



ROMANCE ISLAND

By

ZONA GALE

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"Who that remembers the first kind glance of her
whom he loves can fail to believe in magic?"

— NOVALIS

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CHAPTER I

DINNER TIME

As *The Aloha* rode gently to her buoy among the crafts in the harbour, St. George longed to proclaim in the megaphone's monstrous parody upon capital letters:

"Cat-boats and house-boats and yawls, look here. You're bound to observe that this is my steam yacht. I own her—do you see? She belongs to me, St. George, who never before owned so much as a piece of rope."

Instead—mindful, perhaps, that "a man should not communicate his own glorie"—he stepped sedately down to the trim green skiff and was rowed ashore by a boy who, for aught that either knew, might three months before have jostled him at some ill-favoured lunch counter. For in America, dreams of gold—not, alas, golden dreams—do prevalently come true; and of all the butterfly happenings in this pleasant land of larvæ, few are so spectacular as the process by which, without warning, a man is converted from a toiler and bearer of loads to a taker of his *bien*. However, to none, one must believe, is the changeling such gazing-stock as to himself.

Although countless times, waking and sleeping, St. George had humoured himself in the outworn pastime of dreaming what he would do if he were to inherit a million dollars, his imagination had never marveled its way to the situation's less poignant advantages. Chief among his satisfactions had been that with which he had lately seen his mother—an exquisite woman, looking like the old lace and Roman mosaic pins which she had saved from the wreck of her fortune—set off for Europe in the exceptional company of her brother, Bishop Arthur Touchett, gentlest of dignitaries. The bishop, only to look upon whose portrait was a benediction, had at sacrifice

of certain of his charities seen St. George through college; and it made the million worth while to his nephew merely to send him to Tübingen to set his soul at rest concerning the date of one of the canonical gospels. Next to the rich delight of planning that voyage, St. George placed the buying of his yacht.

In the dusty, inky office of the *New York Evening Sentinel* he had been wont three months before to sit at a long green table fitting words about the yachts of others to the dreary music of his typewriter, the while vaguely conscious of a blur of eight telephone bells, and the sound of voices used merely to communicate thought and not to please the ear. In the last three months he had sometimes remembered that black day when from his high window he had looked toward the harbour and glimpsed a trim craft of white and brass slipping to the river's mouth; whereupon he had been seized by such a passion to work hard and earn a white-and-brass craft of his own that the story which he was hurrying for the first edition was quite ruined.

"Good heavens, St. George," Chillingworth, the city editor, had gnarled, "we don't carry wooden type. And nothing else would set up this wooden stuff of yours. Where's some snap? Your first paragraph reads like a recipe. Now put your soul into it, and you've got less than fifteen minutes to do it in."

St. George recalled that his friend Amory, as "one hackneyed in the ways of life," had gravely lifted an eyebrow at him, and the new men had turned different colours at the thought of being addressed like that before the staff; and St. George had recast the story and had received for his diligence a New Jersey assignment which had kept him until midnight. Haunting the homes of the club-women and the common council of that little Jersey town, the trim white-and-brass craft slipping down to the river's mouth had not ceased to lure him. He had found himself estimating the value—in money—of the bric-à-brac of every house, and the self-importance of every alderman, and reflecting that these people, if they liked, might own yachts of white and brass; yet they preferred to crouch among the bric-à-brac and to discourse to him of one another's violations and interferences. By the time that he had reached home that dripping night and had put captions upon the backs of the unexpectant-looking

photographs which were his trophies, he was in that state of comparative anarchy to be effected only by imaginative youth and a disagreeable task.

Next day, suddenly as its sun, had come the news which had transformed him from a discontented grappler with social problems to the owner of stocks and bonds and shares in a busy mine and other things soothing to enumerate. The first thing which he had added unto these, after the departure of his mother and the bishop, had been *The Aloha*, which only that day had slipped to the river's mouth in the view from his old window at the *Sentinel* office. St. George had the grace to be ashamed to remember how smoothly the social ills had adjusted themselves.

Now they were past, those days of feverish work and unexpected triumph and unaccountable failure; and in the dreariest of them St. George, dreaming wildly, had not dreamed all the unobvious joys which his fortune had brought to him. For although he had accurately painted, for example, the delight of a cruise in a sea-going yacht of his own, yet to step into his dory in the sunset, to watch *The Aloha's* sides shine in the late light as he was rowed ashore past the lesser crafts in the harbour; to see the man touch his cap and put back to make the yacht trim for the night, and then to turn his own face to his apartment where virtually the entire day-staff of the *Evening Sentinel* was that night to dine—these were among the pastimes of the lesser angels which his fancy had never compassed.

A glow of firelight greeted St. George as he entered his apartment, and the rooms wore a pleasant air of festivity. A table, with covers for twelve, was spread in the living-room, a fire of cones was tossing on the hearth, the curtains were drawn, and the sideboard was a thing of intimation. Rollo, his man—St. George had easily fallen in all the habits which he had longed to assume—was just closing the little ice-box sunk behind a panel of the wall, and he came forward with dignified deference.

"Everything is ready, Rollo?" St. George asked. "No one has telephoned to beg off?"

"Yes, sir," answered Rollo, "and no, sir."

St. George had sometimes told himself that the man looked like an oval grey stone with a face cut upon it.

"Is the claret warmed?" St. George demanded, handing his hat. "Did the big glasses come for the liqueur—and the little ones will set inside without tipping? Then take the cigars to the den—you'll have to get some cigarettes for Mr. Provin. Keep up the fire. Light the candles in ten minutes. I say, how jolly the table looks."

"Yes, sir," returned Rollo, "an' the candles 'll make a great difference, sir. Candles do give out an air, sir."

One month of service had accustomed St. George to his valet's gift of the Articulate Simplicity. Rollo's thoughts were doubtless contrived in the cuticle and knew no deeper operance; but he always uttered his impressions with, under his mask, an air of keen and seasoned personal observation. In his first interview with St. George, Rollo had said: "I always enjoy being kep' busy, sir. *To me*, the busy man is a grand sight," and St. George had at once appreciated his possibilities. Rollo was like the fine print in an almanac.

When the candles were burning and the lights had been turned on in the little ochre den where the billiard-table stood, St. George emerged—a well-made figure, his buoyant, clear-cut face accurately bespeaking both health and cleverness. Of a family represented by the gentle old bishop and his own exquisite mother, himself university-bred and fresh from two years' hard, hand-to-hand fighting to earn an honourable livelihood, St. George, of sound body and fine intelligence, had that temper of stability within vast range which goes pleasantly into the mind that meets it. A symbol of this was his prodigious popularity with those who had been his fellow-workers—a test beside which old-world traditions of the urban touchstones are of secondary advantage. It was deeply significant that in spite of the gulf which Chance had dugged the day-staff of the *Sentinel*, all save two or three of which were not of his estate, had with flattering alacrity obeyed his summons to dine. But, as he heard in the hall the voice of Chillingworth, the difficulty of his task for the first time swept over him. It was Chillingworth who had advocated to him the need of wooden type to suit his literary style and who had long ordered and bullied him about; and how was he

to play the host to Chillingworth, not to speak of the others, with the news between them of that million?

When the bell rang, St. George somewhat gruffly superseded Rollo.

"I'll go," he said briefly, "and keep out of sight for a few minutes. Get in the bath-room or somewhere, will you?" he added nervously, and opened the door.

At one stroke Chillingworth settled his own position by dominating the situation as he dominated the city room. He chose the best chair and told a good story and found fault with the way the fire burned, all with immediate ease and abandon. Chillingworth's men loved to remember that he had once carried copy. They also understood all the legitimate devices by which he persuaded from them their best effort, yet these devices never failed, and the city room agreed that Chillingworth's fashion of giving an assignment to a new man would force him to write a readable account of his own entertainment in the dark meadows. Largely by personal magnetism he had fought his way upward, and this quality was not less a social gift.

Mr. Toby Amory, who had been on the Eleven with St. George at Harvard, looked along his pipe at his host and smiled, with flattering content, his slow smile. Amory's father had lately had a conspicuous quarter of an hour in Wall Street, as a result of which Amory, instead of taking St. George to the cemetery at Clusium as he had talked, himself drifted to Park Row; and although he now knew considerably less than he had hoped about certain inscriptions, he was supporting himself and two sisters by really brilliant work, so that the balance of his power was creditably maintained. Surely the inscriptions did not suffer, and what then was Amory that he should object? Presently Holt, the middle-aged marine man, and Harding who, since he had lost a lightweight sparring championship, was sporting editor, solemnly entered together and sat down with the social caution of their class. So did Provin, the "elder giant," who gathered news as he breathed and could not intelligibly put six words together. Horace, who would listen to four lines over the telephone and therefrom make a half-column of American newspaper humour or American newspaper tears, came in roaring

pacifically and marshaling little Bud, that day in the seventh heaven of his first "beat." Then followed Crass, the feature man, whose interviews were known to the new men as literature, although he was not above publicly admitting that he was not a reporter, but a special writer. Mr. Crass read nothing in the paper that he had not written, and St. George had once prophesied that in old age he would use his scrap-book for a manual of devotions, as Klopstock used his *Messiah*. With him arrived Carbury, the telegraph editor, and later Benfy, who had a carpet in his office and wrote editorials and who came in evening clothes, thus moving Harding and Holt to instant private conversation. The last to appear was Little Cawthorne who wrote the fiction page and made enchanting limericks about every one on the staff and went about singing one song and behaving, the dramatic man flattered him, like a motif. Little Cawthorne entered backward, wrestling with some wiry matter which, when he had executed a manoeuvre and banged the door, was thrust through the passage in the form of Bennie Todd, the head office boy, affectionately known as Bennietod. Bennietod was in every one's secret, clipped every one's space and knew every one's salary, and he had lately covered a baseball game when the man whose copy he was to carry had, outside the fence, become implicated in allurements. He was greeted with noise, and St. George told him heartily that he was glad he had come.

"He made me," defensively claimed Bennietod; frowning deferentially at Little Cawthorne.

"Hello, St. George," said the latter, "come on back to the office. Crass sits in your place and he wears cravats the colour of goblin's blood. Come back."

"Not he," said Chillingworth, smoking; "the Dead-and-Done-with editor is too keen for that; I won't give him a job. He's ruined. Egg sandwiches will never stimulate him now."

St. George joined in the relieved laugh that followed. They were remembering his young Sing Sing convict who had completed his sentence in time to step in a cab and follow his mother to the grave, where his stepfather refused to have her coffin opened. And St. George, fresh from his Alma Mater, had weighted the winged words of his story with allusions to the tears celestial of Thetis, shed

for Achilles, and Creon's grief for Haemon, and the Unnatural Combat of Massinger's father and son; so that Chillingworth had said things in languages that are not dead (albeit a bit Elizabethan) and the composing room had shaken mailed fists.

"Hi, you!" said Little Cawthorne, who was born in the South, "this is a mellow minute. I could wish they came often. This shall be a weekly occurrence—not so, St. George?"

"Cawthorne," Chillingworth warned, "mind your manners, or they'll make you city editor."

A momentary shadow was cast by the appearance of Rollo, who was manifestly a symbol of the world Philistine about which these guests knew more and in which they played a smaller part than any other class of men. But the tray which Rollo bore was his passport. Thereafter, they all trooped to the table, and Chillingworth sat at the head, and from the foot St. George watched the city editor break bread with the familiar nervous gesture with which he was wont to strip off yards of copy-paper and eat it. There was a tacit assumption that he be the conversational sun of the hour, and in fostering this understanding the host took grateful refuge.

"This is shameful," Chillingworth began contentedly. "Every one of you ought to be out on the Boris story."

"What is the Boris story?" asked St. George with interest. But in all talk St. George had a restful, host-like way of playing the rôle of opposite to every one who preferred being heard.

"I'll wager the boy hasn't been reading the papers these three months," Amory opined in his pleasant drawl.

"No," St. George confessed; "no, I haven't. They make me homesick."

"Don't maunder," said Chillingworth in polite criticism. "This is Amory's story, and only about a quarter of the facts yet," he added in a resentful growl. "It's up at the Boris, in West Fifty-ninth Street—you know the apartment house? A Miss Holland, an heiress, living there with her aunt, was attacked and nearly murdered by a mulatto woman. The woman followed her to the elevator and came uncomfortably near stabbing her from the back. The elevator boy was

too quick for her. And at the station they couldn't get the woman to say a word; she pretends not to understand or to speak anything they've tried. She's got Amory hypnotized too—he thinks she can't. And when they searched her," went on Chillingworth with enjoyment, "they found her dressed in silk and cloth of gold, and loaded down with all sorts of barbarous ornaments, with almost priceless jewels. Miss Holland claims that she never saw or heard of the woman before. Now, what do you make of it?" he demanded, unconcernedly draining his glass.

"Splendid," cried St. George in unfeigned interest. "I say, splendid. Did you see the woman?" he asked Amory.

Amory nodded.

"Yes," he said, "Andy fixed that for me. But she never said a word. I *parlez-vous*ed her, and *verstehen-Sied* her, and she sighed and turned her head."

"Did you see the heiress?" St. George asked.

"Not I," mourned Amory, "not to talk with, that is. I happened to be hanging up in the hall there the afternoon it occurred;" he modestly explained.

"What luck," St. George commented with genuine envy. "It's a stunning story. Who is Miss Holland?"

"She's lived there for a year or more with her aunt," said Chillingworth. "She is a New Yorker and an heiress and a great beauty—oh, all the properties are there, but they're all we've got. What do you make of it?" he repeated.

St. George did not answer, and every one else did.

"Mistaken identity," said Little Cawthorne. "Do you remember Provin's story of the woman whose maid shot a masseuse whom she took to be her mistress; and the woman forgave the shooting and seemed to have her arrested chiefly because she had mistaken her for a masseuse?"

"Too easy, Cawthorne," said Chillingworth.

"The woman is probably an Italian," said the telegraph editor, "doing one of her Mafia stunts. It's time they left the politicians alone and threw bombs at the bonds that back them."

"Hey, Carbury. Stop writing heads," said Chillingworth.

"Has Miss Holland lived abroad?" asked Crass, the feature man. "Maybe this woman was her nurse or ayah or something who got fond of her charge, and when they took it away years ago, she devoted her life to trying to find it in America. And when she got here she wasn't able to make herself known to her, and rather than let any one else —"

"No more space-grabbing, Crass," warned Chillingworth.

"Maybe," ventured Horace, "the young lady did settlement work and read to the woman's kid, and the kid died, and the woman thought she'd said a charm over it."

Chillingworth grinned affectionately.

"Hold up," he commanded, "or you'll recall the very words of the charm."

Bennietod gasped and stared.

"Now, Bennietod?" Amory encouraged him.

"I t'ink," said the lad, "if she's a heiress, dis yere dagger-plunger is her mudder dat's been shut up in a mad-house to a fare-you-well."

Chillingworth nodded approvingly.

"Your imagination is toning down wonderfully," he flattered him. "A month ago you would have guessed that the mulatto lady was an Egyptian princess' messenger sent over here to get the heart from an American heiress as an ingredient for a complexion lotion. You're coming on famously, Todd."

"The German poet Wieland," began Benfy, clearing his throat, "has, in his epic of the *Oberon* made admirable use of much the same idea, Mr. Chillingworth —"

Yells interrupted him. Mr. Benfy was too "well-read" to be wholly popular with the staff.

"Oh, well, the woman was crazy. That's about all," suggested Harding, and blushed to the line of his hair.

"Yes, I guess so," assented Holt, who lifted and lowered one shoulder as he talked, "or doped."

Chillingworth sighed and looked at them both with pursed lips.

"You two," he commented, "would get out a paper that everybody would know to be full of reliable facts, and that nobody would buy. To be born with a riotous imagination and then hardly ever to let it riot is to be a born newspaper man. Provin?"

The elder giant leaned back, his eyes partly closed.

"Is she engaged to be married?" he asked. "Is Miss Holland engaged?"

Chillingworth shook his head.

"No," he said, "not engaged. We knew that by tea-time the same day, Provin. Well, St. George?"

St. George drew a long breath.

"By Jove, I don't know," he said, "it's a stunning story. It's the best story I ever remember, excepting those two or three that have hung fire for so long. Next to knowing just why old Ennis disinherited his son at his marriage, I would like to ferret out this."

"Now, tut, St. George," Amory put in tolerantly, "next to doing exactly what you will be doing all this week you'd rather ferret out this."

"On my honour, no," St. George protested eagerly, "I mean quite what I say. I might go on fearfully about it. Lord knows I'm going to see the day when I'll do it, too, and cut my troubles for the luck of chasing down a bully thing like this."

If there was anything to forgive, every one forgave him.

"But give up ten minutes on *The Aloha*," Amory skeptically put it, adjusting his pince-nez, "for anything less than ten minutes on *The Aloha*?"