



ISLANDS OF  
TIME: LIFE IN  
THE ENDLESS  
SUN

"To a stranger, life upon those little islands is uniform even to weariness. But the old native dons like my grandfather ripen in the prolonged sunshine, like the turtle upon the Bahama banks, nor know of existence more desirable. Life in the tropics I take to be a placid torpidity. During the long, warm mornings of nearly half a century, my grandfather Titbottom had sat in his dressing-gown and gazed at the sea. But one calm June day, as he slowly paced the piazza after breakfast, his dreamy glance was arrested by a little vessel, evidently nearing the shore. He called for his spyglass, and surveying the craft, saw that she came from the neighboring island.

She glided smoothly, slowly, over the summer sea. The warm morning air was sweet with perfumes, and silent with heat. The sea sparkled languidly, and the brilliant blue hung cloudlessly over. Scores of little island vessels had my grandfather seen come over the horizon, and cast anchor in the port. Hundreds of summer mornings had the white sails flashed and faded, like vague faces through forgotten dreams. But this time he laid down the spyglass, and leaned against a column of the piazza, and watched the vessel with an intentness that he could not explain. She came nearer and nearer, a graceful spectre in the dazzling morning. "'Decidedly I must step down and see about that vessel,' said my grandfather Titbottom. "He gathered his ample dressing-gown about him, and stepped from the piazza with no other protection from the sun than the little smoking cap upon his head.

His face wore a calm, beaming smile, as if he approved of all the world. He was not an old man, but there was almost a patriarchal pathos in his expression as he sauntered along in the sunshine towards the shore. A group of idle gazers was collected to watch the arrival. The little vessel furled her sails and drifted slowly landward, and as she was of very light draft, she came close to the shelving shore. A long plank was put out from her side, and the debarkation commenced. My grandfather Titbottom stood looking on to see the passengers descend. There were but a few of them, and mostly traders from the neighboring island. But suddenly the face of a young girl appeared over the side of the vessel, and she stepped upon the plank to descend.

My grandfather Titbottom instantly advanced, and moving briskly reached the top of the plank at the same moment, and with the old tassel of his cap flashing in the sun, and one hand in the pocket of his dressing gown, with the other he handed the young lady carefully down the plank. That young lady was afterwards my grandmother Titbottom. "And so, over the gleaming sea which he had watched so long, and which seemed thus to reward his patient gaze, came his bride that sunny morning. "'Of course we are happy,' he used to say: 'For you are the gift of the sun I have loved so long and so well.' And my grandfather Titbottom would lay his hand so tenderly upon the golden hair of his young bride, that you could fancy him a devout Parsee caressing sunbeams. "There were endless festivities upon occasion of the marriage; and my grandfather did not go to one of them in his dressing-gown.

The gentle sweetness of his wife melted every heart into love and sympathy. He was much older than she, without doubt. But age, as he used to say with a smile of immortal youth, is a matter of feeling, not of years. And if, sometimes, as she sat by his side upon the piazza, her fancy looked through her eyes upon that summer sea and saw a younger lover, perhaps some one of those graceful and glowing heroes who occupy the foreground of all young maidens' visions by the sea, yet she could not find one more generous and gracious, nor fancy one more worthy and loving than my grandfather Titbottom.

And if in the moonlit midnight, while he lay calmly sleeping, she leaned out of the window and sank into vague reveries of sweet possibility, and watched the gleaming path of the moonlight upon the water, until the dawn glided over it—it was only that mood of nameless regret and longing, which underlies all human happiness,—or it was the vision of that life of society, which she had never seen, but of which she had often read, and which looked very fair and alluring across the sea to a girlish imagination which knew that it should never know that reality. "These West Indian years were the great days of the family," said , with an air of majestic and regal regret, pausing and musing in our little parlor, like a late Stuart in exile, remembering England.

Prue raised her eyes from her work, and looked at him with a subdued admiration; for I have observed that, like the rest of her sex, she has a singular sympathy with the representative of a reduced family. Perhaps it is their finer perception which leads these tenderhearted women to recognize the divine right of social superiority so much more readily than we; and yet, much as Titbottom was enhanced in my wife's admiration by the discovery that his dusky sadness of nature and expression was, as it were, the expiring gleam and late twilight of ancestral splendors, I doubt if I would have preferred him for bookkeeper a moment sooner upon that account.

In truth, I have observed, down town, that the fact of your ancestors doing nothing is not considered good proof that you can do anything. But Prue and her sex regard sentiment more than action, and I understand easily enough why she is never tired of hearing me read of Prince Charlie. If Titbottom had been only a little younger, a little handsomer, a little more gallantly dressed—in fact, a little more of the Prince Charlie, I am sure her eyes would not have fallen again upon her work so tranquilly, as he resumed his story. "I can remember my grandfather Titbottom, although I was a very young child, and he was a very old man.

My young mother and my young grandmother are very distinct figures in my memory, ministering to the old gentleman, wrapped in his dressing-gown, and seated upon the piazza. I remember his white hair and his calm smile, and how, not long before he died, he called me to him, and laying his hand upon my head, said to me: "My child, the world is not this great sunny piazza, nor life the fairy stories which the women tell you here as you sit in their laps.

I shall soon be gone, but I want to leave with you some memento of my love for you, and I know nothing more valuable than these spectacles, which your grandmother brought from her native island, when she arrived here one fine summer morning, long ago. I cannot quite tell whether, when you grow older, you will regard it as a gift of the greatest value or as something that you had been happier never to have possessed.' "'But grandpapa, I am not short-sighted.' "

'My son, are you not human?' said the old gentleman; and how shall I ever forget the thoughtful sadness with which, at the same time he handed me the spectacles. "Instinctively I put them on, and looked at my grandfather. But I saw no grandfather, no piazza, no flowered dressing-gown: I saw only a luxuriant palm-tree, waving broadly over a tranquil landscape. Pleasant homes clustered around it. Gardens teeming with fruit and flowers; flocks quietly feeding; birds wheeling and chirping. I heard children's voices, and the low lullaby of happy mothers. The sound of cheerful singing came wafted from distant fields upon the light breeze. Golden harvests glistened out of sight, and I caught their rustling whisper of prosperity.

A warm, mellow atmosphere bathed the whole. I have seen copies of the landscapes of the Italian painter Claude which seemed to me faint reminiscences of that calm and happy vision. But all this peace and prosperity seemed to flow from the spreading palm as from a fountain. "I do not know how long I looked, but I had, apparently, no power, as I had no will, to remove the spectacles. What a wonderful island must Nevis be, thought I, if people carry such pictures in their pockets, only by buying a pair of spectacles! What wonder that my dear grandmother Titbottom has lived such a placid life, and has blessed us all with her sunny temper, when she has lived surrounded by such images of peace. "My grandfather died.

But still, in the warm morning sunshine upon the piazza, I felt his placid presence, and as I crawled into his great chair, and drifted on in reverie through the still, tropical day, it was as if his soft, dreamy eye had passed into my soul. My grandmother cherished his memory with tender regret. A violent passion of grief for his loss was no more possible than for the pensive decay of the year. We have no portrait of him, but I see always, when I remember him, that peaceful and luxuriant palm.

And I think that to have known one good old man—one man who, through the chances and rubs of a long life, has carried his heart in his hand, like a palm branch, waving all discords into peace, helps our faith in God, in ourselves, and in each other, more than many sermons. I hardly know whether to be grateful to my grandfather for the spectacles.

And yet when I remember that it is to them I owe the pleasant image of him which I cherish, I seem to myself sadly ungrateful. "Madam," said Titbottom to Prue, solemnly, "my memory is a long and gloomy gallery, and only remotely, at its further end, do I see the glimmer of soft sunshine, and only there are the pleasant pictures hung. They seem to me very happy along whose gallery the sunlight streams to their very feet, striking all the pictured walls into unfading splendor." Prue had laid her work in her lap, and as Titbottom paused a moment, and I turned towards her, I found her mild eyes fastened upon my face, and glistening with happy tears. "Misfortunes of many kinds came heavily upon the family after the head was gone.

The great house was relinquished. My parents were both dead, and my grandmother had entire charge of me. But from the moment that I received the gift of the spectacles, I could not resist their fascination, and I withdrew into myself, and became a solitary boy. There were not many companions for me of my own age, and they gradually left me, or, at least, had not a hearty sympathy with me; for if they teased me I pulled out my spectacles and surveyed them so seriously that they acquired a kind of awe of me, and evidently regarded my grandfather's gift as a concealed magical weapon which might be dangerously drawn upon them at any moment.

Whenever, in our games, there were quarrels and high words, and I began to feel about my dress and to wear a grave look, they all took the alarm, and shouted, 'Look out for Titbottom's spectacles,' and scattered like a flock of scared sheep. "Nor could I wonder at it. For, at first, before they took the alarm, I saw strange sights when I looked at them through the glasses.

If two were quarrelling about a marble or a ball, I had only to go behind a tree where I was concealed and look at them leisurely. Then the scene changed, and no longer a green meadow with boys playing, but a spot which I did not recognize, and forms that made me shudder or smile. It was not a big boy bullying a little one, but a young wolf with glistening teeth and a lamb cowering before him.

Or, it was a dog faithful and famishing—or a star going slowly into eclipse—or a rainbow fading—or a flower blooming—or a sun rising—or a waning moon. The revelations of the spectacles determined my feeling for the boys, and for all whom I saw through them. No shyness, nor awkwardness, nor silence, could separate me from those who looked lovely as lilies to my illuminated eyes. If I felt myself warmly drawn to any one I struggled with the fierce desire of seeing him through the spectacles. I longed to enjoy the luxury of ignorant feeling, to love without knowing, to float like a leaf upon the eddies of life, drifted now to a sunny point, now to a solemn shade—now over glittering ripples, now over gleaming calms,—and not to determined ports, a trim vessel with an inexorable rudder.

"But, sometimes, mastered after long struggles, I seized my spectacles and sauntered into the little town. Putting them to my eyes I peered into the houses and at the people who passed me. Here sat a family at breakfast, and I stood at the window looking in. O motley meal! fantastic vision! The good mother saw her lord sitting opposite, a grave, respectable being, eating muffins. But I saw only a bank-bill, more or less crumpled and tattered, marked with a larger or lesser figure. If a sharp wind blew suddenly, I saw it tremble and flutter; it was thin, flat, impalpable. I removed my glasses, and looked with my eyes at the wife. I could have smiled to see the humid tenderness with which she regarded her strange vis-à-vis.

Is life only a game of blind-man's-buff? of droll cross-purposes? "Or I put them on again, and looked at the wife. How many stout trees I saw, —how many tender flowers,—how many placid pools; yes, and how many little streams winding out of sight, shrinking before the large, hard, round eyes opposite, and slipping off into solitude and shade, with a low, inner song for their own solace. And in many houses I thought to see angels, nymphs, or at least, women, and could only find broomsticks, mops, or kettles, hurrying about, rattling, tinkling, in a state of shrill activity. I made calls upon elegant ladies, and after I had enjoyed the gloss of silk and the delicacy of lace, and the flash of jewels, I slipped on my spectacles, and saw a peacock's feather, flounced and furbelowed and fluttering.

Or an iron rod, thin, sharp, and hard; nor could I possibly mistake the movement of the drapery for any flexibility of the thing draped,—or, mysteriously chilled, I saw a statue of perfect form, or flowing movement, it might be alabaster, or bronze, or marble,—but sadly often it was ice; and I knew that after it had shone a little, and frozen a few eyes with its despairing perfection, it could not be put away in the niches of palaces for ornament and proud family tradition, like the alabaster, or bronze, or marble statues, but would melt, and shrink, and fall coldly away in colorless and useless water, be absorbed in the earth and utterly forgotten.

But the true sadness was rather in seeing those who, not having the spectacles, thought that the iron rod was flexible, and the ice statue warm. I saw many a gallant heart, which seemed to me brave and loyal as the crusaders sent by genuine and noble faith to Syria and the sepulchre, pursuing, through days and nights, and a long life of devotion, the hope of lighting at least a smile in the cold eyes, if not a fire in the icy heart. I watched the earnest, enthusiastic sacrifice. I saw the pure resolve, the generous faith, the fine scorn of doubt, the impatience of suspicion. I watched the grace, the ardor, the glory of devotion. Through those strange spectacles how often I saw the noblest heart renouncing all other hope, all other ambition, all other life, than the possible love of some one of those statues.

Ah! me, it was terrible, but they had not the love to give. The Parian face was so polished and smooth, because there was no sorrow upon the heart,—and, drearily often, no heart to be touched. I could not wonder that the noble heart of devotion was broken, for it had dashed itself against a stone. I wept, until my spectacles were dimmed for that hopeless sorrow; but there was a pang beyond tears for those icy statues. "Still a boy, I was thus too much a man in knowledge,—I did not comprehend the sights I was compelled to see. I used to tear my glasses away from my eyes, and, frightened at myself, run to escape my own consciousness. Reaching the small house where we then lived, I plunged into my grandmother's room and, throwing myself upon the floor, buried my face in her lap.

And sobbed myself to sleep with premature grief. But when I awakened, and felt her cool hand upon my hot forehead, and heard the low, sweet song, or the gentle story, or the tenderly told parable from the Bible, with which she tried to soothe me, I could not resist the mystic fascination that lured me, as I lay in her lap, to steal a glance at her through the spectacles. impatience of suspicion. I watched the grace, the ardor, the glory of devotion. Through those strange spectacles how often I saw the noblest heart renouncing all other hope, all other ambition, all other life, than the possible love of some one of those statues. Ah! me, it was terrible, but they had not the love to give. The Parian face was so polished and smooth, because there was no sorrow upon the heart,—and, drearily often, no heart to be touched.

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They did the wrong thing. They called green, yellow; and black, white. Young men said of a girl, 'What a lovely, simple creature!' I looked, and there was only a glistening wisp of straw, dry and hollow. Or they said, 'What a cold, proud beauty!' I looked, and lo! a Madonna, whose heart held the world. Or they said, 'What a wild, giddy girl!' and I saw a glancing, dancing mountain stream, pure as the virgin snows whence it flowed, singing through sun and shade, over pearls and gold dust, slipping along unstained by weed, or rain, or heavy foot of cattle, touching the flowers with a dewy kiss,—a beam of grace, a happy song, a line of light, in the dim and troubled landscape.

"My grandmother sent me to school, but I looked at the master, and saw that he was a smooth, round ferule—or an improper noun—or a vulgar fraction, and refused to obey him. Or he was a piece of string, a rag, a willow-wand, and I had a contemptuous pity. But one was a well of cool, deep water, and looking suddenly in, one day, I saw the stars. He gave me all my schooling. With him I used to walk by the sea, and, as we strolled and the waves plunged in long legions before us, I looked at him through the spectacles, and as his eye dilated with the boundless view, and his chest heaved with an impossible desire, I saw Xerxes and his army tossing and glittering, rank upon rank, multitude upon multitude, out of sight, but ever regularly advancing and with the confused roar of ceaseless music, prostrating themselves in abject homage.

Or, as with arms outstretched and hair streaming on the wind, he chanted full lines of the resounding Iliad, I saw Homer pacing the AEgean sands in the Greek sunsets of forgotten times. "My grandmother died, and I was thrown into the world without resources, and with no capital but my spectacles. I tried to find employment, but men were shy of me. There was a vague suspicion that I was either a little crazed, or a good deal in league with the Prince of Darkness. My companions who would persist in calling a piece of painted muslin a fair and fragrant flower had no difficulty; success waited for them around every corner, and arrived in every ship. I tried to teach, for I loved children.

But if anything excited my suspicion, and, putting on my spectacles, I saw that I was fondling a snake, or smelling at a bud with a worm in it, I sprang up in horror and ran away; or, if it seemed to me through the glasses that a cherub smiled upon me, or a rose was blooming in my buttonhole, then I felt myself imperfect and impure, not fit to be leading and training what was so essentially superior in quality to myself, and I kissed the children and left them weeping and wondering. "In despair I went to a great merchant on the island, and asked him to employ me. "

'My young friend,' said he, 'I understand that you have some singular secret, some charm, or spell, or gift, or something, I don't know what, of which people are afraid. Now, you know, my dear,' said the merchant, swelling up, and apparently prouder of his great stomach than of his large fortune, 'I am not of that kind. I am not easily frightened. You may spare yourself the pain of trying to impose upon me. People who propose to come to time before I arrive, are accustomed to arise very early in the morning,' said he, thrusting his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, and spreading the fingers, like two fans, upon his bosom. 'I think I have heard something of your secret.

You have a pair of spectacles, I believe, that you value very much, because your grandmother brought them as a marriage portion to your grandfather. Now, if you think fit to sell me those spectacles, I will pay you the largest market price for glasses. What do you say?' "I told him that I had not the slightest idea of selling my spectacles. "'My young friend means to eat them, I suppose,' said he with a contemptuous smile. "I made no reply, but was turning to leave the office, when the merchant called after me— "'My young friend, poor people should never suffer themselves to get into pets.

Anger is an expensive luxury, in which only men of a certain income can indulge. A pair of spectacles and a hot temper are not the most promising capital for success in life, Master Titbottom.' "I said nothing, but put my hand upon the door to go out, when the merchant said more respectfully,— "'Well, you foolish boy, if you will not sell your spectacles, perhaps you will agree to sell the use of them to me.