









I Dedicate This Book  
To G. T. S. In Remembrance of A Winter Day

"When half-gods go, the gods arrive."  
R. W. Emerson

Not with the clash of trumpets  
And clangour of gates thrown wide,  
As when the eager crowds press round  
To see the half-gods ride;  
But like a bird at even  
Silently winging home,  
A message came from the darkness  
To say that the gods had come.

And the half-gods scoffed in the temple  
Which custom had bid them hold —  
Sin and Success and Pleasure  
And the hideous Image of Gold.  
Who and what are these strangers?  
Bid them worship before the shrine  
Where we, the gods of the new world,  
Sit o'er the cards and wine!

So they derided the strangers —  
Those gods whom the old folk call  
Courage and Honour and Faithfulness  
And Love which is greater than all.  
But when the night was over  
And the new day pierced within,  
The half-gods were gone from the temple,  
And the gods had entered in.



# CONTENTS

## PART I

- I. Ennui
- II. Adieu
- III. The Gift
- IV. Toby
- V. Discipline
- VI. The Abyss
- VII. Larpent's Daughter

## PART II

- I. Jake Bolton
- II. Maud Bolton
- III. Bunny
- IV. Saltash
- V. The Visitor
- VI. How to Manage Men
- VII. The Promise
- VIII. The Ally
- IX. The Idol
- X. Resolutions
- XI. The Butterfly
- XII. The Ogre's Castle
- XIII. The End of the Game



### **PART III**

- I. The Virtuous Hero
- II. The Compact
- III. L'oiseau bleu
- IV. The Trap
- V. The Confidence
- VI. The Sacred Fire
- VII. Surrender
- VIII. The Magician's Wand
- IX. The Warning
- X. The Mystery
- XI. Suspicion
- XII. The Ally
- XIII. The Truth
- XIV. The Last Card

### **PART IV**

- I. The Winning Post
- II. The Villain Scores
- III. A Wife Is Different
- IV. The Idol of Paris
- V. The Dance of Death
- VI. The New Lover
- VII. The Refugee
- VIII. The Turning-point
- IX. Larpent
- X. In the Name of Love
- XI. The Gift of the Gods



# CHARLES REX

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### ENNUI

"I shall go to sea to-morrow," said Saltash, with sudden decision. "I'm tired of this place, Larpent, — fed up on repletion."

"Then by all means let us go, my lord!" said Larpent, with the faint glimmer of a smile behind his beard, which was the only expression of humour he ever permitted himself.

"Believe you're fed up too," said Saltash, flashing a critical look upon him.

Captain Larpent said nothing, deeming speech unnecessary. All time spent ashore was wasted in his opinion.

Saltash turned and surveyed the sky-line over the yacht's rail with obvious discontent on his ugly face. His eyes were odd, one black, one grey, giving a curiously unstable appearance to a countenance which otherwise might have claimed to possess some strength. His brows were black and deeply marked. He had a trick of moving them in conjunction with his thoughts so that his face was seldom in absolute repose. It was said that there was a strain of royal blood in Saltash, and in the days before he had succeeded to the title when he had been merely Charles Burchester, he had borne

the nickname of "the merry monarch." Certain wild deeds in a youth that had not been beyond reproach had seemed to warrant this, but of later years a friend had bestowed a more gracious title upon him, and to all who could claim intimacy with him he had become "Charles Rex." The name fitted him like a garment. A certain arrogance, a certain royalty of bearing, both utterly unconscious and wholly unfeigned, characterized him. Whatever he did, and his actions were often far from praiseworthy, this careless distinction of mien always marked him. He received an almost involuntary respect where he went.

Captain Larpent who commanded his yacht *The Night Moth*—most morose and unresponsive of men—paid him the homage of absolute acquiescence. Whatever his private opinions might be, he never expressed them unless invited to do so by his employer. He never criticized by word or look. Saltash was wont to say that if he decided to turn pirate he believed that Larpent would continue at his post without the smallest change of front. To raise a protest of any sort would have been absolutely foreign to his nature. He was made to go straight ahead, to do his duty without question and with perfect self-reliance.

On the present occasion, having cruised from port to port in the Mediterranean for nearly six weeks, it was certainly no ill news to him to hear that Saltash had at last had enough. The weather was perfect, too perfect for a man of his bull-dog instincts. He was thoroughly tired of the endless spring sunshine and of the chattering, fashionable crowds that Saltash was wont to assemble on the yacht. He was waiting with an iron patience for the word that should send them forth over the great Atlantic rollers, with the ocean spray bursting over their bows and the sting of the ocean wind in their faces. That was the sort of life that appealed to him. He had no use for civilization; the froth of society had no attraction for him. He preferred a deeper draught.

Saltash was thoroughly cosmopolitan in his tastes; he liked amusement, but he abhorred boredom. He declared that for him it was the root of all evil. He was never really wicked unless he was bored. And then—*que voulez-vous?* He did not guide the star of destiny.

"Yes," he said, after a thoughtful silence, "we will certainly put to sea to-morrow — unless —" he turned his head and threw a merry grin at his companion — "unless Fortune has any tricks up her sleeve for me, for I am going ashore for one more fling to-night."

Larpent smoked on immovably, his blue-grey eyes staring out to the vivid sky-line, his sunburnt face quite imperturbable.

"We shall be ready to start as soon as you come aboard, my lord," he said.

"Good!" said Saltash lightly. "I may be late, or — more probably — very early. Leave the gangway for me! I'll let you know when I'm aboard."

He got up as if he moved on springs and leaned against the rail, looking down quizzically at the man who sat stolidly smoking in the deck-chair. No two people could have formed a stronger contrast — the yacht's captain, fair-bearded, with the features of a Viking — the yacht's owner, dark, alert, with a certain French finesse about him that gave a strange charm to a personality that otherwise might have been merely fantastic.

Suddenly he laughed. "Do you know, Larpent, I often think to myself what odd tricks Fate plays? You for instance — you, the captain of a private yacht when you ought to be roving the high seas in a Flying Dutchman! You probably were a few generations ago."

"Ah!" Larpent said, through a cloud of smoke. "Life isn't what it was."

"It's an infernal fraud, most of it," said Saltash. "Always promising and seldom fulfilling!"

"No good expecting too much," said Larpent.

"True!" said Saltash. "On the other hand it isn't always wise to be too easily satisfied." His look became suddenly speculative. "Have you ever been in love, Larpent?"

The big man in the deck-chair made a sharp movement and spilt some cigar-ash on his coat. He sat up deliberately and brushed it off. Saltash watched him with mischievous eyes.

"Well?" he said.

Larpent leaned back again, puffing forth a thick cloud of smoke. "Once," he said briefly.

"Only once?" gibed Saltash. "Man alive! Why, I've had the disease scores of times, and you are half a generation older than I am!"

"I know," Larpent's eyes dwelt unblinking upon the sparkling blue of the water beyond the rail. "You've had it so often that you take it lightly."

Saltash laughed. "You apparently took it like the plague."

"I didn't die of it," said Larpent grimly.

"Perhaps the lady did!" suggested Saltash.

"No. She didn't die either." Larpent's eyes came slowly upwards to the mocking eyes above them. "For all I know she may be living now," he said.

Saltash's grin became a grimace. "Oh, heavens, Larpent! And you've had indigestion ever since? How long ago is it? Twenty years?"

"About that," said Larpent.

"Heavens!" said Saltash again. "I should like to see the woman who could hold me after twenty years!"

"So should I," said Larpent dryly.

Saltash snapped his fingers. "She doesn't exist, my good fellow! But if she did – by Jove, what a world it would be!"

Larpent grunted sardonically. "It wouldn't be large enough to hold you, my lord."

Saltash stretched his arms wide. "Well, I'm going ashore to-night. Who knows what the gods may send? Wish me luck!"

Larpent surveyed the restless figure with a sort of stony humour. "I wish you a safe return," he said.

Saltash laughed and went away along the deck with a monkey-like spring that was curiously characteristic of him. There was nothing of the sailor's steady poise about him.

The little Italian town that clung to the slopes that rose so steeply from the sea shone among its terraced gardens like a many-coloured jewel in the burning sunset. The dome of its Casino gleamed opalescent in its centre—a place for wonder—a place for dreams. Yet Saltash's expression as he landed on the quay was one of whimsical discontent. He had come nearly a fortnight ago to be amused, but somehow the old pleasures had lost their relish and he was only bored.

"I'm getting old," he said to himself with a grimace of disgust.

But he was not old. He was barely six-and-thirty. He had had the world at his feet too long, that was all.

There was to be a water-side *fête* that night at Valrosa, and the promenade and bandstand were wreathed with flowers and fairy-lights. It was getting late in the season, and it would probably be the last. Saltash surveyed the preparations with very perfunctory interest as he sauntered up to the hotel next to the Casino where he proposed to dine.

A few people he knew were staying there, and he looked forward to a more or less social evening. At least he could count on a welcome and a rubber of bridge if he felt so inclined. Or there was the Casino itself if the gambling mood should take him. But he did not feel much like gambling. He wanted something new. None of the old stale amusements appealed to him tonight. He was feeling very ancient and rather dilapidated.

He went up the steps under the cypress-trees that led from terrace to terrace, pausing at each landing-place to look out over the wonderful sea that was changing every moment with the changing glow of the sunset. Yes, it was certainly a place for dreams. Even old Larpent felt the charm—Larpent who had fallen in love twenty years ago for the first and last time!

An irrepressible chuckle escaped him. Funny old Larpent! The wine of the gods had evidently been too strong a brew for him. It was obvious that he had no desire to repeat the dose.

At his last halting-place he stood longer to drink in the beauty of the evening before entering the hotel. The sea had the pearly tint shot with rose of the inside of an oyster-shell. The sky-line was re-

ceding, fading into an immense calm. The shadows were beginning to gather. The sun had dipped out of sight.

The tinkle of a lute rose from one of the hidden gardens below him. He stood and listened with sentimental eyes and quizzically twitching mouth. Everything in this wonder-world was ultra-sweet to-night. And yet — and yet —

Suddenly another sound broke through the stillness, and in a moment he had sprung to alertness. It was a cry — a sharp, wrung cry from the garden close to him, the garden of the hotel, and instantly following it a flood of angry speech in a man's voice and the sound of blows.

"Damnation!" said Saltash, and sprang for a narrow wooden door in the stone wall a few yards higher up.

It opened to his imperious hand, and he found himself in a dark little shrubbery behind an arbour that looked out to the sea. It was in this arbour that the scuffle was taking place, and in a second he had forced his way through the intervening shrubs and was at the entrance.

"Damnation!" he burst forth again furiously. "What are you doing? Leave that boy alone!"

A man in evening-dress was gripping a fair-haired lad, who wore the hotel-livery, by the back of his neck and raining merciless blows upon his uncovered head. He turned, sharply straightening himself, at Saltash's tempestuous entrance, and revealed to the newcomer the deeply-suffused countenance of the hotel-manager.

Their recognition was mutual. He flung the boy into a corner and faced his patron, breathing hard, his black eyes still fiercely gleaming.

"Ah! It is milord!" he said, in jerky English, and bowed punctiliously though he was still shaking with rage. "What can I do for you, milord?"

"What the devil is the matter?" said Saltash, sweeping aside all ceremony. "What are you hammering that unfortunate boy for? Can't you find a man your own size to hammer?"

The Italian flung a fierce glance over his shoulder at his crouching victim. "He is worthless!" he declared. "I give him a trial—*bueno*, but he is worthless. Milord will pardon me, he is—English. And the English are—no good for work—no good at all."

"Oh, rotten to the core!" agreed Saltash, with a humorous lift of the brows. "But you needn't murder him for that, Antonio. It's his misfortune—not his fault."

"Milord, I have not murdered him," the manager protested with nervous vehemence. "I have only punished him. I have not hurt him. I have done him good."

"Oh!" said Saltash, and looked down at the small, trembling figure in the corner. "It's medicine, is it? But a bit strong for a child of that size. I should try a milder dose next time."

Antonio laughed harshly. "The next time, milord, I shall take him—so—and wring his neck!" His laugh became a snarl as he turned. "Get up now, you—you son of a pig, and go back to your work!"

"Easy! Easy!" said Saltash, with a smile. "We don't talk to the English like that, Antonio,—not even the smallest and weakest of them. Let's have a look at this specimen—with your permission!" He bent over the huddled figure. "Hold up your head, boy! Let me see you!"

There was no movement to obey, and he laid a hand upon the quivering shoulder and felt it shrink away convulsively.

"I believe you've damaged him," he said, bending lower. "Here, Tommy!  
Hold up your head! Don't be afraid! It's a friend."

But the narrow figure only sank down a little lower under his hand.

"His name is Toby," said Antonio with acidity. "A dog's name, milord, and it fits him well. He is what you would call a lazy hound."

Saltash paid not the slightest attention to him. He was bending low, his dark face in shadow.

"Don't be afraid!" he said again. "No one is going to hurt you. Come along! Let's look at you!"

His hold tightened upon the shrinking form. He began to lift it up.

And then suddenly there came a sharp struggle between his hands as lacking in science as the fight of a wild animal for freedom, and as effectual. With a gasping effort the boy wrenched himself free and was gone. He went like a streak of lightning, and the two men were left facing one another.

"What a slippery little devil!" commented Saltash.

"Yes," said Antonio vindictively, "a devil indeed, milord! And I will have no more of him. I will have no more. I hope he will starve!"

"How awfully nice of you, Antonio!" said Saltash lightly. "Being the end of the season, he probably will."

Antonio smacked his red lips with relish. "Ah, probably! Probably!" he said.

## CHAPTER II

### ADIEU

It was growing late and the *fête* was in full swing when Saltash sauntered down again under the cypress-trees to the water's edge. The sea was breaking with a murmurous splashing; it was a night for dreams.

In the flower-decked bandstand an orchestra of stringed instruments was playing very softly—fairy-music that seemed to fill the world with magic to the brim. It was like a drug to the senses, alluring, intoxicating, maddeningly sweet.

Saltash wandered along with his face to the water on which a myriad coloured lights rocked and swam. And still his features wore that monkeyish look of unrest, of discontent and quizzical irony oddly mingled. He felt the lure, but it was not strong enough. Its influence had lost its potency.

He need not have been alone. He had left the hotel with friends, but he had drifted away from them in the crowd. One of them—a girl—had sought somewhat palpably to keep him near her, and he had responded with some show of ardour for a time, and then something about her had struck a note of discord within him and the glamour had faded.

"Little fool!" he murmured to himself. "She'd give me her heart to break if I'd have it."

And then he laughed in sheer ridicule of his own jaded senses. He recognized the indifference of satiety. An easy conquest no longer attracted him.

He began to stroll towards the quay, loitering here and there as if to give to Fates a chance to keep him if they would. Yes, Sheila Melrose was a little idiot. Why couldn't she realize that she was but one of the hundreds with whom he flirted day by day? She was nothing

to him but a pastime—a toy to amuse his wayward mood. He had outgrown his earlier propensity to break his toys when he had done with them. The sight of a broken toy revolted him now.

He was impatiently aware that the girl was watching him from the midst of the shifting crowd. What did she expect, he asked himself irritably? She knew him. She knew his reputation. Did she imagine herself the sort of woman to hold a man of his stamp for more than the passing moment? Save for his title and estates, was he worth the holding?

A group of laughing Italian girls with kerchiefs on their heads surrounded him suddenly and he became the centre of a shower—a storm—of *confetti*. His mood changed in a second. He would show her what to expect! Without an instant's pause he turned upon his assailants, caught the one nearest to him, snatching her off her feet; and, gripping her without mercy, he kissed her fiercely and shamelessly till she gasped with delicious fright; then dropped her and seized another.

The girls of Valrosa spoke of the ugly Englishman with bated breath and shining eyes long after Saltash had gone his unheeding way, for the blood was hot in his veins before the game was over. If the magic had been slow to work, its spell was all the more compelling when it gripped him. Characteristically, he tossed aside all considerations beyond the gratification of the moment's desire. The sinking fire of youth blazed up afresh. He would get the utmost out of this last night of revelry. Wherever he went, a spirit of wild daring, of fevered gaiety, surrounded him. He was no longer alone, whichever way he turned. Once in his mad progress he met Sheila Melrose face to face, and she drew back from him in open disgust. He laughed at her maliciously, mockingly, as his royal forefather might have laughed long ago, and passed on with the throng.

Hours later, when the *fête* was over and the shore quite silent under the stars, he came alone along the quay, moving with his own peculiar arrogance of bearing, a cigarette between his lips, a deep gleam in his eyes. It had been an amusing night after all.

Crossing the gangway to his yacht—*The Night Moth*—that rocked softly on the glimmering ripples, he paused for a moment and turned his face as if in farewell towards the little town that lay