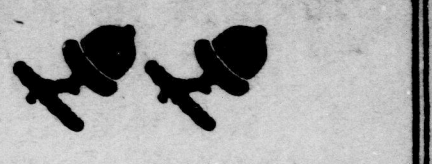


POPLARIS

BY EDEN PHILPOTTS AND
ARNOLD BENNETT



Mary stood up. "You are very, very good," she replied, with deep feeling. And suddenly the atmosphere changed for Tony. The fact that Philip Masters was in actual veritable danger became somehow intensely real to him.

"Not at all. You know Philip is a great pal of mine."

"And supposing you go—go you go what shall you do when you get out there, Philip?"

"That will depend. We may have to consult the local police."

"I hope nothing terrible will happen," Mary breathed.

"Why do you imagine such things?"

"Because I have been thinking there may be something in that hidden treasure story of the negro Cocco's after all. And if money is concerned—and my uncle—"

"She stopped."

"Do you know," cried Tony, "that's just what I've been thinking—I mean about the treasure. As for risks. How can there be any risk? Why Philip should be carried off to a place like Grenada, I can't imagine. But we'll find him. I tell you what—it wouldn't be a bad plan to get hold of Cocco and hear him talk, eh? He might be useful."

"I should like to very much," Mary answered. "He was my poor father's friend, the only friend he had, I think."

The voice almost broke.

"And Tony, as he called briskly for his hat and overcoat, had a dim, vague sense of the grim quality of the whole adventure. And he perceived Mary as a tragic and remote figure, far above, not for him, by a sphere of emotions, vainly different from him. Such simple, vain, good-natured men have at times such glimpses."

CHAPTER XX.

Travels in London.

"After quitting Mary Pollexfen in Kingsway, Philip Masters did not reach Poplar on the Sunday evening without a considerable amount of difficulty. Like many Londoners, he knew not his London. He had probably never in his life been further east than Aldgate; it is doubtful if he ever knew the "Three Nuns." He hailed a hansom just north of St. Clement Dane's, and remarked airily to the cabman: "Cotton street, Poplar, No. 7."

"Cotton street, Poplar, No. 7?"

"Not me," said the cabman.

"What's it worth?" Philip inquired, trying to look generous.

"It ain't worth anything," the cabman replied. "I'm not going to Poplar tonight, guv'nor. I'll drive you to Aldgate, if you like."

Philip accepted. At Aldgate, where he already felt himself in a foreign land, or rather in a hostile country strongly held by an enemy, where he didn't know even the exterior of the churches, where the streets were full of trams instead of crawling cabs, it was with a certain sinking of the heart that he saw his own vehicle vanish. He ought to have been content with a tram, but he lacked skill in the lore of London travel, and loitered about for another hansom. Fortune favored him.

"Cotton street, Poplar," he said to the driver, wisely leaving out the No. 7 on this occasion.

"And to his despair and disgust the cabman replied, "Not me, guv'nor."

"It isn't far," the driver questioned, somewhat wistfully.

"It's further than I'm going this blessed night," said the cabman. "I'll take you to Stepney Station, if you like. That's just in the radius."

Once more Philip bowed.

"You take me further and further into regions Caesar never knew. It followed a thoroughfare wider than anything Philip had seen outside Paris, but as regards its characteristics, ineffably depressing. And the thoroughfare was eternal. Time after time it had the air of reaching the end of the world, and then it made up its mind to proceed further. Philip had not believed in thirty years as many sad-eyed, ill-dressed, plain people as passed the windows of the cab in thirty minutes. There were plenty of public houses, all resembling each other so exactly that they might have been bought at some wholesale store of public houses and put down there at regular intervals, signs and everything complete; but there was not a single decent restaurant—using the word "decent" in Philip's sense—for a single building that put his eye in a friendly manner.

Then the mean lights of Stepney Station appeared, and Philip was obliged to descend again unprotected in the hostile country. He was geographically so lost that he knew not east from west. He had heard of Stepney chiefly as a district owning a bishop; he might have been in Strasburg, Staffa, or Stormaway.

"How do I go on from here?" he asked the cabman respectfully.

And the cabman looked down on him from his box. "Any of these trams," said the cabman, "I don't know as they go to Cotton street, but they go to Aldgate."

"Is it much further?"

"It should say it's a tidy step."

He boarded a tram which he ought to have boarded at Aldgate.

The conductor actually knew Cotton street, and Philip, unheated, regarded him as a man and a brother. The tram was a leisurely apparatus. The entire population of Stepney and Poplar seemed to get in and out of it about three times. It passed churches and manufactories. It crossed water by means of bridges, and Philip saw the masts of ships dimly against the night sky. He also saw now and then, when the tram stopped posters on the walls in languages of which he could not make out a single character. Then the tram drew up at another large railway station and a couple of hundred yards further on the conductor tipped him a familiar wink.

"Ere yare," said the conductor.

And Philip had to descend, and to leave his sole acquaintance in that desolate region. The strange Oriental odor of the tram remained with him.

Just as he had heard of Stepney, so he had heard of Poplar, and he was in it. His own London seemed to be

in another hemisphere. Close by was a curious church, and its clock struck 12 just as Philip was hesitating at the corner of East India Dock road and Cotton street.

He remembered that Giralda, too, had been down there all alone, and he whistled in order to create in himself a feeling of malice. In less than a minute he stood in front of No. 7. So far as he could judge in the obscurity of the badly lit street it was a house unutterably mean and melancholy. A light was burning in the hall, as if light had been burning in the hall of the Corner House on just such an evening. He went up the two steps and knocked loud and bold.

A rather short, firmly built man opened the door.

"I want to see Mrs. Upttery," Philip said at once. He had no intention of raising the point whether or not Mrs. Upttery lived there, or had lived there. The man seemed to hesitate.

"Mrs. Upttery?" he murmured in a thick, heavy voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Upttery."

"We don't want any friends of Mrs. Upttery here," said the man in a tone of finality. "A nice time of night to some waking people up."

"I'm not a friend of Mrs. Upttery, mate," Philip protested. "But I've got to speak to her."

"Well, she ain't in."

"When will she be in?"

"She won't be in. At least I hope not. She turned this house upside down. She made forty times more mess than she's worth. And she ain't paid her bill properly. If my mother had her she'd claw her blooming eyes out for her, that's what she'd do. And quick!"

The man was furious against Mrs. Upttery. He made as if to close the door but Philip put his foot in it, at the same time holding out half a crown which glinted in the feeble light.

"See here, mate," said he persuasively. "If that's any use to you it's yours. I'd like to have a bit of a chat with you. I shan't keep you two minutes. But I've got most particular reasons for meeting with Mrs. Upttery, and I'm no more a friend of hers than you are."

"The man's hand fidgeted toward the half-crown, and then his fingers closed on it, and he opened the door wider. Without waiting for an invitation, Philip stepped inside the house, a candle burned crookedly in a pewter stick on a deal table. The sides of the passage were shiny with grease, and the floor was of no special color or substance. Philip's eyes interrogated the man's. He was shabbily dressed, but he wore a cap, and a leather belt showed under his waistcoat. His face was pale, and it first gave the impression of being young, but this impression passed; he might have been almost any age.

"That do you want to know?" he asked.

"You say Mrs. Upttery's been knocking up a dust here. What about?"

"How do I know what about? I only know as she's going as stewardess, or something on a yacht. But if you ask me, she's a queer lot. What surprise me is that the police ain't been after her. If she ain't a jailbird, then I never seen one. And I seen a few, too."

"A yacht?"

"Yes, I did hear she was bound for the east—Grenada. Grand Etang—damned if I can recollect the names. But the old woman's been babbling about Grand Etang ever since she came in tonight."

Philip was immensely interested.

"Where is she now?"

"She's gone down to the yacht with her bundle."

"Where's the yacht?"

"She's lying off Green's wharf, if she hasn't sailed."

Philip thought a moment.

"Far from here?" he questioned.

"No, no far here."

"If you'll come out and take me there at once," said Philip, feeling in his pocket, "there's five shillings for you."

"I'll do it," said the man promptly. "Come on."

They went outside instantly, and the man banged the door. He led the way down Cotton street, Philip following. They crossed Poplar High street and soon Philip found himself floundering over lines of rail-way amid little groups of loaded wagons with a red signal here and there in the distance. The man walked fast and never looked behind. His route lay over uneven ground; all was strange, exotic and full of sinister romance. Some sheds loomed up, and a warehouse. The man passed along an entry lit by an oil lamp.

"Look out," he said at last.

Philip saw lights. He stood on a wharf. The vast and heaving Thames lay astonishingly before him, with the shipping of the world on its broad bosom. Two steamers were alongside, and into one of them a team came with an incredible thunderous rattle, and screech was pouring bulky packages. Men cried to one another between the ship and the wharf. Philip's gaze walked up the wharf to a long, sloping gangway that gave access to the other steamer. Philip observed the name "White Rose" on a dirty gray life-boat. A thin smoke was oozing from the funnel. A solitary lantern showed from the mast. The guide crossed the gangway, Philip at his heels. And as Philip gained the deck of the mysterious steamer he paused a moment to take in the scene, with its wide water, its tarry, oily odor of ships, its gliding, spectral lights, and the very air smelled of the sea. This was London. This was the city of Piccadilly Circus, and the Alcazar, and the Devonshire Mansion.

"Down here," the man called, indicating a companion ladder, but he remembered nothing else for quite a long time.

CHAPTER XXI.

Uncle Walter Manages Better.

When his senses became once more available for the uses of his existence he was at first aware of nothing except a feeling of fatigue and petulance. It seemed to him that he was like a

cross and sickly child that had a comprehensive quarrel with the universe. Then he began to notice other interesting things, as that he was lying on his back on some sort of substance, and that there was a small circle of faint radiance in front of him to his right. He tried lazily to move his arms, and he could not; then his legs, and he could not; then he renewed the attempt with increased force, still without result. This made him angry. He struggled hard, was conscious of pain in his ankles and wrists, and muttered.

"I'm tied down."

Thenceforward his memory recovered very rapidly. He recalled all that had passed up to the moment of descending the companion. He put two and two ingeniously together, despite a wandering pain in his head. The thought flashed through his brain like a scientific discovery. He remembered and explained a whole series of differing facts:

"Uncle Pollexfen's at the bottom of this."

And shortly afterwards he said aloud: "What? I'm dashed!"

His eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom, and he gradually perceived that he was in a cabin, and that the circle of faint light was a porthole. He thought of Mary Pollexfen, far off in another London, with intense and violent longing. And he thought of the Courier and Lord Nasing, expecting the wonderful "copy" which he was to provide.

From time to time he made efforts to free his limbs in vain.

He heard a key turn in a lock. The door of the cabin opened. A lighted match came into the cabin, followed by a man. Philip's eyes blinked. The man approached a hanging lamp, carefully lighting it. He blew out the match, dropped it on the floor, and turned to examine the prisoner. He was the man of No. 7 Cotton street, the man who had led him, and who had lured him, on board the yacht!

Philip made no sign, though his brain was working at a high rate of speed. His temperamental calm always served him well in a crisis. He had fully grasped the futility of any kind of protest, and he was determined to wait. The man, with an air of bland indifference, bent over the bunk on which Philip lay.

"Hm!" he murmured, rather in the style of a doctor.

Then he picked up a black bonnet which was lying near the door, and gave a twist to his mouth, and winked. The sudden resemblance to Mrs. Upttery was too remarkable to leave any doubt in Philip's mind. He was bound and helpless in the presence of Walter Pollexfen, that protean being who, in his love, was his proper person, dominated the extraordinary drama of the Corner House.

"Thanks for the three half-crowns. I managed it somewhat better this time," said the man softly.

"What?" Philip asked.

"It struck me that the man had changed completely. He now spoke with a highly cultivated accent in a tone that was even more pleasant. It, indeed, he was Mary's uncle, Mary Pollexfen, was not the first of his sort in her family.

"The insensibility business," answered the man. "A few days ago I thought my hand had lost its cunning. It needs a blow of just sufficient strength, neither too strong nor too feeble, in just the right place."

"Are you Walter Pollexfen?" Philip asked, ignoring these observations.

"Mr. Masters," said the man. "I have come to satisfy your curiosity. I am Walter Pollexfen. We have had the pleasure of meeting you several times already."

He smiled vaguely.

"I wish you'd unfasten these ropes," Philip said. "You have not been quite kind to me, you know, Mr. Pollexfen."

Mr. Pollexfen responded. "There is a French proverb about the indiscretion of putting one's finger between the tree and its bark. You committed that indiscretion. It is ridiculous to give against the consequences of having flown in the face of a proverb, my dear sir. However, I am willing to release you. First let me direct your attention to this revolver and this knife."

He drew Philip's revolver and Philip's pocket-knife from his pockets. "I will release your legs first, then your left arm and then your right. Having done that, I shall retreat rapidly to the opposite corner of the cabin, and if you move off the bunk you will be translated direct to heaven. I mention this because I have an objection to your jiu-jitsu tricks. It was a lamentable fault in my programme that while I was in Yokohama I neglected to study jiu-jitsu myself. Do you understand what I have said?"

"Perfectly," said Philip. "Go ahead."

"Your manners please me," Pollexfen remarked as he cut the cord.

"I can't return the compliment," said Philip.

In another moment he was free, while Pollexfen stood at the opposite end of the cabin, the revolver in one hand and the pen-knife in the other. He wondered whether it would be better to make a dash at the scoundrel instantly or to await events. Having reflected upon the matter, he decided to wait. He waited, and Pollexfen's previous exploits, and upon the kind of person that the hero of them must necessarily be, he decided that in all the circumstances it would be better to await events.

"Perhaps," he ventured, stretching, and twisting his legs, and rubbing his wrists, "you'll explain what's the meaning of this foolery with me. It looks to me as much like a theatrical display as anything."

"Certainly," he said, "I will tell you."

"Have I not said that I am here to satisfy your legitimate curiosity? As for the present scene, it is in fact rather like a theatrical display. You see I'm a theatrical person—kindly lie down on that bunk—and I've had about me, that I am a great man. Besides, you deserve that your audacious

curiosity should be appeased. I might have killed you at once."

"It surprises me that you did not," Philip put in. "A murder on so many, or less, especially when one has murdered one's own brother—"

"I'm bound to tell you," said Pollexfen, "that I didn't, morally, murder my brother. I meant only to stun him. Inphilly, I hit too hard—and there the old chap was, dead at my feet."

"What did you hit him with?"

"This," said Pollexfen, putting pen-knife and cord in his pocket and drawing therefrom a small, pear-shaped bag inclosed in a long, narrow net. "It contains a mixture of the smallest shot and silver sand. Shot alone would be too heavy, and sand wouldn't be heavy enough in such a small quantity. It's an instrument of attack affected by the hooligans of Lima, where I met with the circumstance."

He examined his pockets. They had been emptied. He searched the cabin for suitable material, and found nothing but a salver that was reared up on the top of the mahogany erection by the bulkhead. He took the mahogany erection, which in a space of three cubic feet contained with its drawers and apertures and taps and basins and hooks the conveniences of an entire house. He cursed, as philosophers will in their moments of frustration, the knob, and with the sharp screw-end of it he began to scratch a message on the salver. He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

He rushed again to the port hole and tried to put the salver through it. But the circumference of the port hole, immutable Euclid was against him. In a frenzy of rage he bent the salver across his knee. It would just slip through the hole. He let it fall into the boat, and it descended softly on the neatly coiled tarpaper.

The knock was repeated.

Making no answer, Philip rapidly fastened the port hole.

"I say!" The voice was Pollexfen's. "Are you lying on the bunk?"

"No, I'm not."

"Well, kindly lie on the bunk. I'm coming."

Philip obeyed. By stretching out his hand he could screw the knob home in his drawer.

"Well, on the whole I shan't trust you."

There was silence. Then Philip heard the boring of an instrument in the door, and presently an inch-wide gouge came through at the height of a man's eye and was withdrawn. An eye took the place of the gouge, and roved over the cabin.

"When I say I'm on the bunk, I'm on the bunk," observed Philip.

"So I see," answered Pollexfen. "But I preferred to see."

He reentered, making prominent the revolver.

"To resume," he said.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Compact.

"What are you leading up to?" Philip asked. "That's what I want to know."

"To resume," said Pollexfen, ignoring this definite question. "I got the information that I required out of the late captain's pockets. It was quite as good as I expected, and it quite confirmed my view that he could not have used it successfully himself. I saw him at various times, and he was at all on time. I had to pretend to be ill, for reasons of discretion. And your unfortunate discovery made of that and tooth out of my comb made it necessary for me to appear at the inquest."

"I think my appearance at the inquest was rather masterly, don't you, Mr. Masters?"

In the pleasure it gave him it rivalled his finest triumphs at the Britannia, Hoxton and Ford's Opera House in Denver. It was, not to exaggerate, immense. You may be interested to know that the captain knew who I was before he died. I had an interview with him in his room, stormy, in fact, pugilistic. The comb must have got broken then. I had meant simply to steal the few trifling documents that I needed, but I fell in with the captain's whim, and he was so good-natured that he ended badly for the captain. Then, besides, having to pretend to be ill, I had taken a room at the Corner House marine arrangements to perfect and complete. And then, to worry me still further, began to have my doubts about myself. I found out the identity of the youth Meredith—the chit renegade's uncle in certain points of character; and to cap it all I was compelled to waste precious time in dealing with Mr. Varcoe."

Philip gave a start before he could control himself.

"I see I am beginning to excite you now," Pollexfen observed with an agreeable and ironic smile. "Admit it."

Masters was conscious of a feeling hardly to be differentiated from terror. And yet Pollexfen talked so easily, so naturally, with such an undeniable charm of manner, that his listener could scarcely comprehend his own mental disturbance.

"Where is Varcoe?" he demanded, in a nervous voice.

"Let me see," Pollexfen said reflectively. "Today is Monday. This makes the third day. Yes. . . . All London knows where Varcoe is. Mr. Varcoe is a very able man—conceited, over-confident, but able. He made all his preparations, and he meant to strike with a single blow, that the captain was too suspicious, guilty of only one mistake. He thought I didn't suspect him. Whereas the contrary was the case. So that when he entered my room for the battle of Omdurman I was waiting behind the door with my little instrument, and the battle occurred differently. You asked me where he is. Well, on the day of my arrival at the Corner House I was obliged to find a hiding place for male attire and other details, and

opened it.

"Don't try any games," he warned the prisoner, with a menacing accent, and went out and shut and locked the door. The beat of the engine ceased.

Philip leaped from the bunk, making straight for the port hole. With difficulty he unscrewed its fastening and opened it and looked forth. The loading of the other steamer was now finished and not a soul was on the wharf. He called in a low voice; he dared not make much noise; there was no answer. Below him lay a broad, flat-bottomed pair-oar. It was moored to its berth, and it was swaying to and fro, its painter alternately fell into the water and rose dripping; and the sound of hundreds of drops pattering on the black surface of the river each time the painter rose was strangely clear and uncanny in the night.

A notion came to Philip.

He examined his pockets. They had been emptied. He searched the cabin for suitable material, and found nothing but a salver that was reared up on the top of the mahogany erection by the bulkhead. He took the mahogany erection, which in a space of three cubic feet contained with its drawers and apertures and taps and basins and hooks the conveniences of an entire house. He cursed, as philosophers will in their moments of frustration, the knob, and with the sharp screw-end of it he began to scratch a message on the salver. He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

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I took up the floor, loosening the nails under the bed. Nothing is simpler to a man who has been in all trades, from navying to treasure seeking, including naturally that of a carpenter, to arrange nail-heads where nails have been in a way to escape detection even under a close scrutiny. I could lift and replace the planks of the floor in a moment. I had quite a wardrobe down there. Behold the reason why you and your little friend found nothing when you feloniously searched my chamber that night. I—I saw at once you had been on the prowl." He laughed quietly.

"I am not denying it," Philip put in.

"Good! I should have put the Captain under the floor and left London on the morning after his death; but he was unhelpfully too fat. And moreover his weight might have sent him through the ceiling of the room below, which would have been awkward. These objections do not apply