samos, and Rhodes, and finally around the low south end of Cyprus itself. The slopes in the distance, spotted with little groups of pines, without visible habitation, desert-like and bare, offered no answer to their question.

II

Next morning we woke early and found ourselves in the little harbor of Larnagusta. The bay was as smooth and oily as water in a tub, and without a sail except for one high, old-fashioned Greek hulk with a windmill on her after deck. I had never seen a boat with a windmill on her deck before and that trivial curiosity kept me from being introduced to Captain Ladd when, as port authority, he came up our ladder. All I got was the impression of a little fellow, as I had expected, with a small face under his great pith helmet, and one surprising characteristic — the strange, tottering swagger of his walk.

I gave my attention to the view of the forgotten town. Although they were blinding white as seen from the boat rail and lined along the quay in neat precision, I knew, although I could not remember them, that the houses of

Larnagusta were wretched and filthy, that the narrow streets were foul, that life was as hot as it looked from the harbor, but not in any way as clean. It was always so in such towns; I have never needed but one disillusionment to destroy my faith in the glittering white fronts which stand along the quays.

When I went ashore that afternoon I was amazed. There was neatness and cleanliness and order in the narrow lanes under the hanging balconies of the tinted houses. There was the same sprawling Eastern crowd, but it was being governed. That, of course, was Captain Ladd's work. It was inspiring, the force of one man's character, to bully his own shaky little body into effort and then to swing a whole town into the ways of decency and health.

I came upon a dispute in the bazaar, just as I was thinking of this, and he strode into it, with his cocky, thin-legged strut, like an invalid showing off his powers of locomotion, to give me proof of his control. A bearded Jew, in a striped bathrobe of a garment, was holding a squawky chicken in one crooked arm and with the other was pounding at his head in a symbolic gesture of tearing his hair, screaming meanwhile with the fury of the mortally attacked. A thick-chested Greek towered over him, about to strike and take the booty by right of strength. Between the two came the British captain, appearing suddenly around a corner in answer to somebody's summons, pushing his big pith helmet far back on his head, slapping nervously at his knee with his bamboo stick. He turned to the Jew, his back squarely in the face of the threatening Cypriote, and took the clawing chicken in his own hands. The old man surrendered it in a dazed way, without question, but immediately afterward broke out in shriller screams, directed now to the fount of justice. Ladd handed the chicken to a uniformed

Greek who had come up behind him, a black-browed handsome fellow, whose elaborate gravity seemed to conceal a smile, and then spoke very sharply and briefly to the disputants. I expected a Solomon decision on the spot, but it was not his method to do justice without the proprieties. He told them to appear at the police station next morning; the chicken would remain, in the meantime, in his custody. The old man ceased his lamentations so suddenly that he seemed to have come to the end of a recitation and the other claimant shrugged his herculean shoulders and turned away. The crowd vanished.

Captain Ladd, seeing me then, an obvious stranger in his domain, smiled a shy, gratified little smile, and asked me if I was not a passenger on the boat lying in the harbor. 'Come and have tea with me,' he urged. 'My home is a sort of government building and jail and barracks, all rolled into one, but it's all there is to visit.' He walked beside me. 'Too bad that boat of yours has to lie around here for several days. There is n't a thing to do in this place. Not a thing.'

I found that he had another characteristic even more surprising than the swagger; it was the warm, deep, passionate color of his eyes. His sister's were gray and pale and cold; his were blue and burning.

In the afternoon I went round to the police station. Inside the white-plaster gate was a blinding white courtyard where the sun seemed to have been storing up bright heat in unnatural concentration. Across the court, seated disconsolately on the dirt in the full glare, was a prisoner, a Greek boy with a bandage on his head. I climbed the dark stairway to Ladd's rooms and office, and was admitted by the grave sergeant whom I had last seen holding the disputed chicken in the bazaar. Ladd gave me his one comfortable chair and

seated himself jauntily on the corner of his desk, swinging his putteed leg briskly as he talked. I asked him about his prisoner.

'He 's been in a fight. Cut his brother with a knife and got his own head laid open. The brother got away. But he 'll come back. They always come back; their relatives make them. Great system, is n't it, to have the relatives working for the police instead of against them?'

There was not much time to get acquainted with this man and I was interested in him. I asked a rude question. 'Are relatives going to make you go back, too?'

He laughed without the least sign of offense. 'I suppose it is the same sort of affair.' A slow change came over his face. 'I can't say — really.' The self-assurance faded and his blue eyes and thin lips took on a look of uncertainty.

'Do you like it here so much?' I asked.

'Like it?' He seemed surprised at the question, but his ease was established again. 'Oh, yes, very much.'

'Not many of the Mediterranean islands are as interesting as Cyprus,' said I, struggling to get the conversation going. 'Since the day of Aphrodite herself —'

'Yes, yes, quite.' He picked up a piece of paper from the desk. 'It really inspires me to verse, you know. It 's a silly thing to sit here in the evening and look out at the stars and write feeble verses, but I do it — often. How 's this?'

He read from the paper: —

'And Venus never shines so bright
As over Cyprus in the night,
She gazes on her foamy source
And blazes Heaven in her course —

'Pretty bad, eh?'

'Not at all,' I protested. 'Why don't you go on with it?'

He seemed pleased. 'Perhaps I will — if I don't go home. I 'm king here, you know. Absolute monarch. I work hard, and I like it, and they like me. My sergeant, the big fellow who opened the door for you, would die for me any day if necessary. But it would never be necessary. They all do what I tell them — now — absolutely.'

'It would be difficult to surrender an absolute monarchy,' I said.

'Yes — quite.' He laughed again.

When I left him, refusing to stay until his sister and her husband came, he urged me to come back as often as I could while the boat lay in the harbor. The big grave sergeant escorted me to the street gate. As he opened it for me and I stepped out into the street, a girl came toward us and spoke to the Greek. She waited there for me to pass and I could not help glancing at her face. I saw that she was blonde, unusual in an east-Mediterranean woman, and not the blonde of artificial coloring. Her gold hair rippled out from under her head scarf in shining small waves. It was living and glowing and yet it had a strange metallic look. It held my attention and I gave her a prolonged stare, a scrutiny from which she shrank.

And I saw that her forehead was low and broad and gently curved over her eyes — eyes so dark that I wondered if they could be really blue. Her nose sprang gently from under the just perceptible ridge of her married brows; and her mouth, even as her lips were drawn down and sad, had a faintly mocking curve.

As I walked on toward the harbor front the vivid image of her stayed in my mind's eye. In spite of her withdrawal from my barbarous staring the memory of her face gave me an impression of a being superior and aloof; she had an impersonal triumphantness — as if she could suffer only by her own consent.

III

After dinner that night, when the crowd on the after deck was chattering over tiny cups of coffee and cigarettes, I chose a boatman among those who clustered and fought at the foot of the ship's ladder, and went ashore again. The line of buildings along the edge of the oily black water was bright with lights and movement, but I turned, without considering the café tables and the talk, into the sullen interior of the town. For an hour I explored among its uneven, narrow streets, under the stucco balconies, and past the forbidding doors. There was scarcely anyone abroad except those down there on the water front, drinking, smoking, eating bad ice cream, and enjoying life. It occurred to me that those streets had probably been rather dangerous before the British came. The British? — one sick boy and the habit of empire.

Naturally I drifted toward the police station. There was some chance that I might intrude on a family argument, but I was sure Mrs. Clomb and the colonel had been on deck when I left; if by chance they were with Ladd I could excuse myself and withdraw. I knocked at the street gate. It swung slowly open; the Cypriote sergeant looked at me with some surprise. The wide courtyard was still white but with the moonlight now, instead of blazing sunshine. The one prisoner, his bandaged head glimmering in the moonlight, sat on the ground in the same place, in the same position.

In the black passage of the stairway I almost fell over someone sitting there on the steps, and as she turned to let me pass I was sure it was the blonde Greek girl. It did not match the impression I had of her from my other glimpse — to find her crouching in the dark outside a door; but even in this gesture of misery there was a suggestion that she was

playing a part. She must have been, I felt, outside the quarrel that was being carried on over the little Englishman's fate — superior to it by reason of qualities which no outward circumstance could touch or change. There was some extraordinary force in her. One would have felt that, mysteriously, even if he had not chanced to see her only on this day when the existence of people around her was focused down to a very simple tragedy.

When I entered the room above, the Clombs were there. Ladd and his sister looked up with unconcealed impatience; the colonel was hovering, distressed and impotent, in the background. Mrs. Clomb's clear, strong face, with embittered mouth and pale eyes, was slightly flushed; and she sat forward in her chair, interrupted in the midst of a plea.

It was easy to imagine what she had been saying. There may have been strong personal reasons for the boy's going back home, of course, a failing mother, perhaps, or something like that, but — the Indian exile can tell why an Englishman should stay at home. She must have talked of an old house and country lanes in spring. I think she knew her brother's temperament well enough to recall to him the misty green of April so that he might compare it, in his homesick mind, with the glittering, hard brilliance of this alien East. It is possible she spoke of friends and ease and peace, but she must have talked of a loved garden and the nightingales.

In spite of my trying to retreat at once, I was caught, an intruding spectator in the midst of their crisis. There was a sharp exchange of words behind me on the stairs, an angry protest in Greek, and Ladd's handsome sergeant came into the room. His cap was in his hand, but his manner was not deferential; he was disturbed and angry.

'What do *you* want, Agniades?' asked Ladd.

'I wish to speak to you, sir.'

'I'm sorry, but I'm very busy just now. You can put it off until to-morrow, or to-night a little later, perhaps.'

'It must be now.'

Ladd raised his eyebrows. 'Wait outside for a minute; then I'll talk with you.' In spite of his annoyance Ladd's voice was affectionate.

The Greek's eyes flickered and a look of devotion passed over his dark face, interrupting his angry insistence, but he did not move. 'You are going to leave us,' he blurted out, caring for nothing but to get this greatest matter into the open.

'Not to-night, at least,' Ladd answered. 'Will you go, please?'

'But my sister is waiting to know. She did not ask me to come here — she forbid — no! no!' His stiff English was evidently difficult for him. 'She tell me I dare not speak to you about this very important question, but she is waiting. It is not dignified for her to wait.'

The effect of this bungling betrayal of the fact which these other people in the room, Captain Ladd and the Clombs, had uppermost in their minds was for a moment nothing at all. They had been ignoring it, of course, although Mrs. Clomb must have guessed the truth long before. Then the colonel swore under his breath as if somebody had made a bad slip in playing a game, and his wife looked dangerously at the miserable Aghniades. The Greek gave up trying to talk English and launched into his own cataracting tongue, pouring out entreaties on Ladd, who tried in vain to quiet him. Finally Ladd said something which made the Greek stop, wide-eyed and stricken. There was a dead silence and Aghniades's hand went slowly toward the holster at his belt. My glance followed and I felt my heart jump. Mrs. Clomb gave one sharp little scream. Ladd's face was absolutely

stony. The Greek had the automatic in his hand and was talking again in a low hurried murmur.

Ladd held out a steady hand. 'I'll take your gun, Aghniades,' he said.

The Greek backed away a step, still holding the weapon down. I had no exact idea of his threat. It was all rather tense bewilderment; I knew only that he was a mortally threatening man and that his desperation might take any form.

'Give me that pistol,' Ladd commanded, more sharply, 'and consider yourself under arrest.'

Aghniades reached up with his left hand and tore, with two fierce tugs, the insignia from his khaki collar and backed away another step. I have no idea what Colonel Clomb was doing. Ladd and his sergeant were facing each other in the middle of the room in a silent contest to see which could intimidate the other. The pistol came slowly upward; the poor Greek was still uncertain but impelled by a desperate force. The silence had a stealthy quality — ready to conceal events. Aghniades's big hand shook, but the pistol moved. I waited, helpless, fascinated, to see the muzzle come into line with Ladd's face. But it was not pointed at him. His faithful sergeant, who 'would die for him if necessary,' had another idea of unanswerable protest. He pointed the black barrel at his own temple. He would stop this desertion of his sister, this treason, by sacrificing himself. A bizarre, Oriental gesture; but we were all held in a silent agony as his slow arm moved.

Then the door opened quietly and the girl came in.

She spoke to her brother in Greek, acknowledging the presence of the rest of us only by the slightest inclination of her head. He did not answer her. She said something to Ladd, also in Greek; he only spread out his hands in an un-English sign of helplessness.

Since then I have wondered about the scene she played before us, wondered how conscious she was and how much she intended of the effect she created. At the time my heart was in my throat; no one could have questioned her tragic sincerity. It was very simple; there she was, the evident reason for Mortimer Ladd's love of Cyprus. Her presence in the room, crowded before she came, put all the rest of us into a dim background to give her beauty full play in the light. And it was breath-taking.

First she lifted from her head a thin, white-silk scarf, folded it carefully in her hands, and held it toward Ladd. He stood there, like a man upright in Hell, and did not move. She put it down on the desk beside him. She was returning his gifts. As the light shone on the gold waves of her hair and the incredible grace of her head, poised on her round white neck, she bared her arm and took off a little silver bracelet and put that down beside the scarf. I am sure her English lover, as long as he lived, never forgot the bending of her head over her arm as she took off the trinket slowly—the curve of her throat, and the gentle pulling of her fingers at the silver band. Her face was as calm as if she had been alone. She reached up to her hair, took out a shell comb that held it, and shook it free. It fell round her like a heavy cloud of spun metal, filled with light. She showed her beauty as simply and as confidently as a goddess. But she was not a goddess; her gesture as she stooped to put the comb on the desk beside the other gifts was too wistful and too sweet.

Her brother spoke to her, harshly, but she turned on her heel and, without looking at him or any of us, walked from the room. He followed her, his forgotten pistol still in his hand, and stumbled blindly at the threshold.

In the silence of the little room, which

was suddenly emptied as if Mrs. Clomb and her husband and Ladd and I had never occupied it, I got to my feet and made a clumsy excuse to get free.

For an hour or two afterward I walked the black tortuous streets, not thinking, seeing only the Greek girl with her hair unbound and the little Englishman's stony, anguished face.

IV

Next day, just at sunset, we pulled anchor and slipped smoothly out toward the southeast. The ruined freighter, with the windmill on its deck and its rotting wooden sides, was still there. Out toward the red west was the brown sail of a coasting fisherman, riding the wine-dark seas.

The Syrians and Turks and Jews swarmed and buzzed and hung over the rail as we moved. Some of the Moslem women peered from behind their little partitions of gay blankets or pulled their veils down over their faces so that they too might come among the crowd at the ship's side and see the darkening town and the bare slopes dropping away behind us.

Mrs. Clomb and her husband stood in much the same attitude as when we had left Smyrna a week before, calmly surveying land and sea. She turned toward me. 'You will be interested, I'm sure,' she said, her pale eyes challenging mine, 'to know that Captain Ladd has decided to stay in Cyprus — for a while longer.'

I murmured something about his work, his duty.

'The governing instinct was always very strong in Mortimer,' she said.

I looked away as the ship swung farther to the south. In the west blazed a star. It seemed to be shining of its own lambent life, casting over Cyprus and the foam of the sea behind us an eternal and unquenchable radiance.

NORTHUMBRIAN DUETS

BY WILFRID GIBSON

I. NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE

'WILL you come with me, Maggie, to Stagshaw Bank Fair?'

'Come with you where? Come with you where?'

Do you fancy a lass has naught better to do

Than to go gallivanting, Ned Nixon, with you?'

'If you come with me, Maggie, I 'll buy you a ring.'

'You 'll do no such thing — you 'll do no such thing.

Do you fancy I 'd let my lad squander his pence

On tokens and trinkets and suchlike nonsense?'

'Come, Maggie, come, Maggie, we 're only once young!'

'Now hold your fool's tongue — now hold your fool's tongue!

If we 're only young once it behoves us to be

A common-sense couple and act cannily.'

'Time enough, Maggie, for sense when we 're old.'

'Does copper turn gold? Does copper turn gold?'

Or a guff turn wiseacre at threescore-and-ten?'

Anyhow I 'm for taking no chances with men.'

'Then must I go lonesome to Stagshaw Bank Fair?'

'What do I care? What do I care?'

But if you go lonesome I 'd have you to know

It 's lonesome the rest of your life you will go.'