

# SURFET OF LAMPREYS

NGAIO MARSH



RODERICK ALLEYN #10

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Roberta Grey**

**Lord Charles Lamprey**

**Lady Charles Lamprey**

**Henry Lamprey**, *their eldest son*

**Friede Lamprey (Frid)**, *their elder daughter*

**Colin And Stephen Lamprey**, *twins, their second and third sons*

**Patricia Lamprey (Patch)**, *their second daughter*

**Michael Lamprey (Mike)**, *their youngest son*

**Mrs. Burnaby (Nanny)**, *their nurse*

**Baskett**, *their butler*

**Cora Blackburn**, *their parlour-maid*

**Stamford**, *a commissionaire*

**Grimball**, *a "bum"*

**The Lady Katherine Lobe**, *aunt to Lord Charles*

**Gabriel, Marquis Of Wutherwood And Rune (Uncle G.)**, *elder brother to Lord Charles*

**Violet, Marchioness Of Wutherwood And Rune (Aunt V.)**, *his wife*

**Giggle**, *their chauffeur*

**Tinkerton**, *Lady Wutherwood's maid*

**Dr. Kantripp**, *the Lampreys' doctor*

**Sir Matthew Cairnstock**, *a brain specialist*

**Dr. Curtis**, *police surgeon*

**Detective-Inspector Fox** *of the Central Branch, Criminal Investigation Department*

**Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn** *of the Central Branch, Criminal Investigation Department*

**Detective-Sergeant Bailey**, *a finger-print expert*

**Detective-Sergeant Thompson**, *a photographic expert*

**Police-Constable Martin**

**Police-Constable Gibson**, *a police-constable who has read "Macbeth"*

**Detective-Sergeant Campbell**, *on duty at 24 Brummell Street*

**Nigel Bathgate**, *Watson to Mr. Alleyn*

**Mrs. Moffatt**, *housekeeper at 24 Brummell Street*

**Moffatt**, *her husband*

**Mr. Rattisbon**, *solicitor*

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Prelude in New Zealand*

**R**OBERTA GREY first met the Lampreys in New Zealand. She was at school with Frid Lamprey. All the other Lampreys went to school in England: Henry, the twins and Michael to Eton; Patch to an expensive girls' school near Tonbridge. In the New Zealand days, Patch and Mike were too little for school. They had Nanny and, later on, a governess. But when the time came for Frid to be bundled off to England there was a major financial crisis and she became a boarder at Te Moana Collegiate School for Girls. Long after they had returned to England the family still said that Frid spoke with a New Zealand accent, which was nonsense.

In after years Roberta was to find a pleasant irony in the thought that she owed her friendship with the family to one of those financial crises. It must have been a really bad one because it was at about that time that Lady Charles Lamprey suddenly got rid of all her English servants and bought the washing machine that afterwards, on the afternoon it broke loose from its mooring, so nearly-killed Nanny and Patch. Not long after Frid went to board at Te Moana an old aunt of Lord Charles's died, and the Lampreys were rich again, and all the servants came back, so that on Roberta's first visit Deepacres seemed very grand indeed. In New Zealand the Lampreys were a remarkable family. Titles are rare in New Zealand and the younger sons of marquises are practically nonexistent.

In two years' time Roberta was to remember with nostalgic vividness that first visit. It took place during the half-term week-end, when the boarders at Te Moana were allowed to go home. Two days beforehand, Frid asked Roberta if she would spend the half-term at Deepacres. There were long-distance telephone calls between Deepacres and Roberta's parents.

Frid said: "Do come, Robin darling, such fun," in a vague, kind voice.

She had no idea, of course, that for Roberta the invitation broke like a fabulous rocket, that Roberta's mother, when Lady Charles Lamprey telephoned, was thrown into a frenzy of sewing that lasted until two o'clock in the morning, that Roberta's father bicycled four miles before eight o'clock in order to leave at Te Moana a strange parcel, a letter of instruction on behaviour, and five shillings to give the house-maid.

Frid always sympathized when Roberta said her people were poor, as though they were all in the same boat, but the poverty of the Lampreys, as Roberta was to discover, was a queer and baffling condition understood by nobody, not even their creditors, and certainly not by poor Lord Charles with his eye-glass, his smile and his vagueness.

It was almost dark when the car arrived at Te Moana. Roberta was made shy by the discovery of Lady Charles in the front seat beside the chauffeur, and of Henry, dark and exquisite, in the back one. But the family charm was equal to more than the awkwardness of a child of fourteen. Roberta yielded to it in three minutes and it held her captive ever afterwards.

The thirty-mile drive up to the mountains was like a dream. Afterwards, Roberta remembered that they all sang an old song about building a stairway to Paradise, and that she felt as though she floated up the stairway as she sang. The surface of the road changed from tar to shingle; stones banged against the underneath of the car; the foothills came closer and salutary drifts of mountain air were blown in at the window. It was quite dark when they began to climb the winding outer drive of Deepacres. Roberta smelt native bush, cold mountain water and wet loam. The car stopped, and Henry, groaning, got out and opened the gate. That was to be Roberta's clearest picture of Henry—struggling with the gate, screwing up his face in the glare of the headlights. The drive up to Deepacres seemed very long indeed. When at last they came out on a wide gravelled platform before the house, something of Roberta's shyness returned.

Long after the Lampreys had gone to England Roberta would sometimes dream that she returned to Deepacres. It was always at night. In her dream the door stood open, the light streamed down the steps. Baskett was in the entrance with a young footman whose name Roberta, in her dreams, had forgotten. The smell of blue-gum fires, of the oil that Lady Charles burnt in the drawing-room, and of cabbage-tree bloom would come out through the open door to greet her. There, in the drawing-room, as on that first night, she would see the family. Patch and Mike had been allowed to stay up; the twins, Stephen and Colin, that week arrived from England, were collapsed in arm-chairs. Henry lay on the hearthrug with his shining head propped against his mother's knee. Lord Charles would be gently amused at something he had been reading in a month-old *Spectator*. Always he put it down out of politeness to Roberta. The beginning of the dream never varied, or the feeling of enchantment.

The Lampreys appeared, on that first night, to scintillate with polish, and the most entrancing worldly-wisdom. Their family jokes seemed then the very quintessence of wit. When she grew up Roberta had still to remind herself that the Lampreys were funny but, with the exception of Henry, not witty. Perhaps they were too kind to be wits. Their jokes depended too much on the inconsequent family manner to survive quotation. But on that first night Roberta was rapturously uncritical. In retrospect she saw them as a very young family. Henry, the eldest, was eighteen. The twins, removed from Eton during the last crisis, were sixteen; Frid was fourteen, Patricia ten, and little Michael was four. Lady Charles—Roberta never could remember when she first began to call her Charlot—was thirty-seven, and it was her birthday. Her husband had given her the wonderful dressing-case that appeared later, in the first financial crisis after Roberta met them. There were many parcels, arrived that day from England, and Lady Charles opened them in a vague pleased manner, saying of each one that it was "great

fun,” or “charming,” and exclaiming from time to time: “How kind of Aunt M.!” “How kind of George!” “How kind of the Gabriels!” The Gabriels had sent her a bracelet and she looked up from the cards and said: “Charlie, it’s from both of them. They must have patched it up.”

“The bracelet, darling?” asked Henry.

“No, the quarrel. Charlie, I suppose that, after all, Violet can’t be going to divorce him.”

“They’ll have six odious sons, Imogen,” said Lord Charles, “and I shall never, never have any money. How she can put up with Gabriel! Of course she’s mad.”

“I understand Gabriel had her locked up in a nursing-home last year, but evidently she’s loose again.”

“Gabriel’s our uncle,” explained Henry, smiling at Roberta. “He’s a revolting man.”

“I don’t think he’s so bad,” murmured Lady Charles, trying on the bracelet.

“Mummy, he’s the *End*,” said Frid, and the twins groaned in unison from the sofa. “The *End*,” they said, and Colin added: “Last, loathsomest, lousiest, execrable apart.”

“Doesn’t scan,” said Frid.

“Mummy,” asked Patch who was under the piano with Mike, “who’s lousy? Is it Uncle Gabriel?”

“Not really, darling,” said Lady Charles, who had opened another parcel. “Oh, Charlie, *look!* It’s from Auntie Kit. She’s knitted it herself, of course. What can it be?”

“Dear Aunt Kit!” said Henry. And to Roberta: “She wears buttoned-up boots and talks in a whisper.”

“She’s Mummy’s second cousin and Daddy’s aunt. Mummy and Daddy are relations in a weird sort of way,” said Frid.

“Which may explain many things,” added Henry, looking hard at Frid.

“Once,” said Colin, “Aunt Kit got locked up in a railway lavatory for sixteen hours because nobody could hear her whispering: ‘Let me out, if you please, let me out!’”

“And of course she was too polite to hammer or kick,” added Stephen.

Patch burst out laughing and Mike, too little to know why, broke into a charming baby’s laugh to keep her company.

“It’s a hat,” said Lady Charles and put it on the top of her head.

“It’s a tea-cosy,” said Frid. “How common of Auntie Kit.”

Nanny came in. She was the quintessence of all nannies, opinionated, faithful, illogical, exasperating and admirable. She stood just inside the door and said:

“Good evening, m’lady. Patricia, Michael. Come along.”

“Oh *Nanny*,” said Patch and Mike. “It’s not time. Oh *Nanny!*”

Lady Charles said: “Look what Lady Katherine has sent me, Nanny. It’s a hat.”

“It’s a hot-water-bottle cover, m’lady,” said Nanny. “Patricia and Michael, say good night and come along.”



It was the first of many visits. Roberta spent the winter holidays at Deepacres and when the long summer holidays came she was there again. The affections of an only child of fourteen are as concentrated as they are vehement. All her life Roberta was to put her emotional eggs in one basket. At fourteen, with appalling simplicity, she gave her heart to the Lampreys. It was, however, not merely an attachment of adolescence. She never grew out of it, and though, when they met again after a long interval, she could look at them with detachment, she was unable to feel detached. She wanted no other friends. Their grandeur, and in their queer way the Lampreys were very grand for New Zealand, had little to do with their attraction for Roberta. If the crash that was so often averted had ever fallen upon them they would have carried their glamour into some tumbledown house in England or New Zealand, and Roberta would still have adored them.

By the end of two years she knew them very well indeed. Lady Charles, always vague about ages, used to talk to Roberta with extraordinary frankness about family affairs. At first Roberta was both flattered and bewildered by these confidences. She would listen aghast to stories of imminent disaster, of the immediate necessity for a thousand pounds, of the impossibility of the Lampreys keeping their heads above water, and she would agree that Lady Charles must economize by no longer taking *Punch* and *The Tatler*, and that they could all do without table napkins. It seemed a splendid strategic move for the Lampreys to buy a second and cheaper car in order to make less use of the Rolls Royce. When, on the day the new car arrived, they all went for a picnic in both cars, Roberta and Lady Charles exchanged satisfied glances.

“Stealth is my plan,” cried Lady Charles as she and Roberta talked together by the picnic fire. “I shall wean poor Charlie gradually from the large car. You see it quite amuses him, already, to drive that common little horror.”

Unfortunately, it also amused Henry and the twins to drive the large car.

“They must have some fun,” said Lady Charles, and to make up she bought no new clothes for herself. She was always eager to deny herself, and so gaily and lightly that only Henry and Roberta noticed what she was up to. Dent, her maid, who was friendly with a pawnbroker, made expeditions to the nearest town with pieces of Lady Charles’s jewellery, and as she had a great deal of jewellery this was an admirable source of income.

“Robin,” said Henry to Roberta, “What has become of Mummy’s emerald star?”

Roberta looked extremely uncomfortable.

“Has she popped it?” asked Henry, then added: “You needn’t tell me. I know she has.”

For twenty minutes Henry was thoughtful and he was particularly attentive to his mother that evening. He told his father that she was overtired and suggested that she should be given champagne with her dinner. After making this suggestion Henry caught Roberta’s eye and suddenly he grinned. Roberta liked Henry best of all the Lampreys. He had the gift of detachment. They all knew that they were funny, they even knew that they were peculiar and rather gloried in it, but only Henry had the

faculty of seeing the family in perspective, only Henry could look a little ruefully at their habits, only Henry would recognize the futility of their economic gestures. He, too, fell into the habit of confiding in Roberta. He would discuss his friends with her and occasionally his love affairs. By the time Henry was twenty he had had three vague love affairs. He also liked to discuss the family with Roberta. On the very afternoon when the great blow fell, Henry and Roberta had walked up through the bush above Deepacres and had come out on the lower slope of Little Mount Silver. The real name for Deepacres was Mount Silver Station but Lord Charles on a vaguely nostalgic impulse had rechristened it after the Lampreys's estate in Kent. From where they lay in the warm tussock, Henry and Roberta looked across forty miles of plains. Behind them rose the mountains, Little Mount Silver, Big Mount Silver, the Giant Thumb Range, and, behind that, the back-country, reaching in cold sharpness away to the west coast. All through the summer the mountain air came down to meet the warmth of the plains and Roberta, scenting it, knew contentment. This was her country.

"Nice, isn't it?" she said, tugging at a clump of tussock.

"Very pleasant," said Henry.

"But not as good as England?"

"Well, I suppose England's my country," said Henry.

"If I was there expect I'd feel the same about New Zealand."

"I expect so. But you're only once removed from England, and we're not New Zealand at all. Strangers in a strange land and making pretty considerable fools of ourselves. There's a financial crisis brewing, Roberta."

"Again!" cried Roberta in alarm.

"Again, and it seems to be a snorter."

Henry rolled over on his back and stared at the sky.

"We're hopeless," he said to Roberta. "We live by wind-falls and they won't go on for ever. What will happen to us, Roberta?"

"Charlot," said Roberta, "thinks you might have a poultry farm."

"She and Daddy both think so," said Henry. "What will happen? We'll order masses of hens,—and I can't tell you how much I dislike the sensation of feathers,—we'll build expensive modern chicken-houses, we'll buy poultrified garments for ourselves, and for six months we'll all be eaten up with the zeal of the chicken-house and then we'll employ someone to do the work and we won't have paid for the outlay."

"Well," said Roberta unhappily, "why don't you say so?"

"Because I'm like all the rest of my family," said Henry. "What do you think of us, Robin? You're such a composed little person with your smooth head and your watchfulness."

"That sounds smug and beastly."

"It isn't meant to. You've got a sort of Jane Eyreishness about you. You'll grow up into a Jane Eyre, I daresay, if you grow at all. Don't you sometimes think we're pretty hopeless?"

“I like you.”

“I know. But you must criticize a little. What’s to be done? What, for instance, ought I to do?”

“I suppose,” said Roberta, “you ought to get a job.”

“What sort of job? What can I do in New Zealand or anywhere else for a matter of that?”

“Ought you to have a profession?”

“What sort of profession?”

“Well,” said Roberta helplessly, “What would you like?”

“I’m sick at the sight of blood so I couldn’t be a doctor. I lose my temper when I argue, so I couldn’t be a lawyer, and I hate the poor, so I couldn’t be a parson.”

“Wasn’t there some idea of your managing Deepacres?”

“A sheep farmer?”

“Well—a run-holder. Deepacres is a biggish run, isn’t it?”

“Too big for the Lampreys. Poor Daddy! When we first got here he became so excessively New Zealand. I believe he used sheep-dip on his hair and shall I ever forget him with the dogs! He bought four—I think they cost twenty pounds each. He used to sit on his horse and whistle so unsuccessfully that even the horse couldn’t have heard him and the dogs all lay down and went to sleep and the sheep stood in serried ranks and gazed at him in mild surprise. Then he tried swearing and screaming but he lost his voice in less than no time. We should never have come out here.”

“I can’t understand why you did.”

“In a vague sort of way I fancy we were shooting the moon. I was at Eton and really didn’t know anything about it, until they whizzed me away to the ship.”

“I suppose you’ll all go back to England,” said Roberta unhappily.

“When Uncle Gabriel dies. Unless, of course, Aunt G. has any young.”

“But isn’t she past it?”

“You’d think so, but it would be just like the Gabriels. I wish I could work that Chinese Mandarin trick and say in my head, ‘Uncle G. has left us!’ and be sure that he would instantly fall down dead.”

“Henry!”

“Well, my dear, if you *knew* him. He’s the most revolting old gentleman. How Daddy ever came to have such a brother! He’s mean and hideous and spiteful and ought to have been dead ages ago. There were two uncles between him and Daddy but they were both killed in the Great War. I understand that they were rather nice, and at any rate they had no sons, which is the great thing in their favour.”

“Henry, I get so muddled. What is your Uncle Gabriel’s name?”

“Gabriel.”

“No, I mean his title and everything.”

“Oh. Well, he’s the Marquis of Wutherwood and Rune. While my grandfather was alive, Uncle G. was Lord Rune, the Earl of Rune. That’s the eldest son’s title you see. Daddy is just a younger son.”

“And when your Uncle G. dies your father will be Lord Wutherwood and you’ll be Lord Rune?”

“Yes, I shall, if the old pig ever does die.”

“Well, then there’d be a job for you. You could go into the House of Lords.”

“No; I couldn’t. Poor Daddy would do that. He could bring in a bill about sheep-dip if peers are allowed to bring in bills. I rather think they only squash them, but I’m not sure.”

“You wouldn’t care about being a politician, I suppose?”

“No,” said Henry sadly, “I’m afraid I wouldn’t.” He looked thoughtfully at Roberta and shook his head. “The only thing I seem to have any inclination for is writing nonsense-rhymes and playing cricket and I’m terribly bad at both. I adore dressing up of course, but only in funny noses and false beards, and we all like doing that, even Daddy, so I don’t imagine it indicates the stage as a career. I suppose I shall have to try and win the heart of an ugly heiress. I can’t hope to fascinate a pretty one.”

“Oh,” cried Roberta in a fury, “don’t pretend to be so *feeble!*”

“I’m not pretending, alas.”

“And don’t be so affected. ‘Alas!’”

“But it’s true, Robin. We are feeble. We’re museum pieces. Carry-overs from another age. Two generations ago we didn’t bother about what we would do when we grew up. We went into regiments, or politics, and lived on large estates. The younger sons had younger son’s compartments and either fitted them nicely or else went raffishly to the dogs and were hauled back by the head of the family. Everything was all ready for us from the moment we were born.”

Henry paused, wagged his head sadly and continued:

“Now look at us! My papa is really an amiable dilettante. So, I suppose, would I be if I could go back into setting, but you can’t do that without money. Our trouble is that we go on behaving in the grand leisured manner without the necessary backing. It’s very dishonest of us, but we’re conditioned to it. We’re the victims of inherited behaviourism.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Nor do I, but *didn’t* it sound grand?”

“Do you?” asked Henry anxiously. “Anyway, Robin, we shan’t last long at this rate. A dreadful time is coming when we shall be obliged to do something to justify our existence. Make money or speeches or something. When the last of the money goes we’ll be for it. The ones with brains and energy may survive but they’ll be starting from a long way behind scratch. They say that if you want a job in the City it’s wise to speak with an accent and pretend you’ve been to a board school. A hollow mockery, because you’re found out the moment you have to do sums or write letters.”

“But,” said Robin, “your sort of education—”

“Suits me. It’s an admirable preparation for almost everything except an honest job of work.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Don’t you? Perhaps you’re right and it’s just our family that’s mad of itself

without any excuse.”

“You’re a nice family. I love every one of you.”

“Darling Robin.” Henry reached out a hand and patted her. “Don’t be too fond of us.”

“My mother,” said Robin, “says you’ve all got such a tremendous amount of charm.”

“Does she?” To Robin’s surprise Henry’s face became faintly pink. “Well,” he said, “perhaps if your mother is right *that* may tide us over until Uncle G. pops off. Something has got to do it. Are there bums in New Zealand?”

“What do you mean? Don’t be common.”

“My innocent old Robin Grey! A bum is a gentleman in a bowler hat who comes to stay until you pay your bills.”

“Henry! How awful!”

“Frightful,” agreed Henry who was watching a hawk.

“I mean how shaming.”

“You soon get used to them. I remember one who made me a catapult when I was home for the holidays. That was the time Uncle G. paid up.”

“But aren’t you ever—ever—”

Roberta felt herself go scarlet and was silent.

“Ashamed of ourselves?”

“Well—”

“Listen,” said Henry. “I can hear voices.”

It was Frid and the twins. They were coming up the bush track and seemed to be in a state of excitement. In a moment they began shouting:

“Henry! Where are you-oo! Henry!”

“Hullo!” Henry shouted.

The manuka scrub on the edge of the bush was agitated and presently three Lampreys scrambled out into the open. The twins had been riding and still wore their beautiful English jodhpurs. Frid, on the contrary, was dressed in a bathing suit.

“I say, what do you think?” they cried.

“What?”

“Such a thrill! Daddy’s got a marvellous offer for Deepacres,” panted Frid.

“We’ll be able to pay our bills,” added Colin. And they all shouted together: “And we’re going back to England.”

## Arrival in London

NOW THAT THE LAST trunk was closed and had been dragged away by an impatient steward, the cabin seemed to have lost all its character. Surveying it by lamplight, for it was still long before dawn, Roberta felt that she had relinquished her ownership and was only there on sufferance. Odd scraps of paper lay about the floor; the wardrobe door stood open; across the dressing-table lay a trail of spilt powder. The unfamiliar black dress and overcoat in which she would go ashore hung on the peg inside the door and seemed to move stealthily, and of their own accord, from side to side. The ship still creaked with that pleasing air of absorption in its own progress. Outside in the dark the lonely sea still foamed past the porthole, and footsteps still thudded on the deck above Roberta's head. But all these dear and familiar sounds only added to her feeling of desolation. The voyage was over. Already the ship was astir with agitated passengers. Slowly the blackness outside turned to grey. For the last time she watched the solemn procession of the horizon, and the dawn-light on cold ruffles of foam.

She put on the black dress and, for the hundredth time, wondered if it was the right sort of garment in which to land. It had a white collar and there was a white cockade in her hat so perhaps she would not look too obviously in mourning.

"I've come thirteen thousand miles," thought Roberta. "Half-way round the world. Now I'm near the top of the world. These are northern seas and those fading stars are the stars of northern skies."

She leant out of the porthole and the sound of the sea surged up into her ears. A cold dawn-wind blew her hair back. She looked forward and saw a string of pale lights strung like a necklace across a wan greyness. Her heart thumped violently, for this was her first sight of England. For a long time she leant out of the porthole. Gulls now swooped and mewed round the ship. Afar off she heard the hollow sound of a siren. Filled with the strange inertia that is sometimes born of excitement Roberta could not make up her mind to go up on deck. At last a bugle sounded for the preposterously early breakfast. Roberta opened her bulging handbag and with a good deal of difficulty extracted the two New Zealand pound notes she meant to give her stewardess. It seemed a large tip but it would represent only thirty English shillings. The stewardess was waiting in the corridor. The steward was there too and the bath steward. Roberta was obliged to return to her cabin and grope again in her bag.

Breakfast was a strange hurried affair with everybody wearing unfamiliar clothes and exchanging addresses. Roberta felt there was no sense of conviction in the plans the passengers made to sustain the friendships they had formed, but she too gave addresses to one or two people and wrote theirs on the back of a menu card. She then

joined in the passport queue and in her excitement kept taking her landing papers out of her bag and putting them back again. Through the portholes she saw funnels, sides of tall ships, and finally buildings that seemed quite close to hand. She had her passport stamped and went up to B deck where the familiar notices looked blankly at her. Already the hatches were open and the winches uncovered. She stood apart from the other passengers and like them gazed forward. The shore was now quite close and there were many other ships near at hand. Stewards, pallid in their undervests, leant out of portholes to stare at the big liner. Roberta heard a passenger say, "Good old Thames." She heard names that were strange yet familiar: Gravesend, Tilbury, Greenhithe.

"Nearly over, now, Miss Grey," said a voice at her elbow. An elderly man with whom she had been vaguely friendly leant on the rail beside her.

"Yes," said Roberta. "Almost over."

"This is your first sight of London?"

"Yes."

"That must be a strange sensation. I can't imagine it. I'm a Cockney, you see." He turned and looked down at her. Perhaps he thought she looked rather small and young for he said:

"Someone coming to meet you?"

"At the station, not at the boat. An aunt. I've never met her."

"I hope she's a nice aunt."

"I do too. She's my father's sister."

"You'll be able to break the ice by telling her that you recognized her at once from her likeness to your father—" He broke off abruptly. "I'm sorry," he said. "I've said something that's—I'm sorry."

"It's all right," said Roberta, and because he looked so genuinely sorry she added: "I haven't got quite used to talking ordinarily about them yet. My father and mother, I mean. I've got to get used to it, of course."

"Both?" said her companion compassionately.

"Yes. In a motor accident. I'm going to live with this aunt."

"Well," he said, "I can only repeat that I do hope she's a nice aunt."

Roberta smiled at him and wished, though he was kind, that he would go away. A steward came along the deck carrying letters.

“Here’s the mail from the pilot boat,” said her companion.

Roberta didn’t know whether to expect a letter or not. The steward gave her two and a wireless message. She opened the wireless first and in another second her companion heard her give a little cry. He looked up from his own letter. Roberta’s dark eyes shone and her whole face seemed to have come brilliantly to life.

“Good news?”

“Oh yes! Yes. It’s from my greatest friends. I’m to stay with them first. They’re coming to the ship. My aunt’s ill or something and I’m to go to them.”

“That’s good news?”

“It’s splendid news. I knew them in New Zealand, you see, but I haven’t seen them for years.”

Roberta no longer wished that he would go away. She was so excited that she felt she must speak of her good fortune.

“I wrote and told them I was coming but the letter went by air-mail on the day I sailed.” She looked at her letters. “This one’s from Charlot.”

She opened it with shaking fingers. Lady Charles’s writing was like herself, at once thin, elegant and generous.

Darling Robin, Roberta read we are all so excited. As soon as your letter came I rang up your Kentish aunt and asked if we might have you first. She says we may for one night only which is measly but you must come back soon. She sounds quite nice. Henry and Frid will meet you at the wharf. We are so glad, darling. There’s only a box for you to sleep in but you won’t mind that. Best love from us all.

Charlot

The wireless said: “AUNT ILL SO WE ARE ALLOWED TO KEEP YOU FOR A MONTH. HURRAH DARLING SO GLAD AUNT NOT SERIOUSLY ILL SO EVERYTHING SPLENDID LOVE CHARLOT.”

The second was from Roberta’s aunt.

My dearest Roberta [it said], I am so grieved and vexed that I am unable to welcome you to Dear Old England but alas, my dear, I am prostrated with such dreadful sciatica that my doctor insists on a visit to a very special nursing home!! So expensive and worrying for poor me and I would at whatever cost to myself have defied him if it had not been for your friend Lady Charles Lamprey, who rang me up from London which was quite an excitement in my humdrum life to

ask when you arrived and on hearing of my dilemma very kindly offered to take you for a month or more . At first I suggested one night but I know your dear father and mother thought very highly of Lady Charles Lamprey and now I feel I may with a clear conscience accept her offer. This letter will, I am assured, reach you while you are still on your ship. I am so distressed that this happened but all's well that ends well, and I'm afraid you will find life in a Kentish village very quiet after the gaiety and grandeurs of your London friends!!! Well, my dear, Welcome to England and believe me I shall look forward to our meeting as soon as ever I return!

With much love,

Your affectionate

ANT HLDA

P.S. I have written a little note to Lady Charles Lamprey. By the way I hope that is the correct way to address her! Should it perhaps be Lady Imogen Lamprey? I seem to remember she was The Hon., or was it Lady, Imogen Ringle. I do hope I have not committed a faux pas! I think her husband is the Lord Charles Lamprey who was at Oxford with dear old Uncle George Alton who afterwards became rector of Lumpington-Parva but I don't suppose he would remember. ANT H.

P.P.S. On second thoughts he would be much too young!! A. H.

Roberta grinned and then laughed outright. She looked up to find her fellow-passenger smiling at her.

"Everything as it should be?" he asked.

"Lovely," said Roberta.



As the distance lessened between wharf and ship the communal life that had bound the passengers together for five weeks dwindled and fell away. Already they appeared to be strangers to each other and their last conversations grew more and more desultory and unreal. To Roberta, the ship herself seemed to lose familiarity. Because she had so much enjoyed her first long voyage she was now aware of a brief melancholy. But only a ditch of dirty water remained and on the wharf a crowd waited behind a barrier. Isolated individuals had begun to flutter handkerchiefs. Roberta's eyes searched diligently among the closely packed people and she had decided that neither Henry nor Frid was there when suddenly she saw them, standing apart from the others and waving with that vague sideways sweep of the Lampreys. Henry looked much as she remembered him but four years had made an enormous difference to Frid. Instead of a shapeless schoolgirl Roberta saw a post-debutante, a young woman of twenty who looked as if every inch of herself and her clothes had been subjected to a sort of

intensive manicuring. How smart Frid was and how beautifully painted; and how different they both looked from anyone else on the wharf. Henry was bare-headed and Roberta, accustomed to the close-cropped New Zealand heads, thought his hair rather long. But he looked nice, smiling up at her. She could see that he and Frid were having a joke. Roberta looked away. Lines had been flung to men on the wharf. With an imperative rattle, gang-planks were thrown out and five men in bowler hats walked up the nearest one.

“We won’t be allowed ashore just yet,” said her friend. “There’s always a delay. Good Lord, what on earth are those two people doing down there? They must be demented! Look!”

He pointed at Henry and Frid who thrust out their tongues, rolled their eyes, beat the air with their hands and stamped rhythmically.

“Extraordinary!” he ejaculated. “Who can they be?”

“They are my friends,” said Roberta. “They’re doing a haka.”

“A what?”

“A Maori war-dance. It’s to welcome me. They’re completely mad.”

“Oh,” said her friend, “yes. Very funny.”

Roberta got behind him and did a few haka movements. A lot of the passengers were watching Henry and Frid and most of the people on the wharf. When they had finished their haka they turned their backs to the ship and bent their heads.

“What are they doing now?” Roberta’s friend asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered nervously.

The barrier was lifted and the crowd on the wharf moved towards the gangways. For a moment or two Roberta lost sight of the Lampreys. The people round her began laughing and pointing, and presently she saw her friends coming on board. They now wore papier-mâché noses and false beards and they gesticulated excitedly.

“They must be characters,” said her acquaintance doubtfully.

The passengers all hurried towards the head of the gangplank and Roberta was submerged among people much taller than herself. Her heart thumped; she saw nothing but the backs of overcoats and heard only confused cries of greeting. Suddenly she found herself in somebody’s arms. False beards and nose were pressed against her cheeks; she smelt Frid’s scent and the stuff Henry put on his hair.

“Hullo, darling,” cried the Lampreys.

“Did you like our haka?” asked Frid. “I wanted us to wear Maori mats and be painted brown but Henry wanted to be bearded so we compromised. It’s such fun you’ve come.”

“Tell me,” said Henry solemnly, “What do you think of dear old England?”

“Did you have a nice voyage?” asked Frid anxiously. “Were you sick?”

“Shall we go now?”

“Or do you want to kiss the Captain?”

“Come on,” said Frid. “Let’s go. Henry says we’ve got to bribe the customs so that they’ll take you first.”

“Do be quiet, Frid,” said Henry, “it’s all a secret and you don’t call it a bribe. Have you got any money, Robin? I’m afraid we haven’t.”

“Yes, of course,” said Roberta. “How much?”

“Ten bob. I’ll do it. It doesn’t matter so much if I’m arrested.”

“You’d better take off your beard,” said Frid.

The rest of the morning was a dream. There was a long wait in the customs shed where Roberta kept remeeting all the passengers to whom she had said good-bye. There was a trundling of luggage to a large car where a chauffeur waited. Roberta instantly felt apologetic about the size of her cabin trunk. She found it quite impossible to readjust herself to these rapidly changing events. She was only vaguely aware of a broad and slovenly street, of buildings that seemed incredibly drab, of ever-increasing traffic. When Henry and Frid told her that this was the East End and murmured about Limehouse and Poplar, Roberta was only vaguely disappointed that the places were so much less romantic than their associations, that the squalor held no suggestion of illicit glamour, that the Road—looked so precisely like its name. When they came into the City and Henry and Frid pointed uncertainly to the Mansion House or suggested she should look at the dome of St. Paul’s, Roberta obediently stared out of the windows but nothing that she saw seemed real. It was as if she lay on an unfamiliar beach and breaker after breaker rolled over her head. The noise of London bemused her more than the noise of the sea. Her mind was limp; she heard herself talking and wondered at the coherence of the sentence.

“Here’s Fleet Street,” said Henry. “Do you remember ‘Up the Hill of Ludgate, down the Hill of Fleet’?”

“Yes,” murmured Roberta, “yes. Fleet Street.”

“We’ve miles to go still,” said Frid. “Robin, did you know I am going to be an actress?”

“She might have guessed,” said Henry, “by the way you walk. Did you notice her walk, Robin? She sort of paws the ground. When she comes into the room she shuts the door behind her and leans against it.”

Frid grinned. “I do it beautifully,” she said. “It’s second nature to me.”

“She goes to a frightful place inhabited by young men in mufflers who run their hands through their hair and tell Frid she’s marvellous.”

“It’s a dramatic school,” Frid explained. “The young men are very intelligent. All of them say I’m going to be a good actress.”

“We’ll be passing the law courts in a minute,” said Henry.

Scarlet omnibuses sailed past like ships. Inside them were pale people who looked at once alert, tired and preoccupied. In a traffic jam a dark blue car came so close alongside that the men in the back seat were only a few inches away from Roberta and the Lampreys.

“That’s one of the new police cars, Frid,” said Henry.

“How do you know?”

“Well, I know it is. I expect those enormous men are Big Fours.”

“I wish they’d move on,” said Frid. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we fell into their hands one of these days.”

“Why?” asked Roberta.

“Well, the twins were saying at breakfast yesterday that they thought the only thing to be done was for them to turn crooks and be another lot of Mayfair boys.”

“It was rather a good idea, really,” said Henry. “You see Colin said he’d steal incredibly rich dowager’s jewels and Stephen would establish his alibi at the Ritz or somewhere. Nobody can tell them apart, you know.”

“And then, you know,” added Frid, “if one of them was arrested they’d each say it was the other and as one of them must be innocent they’d have to let both of them go.”

“From which,” said Henry, “you will have gathered we are in the midst of a financial crisis.”

Roberta started at the sound of that familiar phrase.

“Oh, no!” she said.

“Oh, yes,” said Henry, “and what’s more it’s a snorter. Everybody seems to be furious

with us.”

“Mummy’s going to pop the pearls this afternoon,” added Frid, “on her way to the manicurist.”

“She’s never done that before,” said Henry. “This is the Strand, Robin. That church is either St. Clement Dane or St. Mary-le-Strand and the next one is whatever that one isn’t. We’d better explain about the crisis, I suppose.”

“I wish you would,” said Roberta. In her bemused condition the Lampreys’ affairs struck a friendly and recognizable note. She could think sharply about their debts but she could scarcely so much as gape at the London she had greatly longed to see. It was as if her powers of receptivity were half-anesthetized and would respond only to familiar impressions. She listened attentively to a long recital of how Lord Charles had invested a great deal of the money he still mysteriously possessed in something called San Domingoes and how it had almost immediately disappeared. She heard of a strange venture in which Lord Charles had planned to open a jewellery business in the City, run on some sort of commission basis, with Henry and the twins as salesmen. “And at least,” said Frid, “there would have been Mummy’s things that she got out of pawn when Cousin Ruth died. It would have been better to sell than to pop them, don’t you think?” This project, it appeared, had depended on somebody called Sir David Stein who had recently committed suicide, leaving Lord Charles with an empty office and a ten years’ lease on his hands.

“And so now,” said Henry, “we appear to be sunk. That’s Charing Cross Station. We thought we would take you to a play to-night, Robin.”

“And we can dance afterwards,” said Frid. “Colin’s in love with a girl in the play so I expect he’ll want her to come whizzing on with us which is rather a bore. Have you asked Mary to come, Henry?”

“No,” said Henry. “We’ve only got five seats and the twins both want to come and anyway I want to dance with Robin, and Colin’s actress isn’t coming.”

“Well, Stephen could take Mary off your hands.”

“He doesn’t like her.”

“Mary is Henry’s girl,” explained Frid. “Only vaguely, though.”

“Well, she’s quite nice really,” said Henry.

“Charming, darling,” said Frid handsomely.

Roberta suddenly felt rather desolate. She stared out of the window and only half-listened to Henry who seemed to think he ought to point out places of interest.

“This is Trafalgar Square,” said Henry. “Isn’t that thing in the middle too monstrous?”