

HABENT SUA FATA LIBELLI

By MAURICE BARING

THE village of X.—where the Conference of Army Commanders was being held that winter's morning in 1917—was not one of the larger centres of troops and billets in Northern France. The Conference itself was to take place in the classroom of the small village school. There was no place in the house for the smaller fry and the A.D.C.'s to wait. Such of these as there were—and there were not many that day—sat inside the cars or walked about. I knew I had two hours or more to wait. I explored the village. There were no shops worth mentioning and no signs of military life. As I passed by one house I looked in at the window. An officer was typing at a table near the window. As I passed by he looked up and he beckoned me to come in. I walked into his room. He was evidently thirsting for human society. "Come in and get warm," he said.

He was a middle-aged man with grey eyes and an unmilitary stamp of countenance and shoulders.

While we were talking of the topics of the day I remembered that I had in my pocket a rather large sheaf of confidential notes which the General had told me to burn. I asked my host if I might use his fire, and soon the document was beginning to smoulder. I say *smoulder* because, although the fire was not a bad one, the flames were curiously slow in carrying out their work of destruction, and I had to poke the fire and every now and then to separate the sheets of obstinate paper.

"What a long time," I said, "it takes to burn anything; and yet they say the library of Alexandria was burnt in three days."

"If they say that," said my host, "they lie."

"I suppose," I said, "nobody knows anything about it."

"Well," he said, "I know all about it as a matter of fact, because I burnt the library myself."

I thought the man was mad, but to humour him I asked him if he had done this in a former existence.

"No," he said, reading my thoughts, "I am not mad, and it was not in a former existence. If you like to listen to a long story, which you won't believe, I will tell you all about it."

I told him that I enjoyed listening and that my capacity for belief was great.

"You won't believe it," he said—"and, mind you, I don't expect you to—but the story may interest you, and you may as well listen to it as discuss the probability of the war ever ending, which will only be tedious, as we have both heard all there is to say." I begged him to tell me his story, and he began as follows:

“ I won't bore you with the story of my life, but I must tell you a few points to make what happened later clear. Point one : I was educated at a public school and at a university—in fact, two universities, if you count Cambridge as a university. I got a First Class in Classical Mods. at Oxford, and then, like Calverley, I migrated to Cambridge, where I took up Oriental languages and dabbled in palæography, but I never took a degree. My university career came to an end owing to family reasons, which I needn't trouble you with, but it is important that you should know I got the Chancellor's Medal for Latin Verse—indeed I could write both Latin verse and Greek verses with great facility, although I was not a scholar and never read seriously. Point two : After I left the university various things happened to me, ranging from employment at the British Museum to employment in a *bric-à-brac* shop of antiquities. I was an expert at papyri, and I had a good eye for antiquities, especially for false antiquities. Do you remember the story of the Greek vase in Paris somewhere about the year 1899 ? No ? Well, a very fine Greek vase turned up in Paris which was said to have been stolen from a museum in the south of Italy.

“ All the experts of the Louvre, and many English experts, dealers, and scholars, examined it, and they all pronounced it to be genuine. The director of the little museum in Italy was furious and said his vase was still there and perfectly genuine. The Paris vase, he said, was a forgery. The Louvre authorities were equally indignant and said they didn't make mistakes of that kind. My employers sent me over from London to see it. I saw it, and I tried a certain experiment on the bottom of it with a penknife, and reported it to be a forgery. Soon after, the Italian youth who had made the vase turned up and asked for money. The whole story crept into the newspapers, and so did my name ; but somehow or other I got the credit, not of having discovered the vase was a forgery, but of having forged the vase myself, and this proved the ruin and the end of my career as a seller of antiquities. The public fought shy of our establishment, and very soon the shop had to be closed.

“ Then, as a friend of mine put it, another revolution took place in my disgraceful career. I was looking out for a job, but my experience, which was varied, and my knowledge, which, though limited, was peculiar and exotic, were just the kind of assets that nobody seemed to want. However, fortune favoured me in the shape of a Franco-American millionaire who wanted to found an empire somewhere in the deserts of North Africa.

“ He had already spent a great deal of money in wants of this description, and five minutes' conversation with him convinced me that his latest whim would be expensive and short-lived. He was on the look-out for a Minister of Foreign Affairs, a commander-in-chief, and a private secretary. He engaged me as private secretary, with a handsome salary, solely on the strength of my knowledge of faked Greek and Roman antiquities. His Foreign Minister was a man who had failed to pass the examination for an interpretership, although he certainly spoke eight European and several Oriental languages, not counting dialects, because, unfortunately, he

couldn't spell English. Charlemagne Caryll—for such was the millionaire's name, and he claimed descent from his illustrious namesake—could not find a commander-in-chief to his taste in Europe, and he put off doing so till we got to Algiers. There he found exactly what he wanted—a Russian called—it wasn't his real name—Dimitri Ivanoff, who had served for five years in the French Foreign Legion. Ivanoff was engaged immediately. So were 200 native soldiers and a host of camels, and we started for Heaven knows where. I soon made friends with Ivanoff. He was an astonishing person, and his story was far more interesting and extraordinary than the one I am telling you now, but there isn't time for it to-day, and I will tell it to you next time there is a Conference here. Suffice it to say that the expedition wouldn't have lasted twenty-four hours without him. He had started life as an officer in a good cavalry regiment, and he had spent five years as a convict at Saghalien for shooting a money-lender.

“We left Biskra in September, but our final mobilisation base was the oasis of Sedrata, not far from Ouargla, which we left at the beginning of October, and before the end of November we reached a place called Timassanin, which is an oasis.

“By the time we had reached this cultivated spot many things had become plain. Firstly, that Caryll had given up all idea of founding an empire and a dynasty in the remoter parts of Africa. The scheme was now called an exploration expedition in the interests of science. It was moreover quite clear both to Ivanoff and to myself that Caryll and Haverley, who was to have been the Foreign Minister, hated the desert, camp life, natives, and everything that Africa has to offer. Caryll was, in fact, longing to go home, but did not like to say so. Ivanoff, on the other hand, who had never seriously thought for one moment of the empire, was a born explorer and traveller, and was bent, so he said then, on reaching the Congo. The matter was decided for us by Caryll falling sick. It was settled that he and Haverley would go back to Biskra. Ivanoff and I were to proceed with the expedition. Caryll was only too glad to be its patron and financier. He arranged to join us in his steam yacht at Lagos and await our arrival there in a year's time from the following June. This, it was thought, was the shortest possible time in which we could accomplish the journey.

“Then, to their inexpressible relief, Caryll and Haverley said good-bye to us and to the desert. I never set eyes on either of them again. The day after Charlemagne Caryll left us, we struck our camp and resumed our journey. It was at the end of our first day's march that I made the startling discovery that Ivanoff had no intention of making the Congo his objective. Instead of marching south we were to go east. There was a particular tribe he was after and the remains of a civilisation which he said had never been discovered. I told him frankly that I had no desire to play the part of Greek chorus in a Rider Haggard adventure, and suggested I had better leave him and go back to Biskra. He then said that my services would be indispensable to him, and he vowed he would make my fortune.

“ Before consenting to go on with him I insisted on knowing more, and he then revealed to me the scheme that was at the back of his mind. Ivanoff, I have already told you, was an extraordinary man. His mental equipment and the nature of his culture were as extraordinary as his character. He spoke four or five European languages, Arabic, and many native dialects, but he knew next to no Latin and no Greek. He was a mathematician, and seemed to know something of every science and almost every trade. He had an inventor’s mind and the eye of an engineer, and was astonishingly ingenious both in devising expedients and in carrying them out practically. Well, his idea was this : During his adventurous life he had come across many African travellers and had mixed and made friends with strange tribes, and had taken part himself in many hazardous and difficult expeditions. During all his travels in North Africa he had at many times and in various places come across a tradition of a host of camels travelling in remote times from Alexandria, bearing loads of precious objects across the desert to some spot in the north-west. This exodus he presumed to have taken place after the conquest of Alexandria by the Saracens in A.D. 638, and his theory was that the precious burdens which were taken on camels from Alexandria were nothing less than the more valuable portions of the famous library which were saved by the zeal of John Philoponus from the fate appointed to them by Omar the Caliph.

“ ‘ I expect,’ Ivanoff told me, ‘ he let the huge mass of writing which had accumulated over the Arian and Monophysite controversy burn, so the Caliph was satisfied that something was being burnt, and that he saved the classics.’

“ Ivanoff maintained that he had come across this tradition over and over again, and that other travellers and explorers whom he had known had told him the same thing ; among others, Richard Burton, who had discussed the theory of the salvage of the library with him and had thought it quite possible.

“ Ivanoff said he now knew where to look for the place and that he intended to go down to history as the saviour of the library, and Caryll, he said, would have the credit of having made the expedition possible. I asked him how he knew, but he put me off by saying that he would tell me all that later.

“ Then followed weeks and weeks of monotonous and weary desert travelling, devoid of adventure or of any startling incident ; and after a time, which seemed to me an eternity, during which we had travelled several hundred miles, we reached a cultivated country once more : trees, mountains, and a river. We gathered that we were in the territory of a tribe called *Tebbi*, and that we were near their chief city, which was called *Khem*.

“ The Touaregs who had accompanied us said that these *Tebbi* were Touaregs, although they did not speak Touareg but another dialect which was a *lingua franca* in those parts. They were a black people with finely-cut features, not all the same type as the niggers of the Soudan. They welcomed us in the most friendly fashion, and we were invited to

the city of Khem, which turned out to be a small village. Khem, Ivanoff said, was our destination ; and when I asked where the remnants of the fallen civilisation were to be found, he laughed and said that there never had been any civilisation, but that we would find the library all the same.

“ We established ourselves at Khem, and Ivanoff soon got on the friendliest terms with the natives. The Tebbi had a passion for talismans and wore dozens of them sewn up in little black leather bags or sealed in small tin cases on their bracelets, belts, bridles, and bows. Ivanoff put this taste of theirs to good use by inventing talismans for them and demonstrating their efficacy.

“ After we had been there a week or so, without anything of interest happening, Ivanoff announced to me one morning that the local chief, whose name was Mara, was going to do us the signal honour of taking us to see the Talisman-in-Chief of the locality. He was kept in a sanctuary in a wood which was not far distant. We rode about three miles, and in the cutting of a thick forest we were taken down some steps into a large stone vault lit up with oil lamps. In the centre of the vault was a stone sarcophagus, and on the top of the sarcophagus a complete suit of green Jaeger cloth, a butterfly net, a stalking cap made of alpaca, and a collector's tin, besides various small objects such as a flask and a cabin hold-all.

“ This, Mara told us, was the biggest white man's ju-ju they had ever had and was the most powerful talisman of the country. On being further questioned by Ivanoff he said that the tomb contained the remains of the wisest of white men, who had arrived one day from nowhere, accompanied by only two natives, and had spent the rest of his life at Khem. His sole occupation had been, so Mara told us, the discovery and arrangements of bundles. Asked where the bundles were, he took us into a further and larger vault, and there, partly on shelves and partly in chests, were rolls and rolls of perfectly preserved papyri, carefully arranged and sorted and docketed with neat German labels. The first label which caught my eye was under the letter ‘ A ’—*Aristoteles' Werke*.

“ ‘ This,’ said Ivanoff very calmly, as he looked at the papyri, ‘ is the cream of the library of Alexandria, and a kind and industrious German has been here before us and catalogued the library with a card index.’ This, indeed, proved to be the case. Twenty years before our adventure began, a German professor had arrived there. His name was Engelmann. He had discovered the library and had spent his life in cataloguing it. As far as we could discover he had been treated by the natives with respect and veneration, and they had looked upon him as an almost supernatural being.

“ He had cured their sick and taught them all manner of things, and at his death his body had become the principal talisman of the tribe and the object of pilgrimage. The question which arose now was what was to be done. Ivanoff couldn't read Greek or Latin, still less a papyrus, and I at once began a preliminary investigation. The treasures we found must, of course, have made up only a small part of the library, but perhaps the

most valuable and interesting part of it. Here were the plays of Agathon, the complete works of Æschylus and Sophocles, lost plays of Euripides, the complete lyrics of Sappho and Alcæus, the *Margites* of Homer and innumerable lives of that poet and critical commentaries on his works, the poems of Calvus, some unguessed-of poems of Catullus, and the remaining books of Euclid.

“What we settled was this: I was to transcribe some of the most interesting specimens of the unknown works and to go back at once to Europe to interest the world in the matter, to get Caryll to organise a second and larger expedition and to bring back an army of scribes and scholars. Ivanoff was to remain behind.

“I insisted on spending a month in investigating the library before starting, and I made some interesting discoveries, especially in the Homeric branch of literature, where I found that it was generally stated by the earliest Greek writers that the *Odyssey* was the work of Homer’s youth and written after the *Margites* but long before the *Iliad*. Homer, in fact, was known throughout his life as the author of the *Odyssey*.

“All Homer’s works had been from the earliest times committed to writing, and the custom of reciting them was comparatively late. Every detail of Homer’s life was known and his autobiography existed. The texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* agreed, as far as arrangement is concerned, with what we have. The plays of Æschylus, on the other hand, were infinitely fuller than our versions. The lost books of Euclid afforded interesting reading. They dealt with the theory of relativity and were, so Ivanoff said, far in advance of Einstein. One of the axioms was to the effect that parallel straight lines, if produced, meet immediately, and that two straight lines cannot avoid containing a space.

“Of course there were some disappointments. The verse of Calvus read like efforts of modern scholars in the *Saturday Westminster*, nor could we find any trace or even mention of the works of Tacitus.

“Well, I transcribed some interesting samples and set out again for Biskra with guides and a powerful escort. In less than six months’ time I was in London. My first disappointment was to learn that Charlemagne Caryll was dead, and by a curious irony of fate he had left all his money to the foundation of a library in California. I corresponded with his executors, but they said they had all the classical works they wanted, and what they required were first editions of Conrad and Masefield, which they found difficulty in collecting.

“I at once realised that if I simply told my story not a soul would believe it, so I started by sending some specimens of Calvus and Sappho to the Literary Supplement of the *Times*, without explaining how I had obtained the text. There was a correspondence—perhaps you remember it. The fragments I sent excited considerable interest *at first*. The scholars were of the opinion that the specimens of Sappho I sent were in the Lesbian dialect and the Sapphic metre, and someone went so far as saying that they might have been written by Alcæus, but the majority of the critics agreed

in saying that they must be regarded as of uncertain origin—*fragmenta adespota*.

“One of the editors of the *Rheinisches Museum* suggested some ingenious emendations to the already perfect text and divided the poem into two parts, maintaining that there was an interval of many years, as was plain from internal evidence, between the composition of the two parts; but just when the interest in the matter was really growing strong an authoritative professor wrote from Oxford pointing out that some of the words were not in the Æolic dialect at all, and that in the Greek poems ‘the colour of the diction’ was not that of Sappho. This was the first round of the dispute, and it left matters more or less as they were. The second round began by my sending to the *Literary Supplement* a poem by Calvus. This the scholars of England and Germany agreed in pronouncing to be an impudent forgery.

“The incident of the Greek vase was recalled, and it was in vain that I said I had discovered that work to be a forgery and had not forged it myself. The verses which had got me the Chancellor’s Medal at Cambridge were produced, and scholars said it was clear that they were by the same hand as that which had produced the so-called ‘discoveries,’ and the *Times Literary Supplement* said that the correspondence must cease.

“It ended up with what was called a crushing rejoinder and thorough exposure by a celebrated scholar who triumphantly put the same question to me as Dr. Johnson put to Macpherson: ‘Where are the originals?’

“It was time, the writer said, that this trifling should cease. I had only proved what I had already shown at college—that I had a happy knack of classical *pastiche*, and that had I taken the trouble I might have become a scholar, instead of which I had been guilty of criminal levity. I then appealed to people outside the literary world. I wrote to the *Daily Mail* and to *John Bull*. They did not even print the letters, so convinced were they that the thing was a spoof. I approached one or two people privately whom I thought it might interest. I soon saw that they thought that I was either mad or an unparalleled liar, so I gave this up. The only thing to do was to go back to Africa. I went back to Biskra and found Ivanoff’s men punctual to the rendezvous we had arranged. I made the journey a second time. When I told Ivanoff the result of my efforts he laughed and said he was not surprised. ‘They don’t deserve to have the library, and I for one am not going to help them to have it,’ he said. His attitude surprised me at first, but presently I found out that the fate of the library had gone out of his head. Two new matters engrossed him. Firstly, he had married the daughter of Mara, the chief—a beautiful black lady named Messadjibla; and, secondly, he had struck a supply of oil and had taught the natives how to bore for it.

“He had no intention, he said, of ever going back to Europe. Had not someone once said that the acme of human felicity was contained in the phrase ‘A library in a garden’ and we had found the finest library in the world in the Garden of Eden? Not that he ever went near the library now.

Unfortunately Ivanoff had made a third discovery, and this was that from the fruit of a local tree—a kind of black plum the size of an olive, called *Demenia*, which had a sweet taste and a slight after-taste of tallow and rancid butter—one could make a powerful and highly intoxicating liqueur.

“This he carried out with the same energy and success that attended all his operations. But the first time Messadjibla found him almost insensible from drunkenness she gave him a sound beating, so that after this he confined his drinking to high days and holidays, as he was in mortal fear of his black spouse.

“As for me, I was crushed with disappointment. At one time I dreamt of final triumph over the scholars of Europe by returning to England and publishing the complete works of Æschylus and Agathon, with notes to show how foolish the emendations of Berlin and Oxford looked in view of the correct text. But my real conviction was that it was hopeless to attempt anything. There was nothing to be done. One evening something happened which settled the matter: Ivanoff invited Mara and all the notabilities of the place to a large *Tantam*—that is to say, a feast with dances, music, and a torchlight procession. The *Tantam* took place in the forest, near the vault which contained the library and not far from the petroleum wells.

“Ivanoff had already obtained quite a fine store of petroleum, which was kept in large stone jars in the first vault, where we found the tomb of the German professor.

“During the entertainment Ivanoff got riotously drunk, and he suggested that it would be a fine thing to make a sacrifice to the big talisman by burning the papyri, that the scholars of Europe did not deserve this library, and that I might thus have a fine revenge and punish them for their stupidity.

“‘If they won't let us give them the library,’ he said, ‘at least nobody else shall. They are capable of finding it later and claiming all the credit themselves. That, in any case, shall not happen.’

“I fell in with the idea, as no words can express the bitterness I felt after my treatment in England. Together we drenched the papyri with petroleum, and we explained to the natives that we were going to pay the highest possible honour to the sleeping Demigod. They were delighted. On that night the destruction of the library of Alexandria was begun. We burnt the best things first—Æschylus, Aristotle, Sappho, Alcæus, Homer, and some illuminating history. As the flames of our bonfire leapt to the sky the dark natives howled with joy and danced round the bonfire and banged their shields, and beat tom-toms and yelled and stamped. It was a fine sight.

“One night's bonfire was only enough to burn a very little, and it took us a month to destroy the whole library. But the work of destruction was carried out to the end, and all that I kept were the specimens which had appeared in the London Press. I can show you these if you like. I have got them here. When the last papyrus was burnt, which happened to be

the private diary of Julius Cæsar, I considered that my mission was accomplished, and I suggested going home ; but Ivanoff refused to budge. He said I could take any escort I liked, and do what I liked, and go where I liked ; as for himself, he had found the place of his dreams and his heart's desire, and he was not such a fool as to regret civilisation. So I left him and came back to Europe, where I had to live down the reputation of being a de Rougemont. Fortunately, so watertight are the compartments of this world that in the sphere in which I next sought and found employment nobody had even heard of the library of Alexandria."

At that moment I heard the impatient tootling of a motor-horn, and I knew that the Conference was over and that the General was waiting for me. I took hurried leave of my host.

" You must take this," he said, and he took from a despatch case two torn newspaper cuttings. They were a fragment of the specimens he had sent to the *Literary Supplement*. I never saw him again.

P.S.—These are the two fragments, one purporting to be by Sappho, the other by G. Calvus.

Αἴθ' ἔγω, χρυσοστεφαν' Ἀφρόδιτα,
τόνδε τὸν πάλον λαχόνην, ὑμοῖα
σαῖσι φοιτίσδοισα περιστέραισι
Κύπρον ἀμείβην·
αἶψα γὰρ χεῖμων ἐτίναξεν ὕσδους,
ταῖσι δὲ ψύχρος μὲν ἔγεντο θῆμος,
πὰρ δ' ἴεσι τὰ πτέρα, καππεπάγα-
σιν δὲ νόημα
κοῦφον· ἀλλ' ἀπὸ στυγέμων ἀέλλων
ἐκκαλήσασ' ἀθανάτων ἐπέμψας
ἄμ βρόδων ἔδρας, πεδέχην ἐράνας
δοῖσα Κυθήρας.

Pauper uterque, quibus non altera cura, parentes
Quintiliae inferias rettulimus cineri,
non vocem audituri iterum, nec verba venusta,
blaesiloquentis adhuc verba venusta tua.
qui tenerae placuere, sepulcro sternite flores :
forsitan hoc etiam gaudeat ipsa cinis.

The first may be translated : " Would that golden-crowned Aphrodite might win this lot, to migrate to Cyprus, journeying like thy doves ; for suddenly the storm has tossed the boughs and their heart has become chill, and they shed their feathers, and they are paralysed in their silly wits. But thou, calling them away from the hateful blasts, hast sent them among the abodes of roses undying, bidding them be partakers of delectable Cythera." The second may run : " We her parents, poor in substance and having no other love in life, have paid the last rites to Quintilia's ashes, never again to hear that voice and those gay words—those gay words of yours, still lispings. Cast on her tomb the flowers her youth loved ; maybe her very ashes will take pleasure even in this."