

THEODORE SAVAGE
A STORY OF THE PAST OR THE FUTURE

BY
CICELY HAMILTON

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Theodore Savage

I

If it had been possible for Theodore Savage to place on record for those who came after him the story of his life and experiences, he would have been the first to admit that the interest of the record lay in circumstance and not in himself. From beginning to end he was much what surroundings made of him; in his youth the product of a public school, Wadham and the Civil Service; in maturity and age a toiler with his hands in the company of men who lived brutishly. In his twenties, no doubt, he was frequently bored by his clerking duties and the routine of the Distribution Office; later on there were seasons when all that was best in him cried out against confinement in a life that had no aspiration; but neither boredom nor resentment ever drove him to revolt or set him to the moulding of circumstance. If he was destined to live as a local tradition and superman of legend, the honour was not gained by his talents or personal achievements; he had to thank for it an excellent constitution, bequeathed him by his parents, certain traces of refinement in manner and speech and the fears of very ignorant men.

When the Distribution Office—like his Hepplewhite furniture, his colour-prints and his English glass—was with yesterday's seven thousand years, it is more than possible that Theodore Savage, looking back on his youth, saw existence, till he neared the age of

thirty, as a stream of scarcely ruffled content. Sitting crouched to the fire in the sweat-laden air of his cabin or humped idly on a hillside in the dusk of summer evening, it may well have seemed, when his thoughts strayed backwards, that the young man who once was impossibly himself was a being whom care did not touch. What he saw with the eye of his mind and memory was a neat young Mr. Savage who was valeted in comfortable chambers and who worked, without urgency, for limited hours, in a room that looked on Whitehall. Who in his plentiful leisure gained a minor reputation on the golf-links! Who frequented studios, bought—now and then—a picture and collected English glass and bits of furniture. Who was passably good-looking, in an ordinary way, had a thoughtful taste in socks and ties and was careful of his hands as a woman.... So—through the vista of years and the veil of contrast—Theodore may have seen his young manhood; and in time, perhaps, it was difficult for a coarse-fingered labourer, dependent for his bread on the moods of nature, to sympathize greatly with the troubles of neat Mr. Savage or think of him as subject to the major afflictions of humanity.

All the same, he would spend long hours in communion with his vanished self; striving at times to trace resemblances between the bearded, roughened features that a fishing-pool reflected and the smooth-chinned civil servant with brushed hair and white collar whom he followed in thought through his work, his amusements, his love-making and the trivial details of existence.... And imagining, sometimes, the years and the happenings that might have been if his age, like his youth, had been soaped and collared, routined by his breeding and his office; if gods and men had not run amuck in frenzy and his sons had been born of a woman who

lived delicately—playing Chopin of an evening to young Mr. Savage and giving him cream in his tea?...

Even if life in his Civil Service days was not all that it shone through the years of contrast, Theodore Savage could have had very little of hardship to complain of in the days when he added to a certain amount of private income a salary earned by the duties of the unexacting billet which a family interest had secured for him. If he had no particular vocation for the bureaucratic life—if good painting delighted, and official documents bored him—he had sufficient common sense to understand that it is given to most of us, with sufficient application, to master the intricacies of official documents, while only to few is it given to master an art. After a phase of abortive experiment in his college days he had realized—fortunately—that his swift and instinctive pleasure in beauty had in it no creative element; whereupon he settled down, early and easily, into the life and habits of the amateur.... There remained with him to the end of his days an impression of a young man living pleurably, somewhat fastidiously; pursuing his hobbies, indulging his tastes, on the whole without much damage to himself or to others affected; acting decently according to his code and, when he fell in love and out of it, falling not too grossly or disastrously. If he had a grievance against his work at the Distribution Office, it was no more serious than this: it took much time, certain hours every day, from the interests that counted in his life. And against that grievance, no doubt, he set the ameliorating fact that his private means unaided would hardly have supported his way of existence, his many pleasant interests and himself; it was his civil servant's salary that had furnished his rooms in accordance with his taste and made possible the purchase of his treasured Fragonard and his bell-toned Georgian wine-glasses....

The bearded toiler, through a mist of years, watched a young man dawdling, without fear of the future, through a world of daily comforts that to his sons would seem fantastic, the creation of legend or of dream.

It was that blind and happy lack of all fear of the future that lent interest to the toiler's watching; knowing what he knew of the years that lay ahead, there was something of grim and dramatic humour in the sight of himself—yea, Theodore Savage, the broken-nailed, unshorn—arrayed of a morning in a flowered silk dressing-gown or shirt-fronted for an evening at the opera.... As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be—that, so it seemed to him in later years, had been the real, if unspoken, motto of the world wherein he had his being in the days of his unruffled content....

Of the last few weeks in the world that was and ever should be he recalled, on the whole, very little of great hurrying and public events; it was the personal, intimate scenes that stood out and remained to a line and a detail. His first meeting with Phillida Rathbone, for instance, and the chance interview with her father that led to it: he could see himself standing by Rathbone's desk in the Distribution Office, see the bowl between his fingers, held to the light—see its very shape and conventional pattern of raised flowers.

Rathbone—John Rathbone—was his chief in his Distribution days; a square-jawed, formidable, permanent official who was held in awe by underlings and Ministers, and himself was subject, most contentedly subject, to a daughter, the ruler of his household. Her taste in art and decoration was not her father's, but, for all the bewilderment it caused him, he strove to gratify it loyally; and for

Phillida's twenty-third birthday he had chosen expensively, on his way to the office, at the shop of a dealer in antiquities. Swept on the spate of the dealer's eloquence he had been pleased for the moment with his find—a flowered bowl, reputed Chelsea; it was not until half an hour later that he remembered uneasily his daughter's firm warnings against unaided traffic with the miscreants who deal in curios. With the memory uncomfortable doubts assailed him, while previous experiments came thronging unpleasantly to mind—the fiasco of the so-called Bartolozzi print and the equally lamentable business of the so-called Chippendale settee.... He drew his purchase from its paper wrapping, set it down on the table and stared at it. The process brought no enlightenment and he was still wrestling with uncomfortable doubts when Theodore Savage knocked and came in with a draft report for approval.

The worry born of ignorance faded out of Rathbone's face as he conned the document and amended its clauses with swift pencilled notes in the margin; he was back with the solidities he knew and could make sense of, and superfluous gimcracks for the moment had ceased to exist. It was Savage who unwittingly recalled their existence and importance; when his chief, at the end of his corrections, looked up, the younger man was eyeing the troublesome gimcrack with a meditative interest that reminded Rathbone of his daughter's manner when she contemplated similar rubbish.

“Know anything about old china?” he inquired—an outward and somewhat excessive indifference concealing an inward anxiety.

“Not much,” said Theodore modestly; but, taking the query as request for an opinion, his hand went out to the bowl.

“What do you make of it?” asked Rathbone, still blatantly indifferent. “I picked it up this morning—for my daughter. Supposed to be Chelsea—should you say it was?”

If the answer had been in the negative the private acquaintance between chief and subordinate would probably have made no further progress; no man, even when he makes use of it, is grateful for the superior knowledge in a junior that convicts him to his face of gullibility. As it was, the verdict was favourable and Rathbone, in the relief of finding that he had not blundered, grew suddenly friendly—to the point of a dinner invitation; which was given, in part, as instinctive thanks for restored self-esteem, in part because it might interest Phillida to meet a young man who took gimcracks as gravely as herself. The invitation, as a matter of course, was accepted; and three days later Savage met Phillida Rathbone.

“I’ve asked a young fellow you’re sure to get on with”—so Rathbone had informed his daughter; who, thereupon, as later she confessed to Theodore, had made up her mind to be bored. She threw away her prejudice swiftly when she found the new acquaintance talked music with intelligence—she herself had music in her brain as well as in her finger-tips—while he from the beginning was attracted by a daintiness of manner and movement that puzzled him in Rathbone’s daughter.... From that first night he must have been drawn to her, since the evening remained to him clear in every detail; always in the hollow of a glowing fire he could summon up Phillida, himself and Rathbone, sitting, the three of them, round the table with its silver and tall roses.... In the centre a branching cluster of roses—all yellow, like Phillida’s dress.... Rathbone, for the most part, good-naturedly silent, Phillida and himself talking swiftly.... In shaded light and a solid, pleasant comfort; ordinary comfort, which he took for granted as an

element of daily life, but which yet was the heritage of many generations, the product of long centuries of striving and cunning invention.... Later, in the drawing-room, the girl made music—and he saw himself listening from his corner of the sofa with a cigarette, unlit, between his fingers. Above all it was her quality of daintiness that pleased him; she was a porcelain girl, with something of the grace that he associated with the eighteenth century....

After half an hour that was sheer content to Theodore she broke off from her playing to sit on the arm of her father's chair and ruffle his grey hair caressingly.

“Old man, does my noise on the piano prevent you from reading your paper?”

Whereat Rathbone laughed and returned the caress; and Phillida explained, for the visitor's benefit, that the poor dear didn't know one tune from another and must have been bored beyond measure—by piano noises since they came upstairs and nothing but music-talk at dinner.

“I believe we've driven him to the Montagu divorce case,” she announced, looking over his shoulder. “‘Housemaid cross-examined—the Colonel's visits.’ Daddy, have you fallen to that?”

“No, minx,” he rebuked her, “I haven't. I'm not troubling to wade through the housemaid's evidence for the very good reason that it's quite unnecessary. I shall hear all about it from you.”

“That's a nasty one,” Phillida commented, rubbing her cheek against her father's. She turned the paper idly, reading out the headlines. “‘American elections—Surprises at Newmarket—Bank

Rate’—There doesn’t seem much news except the housemaid and the colonel, does there?”

Rathbone laughed as he pinched her cheek and pointed—to a headline here and a headline there, to a cloud that was not yet the size of a man’s hand.

“It depends on what you call news. It seems to have escaped you that we’ve just had a Budget. That matters to those of us who keep expensive daughters. And, little as the subject may interest you, I gather from the size of his type, that the editor attaches some importance to the fact that the Court of Arbitration has decided against the Karthanian claim. That, of course, compared to a housemaid in the witness-box is——”

“Ponderous,” she finished and laughed across at Theodore. “Important, no doubt, but ponderous—the Court of Arbitration always is. That’s why I skipped it.” ... Then, carelessly interested, and running her eye down the columns of the newspaper, she supposed the decision was final and those noisy little Karthanians would have to be quiet at last. Rathbone shrugged his shoulders and hoped so.

“But they’ll have to, won’t they?” said Phillida. “Give me a match, Daddy—There’s no higher authority than the Court of Arbitration, is there?”

“If,” Rathbone suggested as he held a light to her cigarette, “if your newspaper reading were not limited to scandals and chiffons, you might have noticed that your noisy little friends in the East have declared with their customary vehemence that in no circumstances whatever will they accept an adverse verdict—not even from the Court of Arbitration.”

“But they’ll have to, won’t they?” Phillida repeated placidly. “I mean—they can’t go against everybody else. Against the League.”

She tried to blow a smoke-ring with conspicuous ill-success, and Theodore, watching her from his corner of the sofa—intent on her profile against the light—heard Rathbone explaining that “against everybody else” was hardly the way to put it, since the Federal Council was not a happy family at present. There was very little doubt that Karthania was being encouraged to make trouble—and none at all that there would be difference of opinion on the subject of punitive action.... Phillida, with an arm round her father’s neck, was divided between international politics and an endeavour to make the perfect ring—now throwing in a question anent the constitution and dissensions of the League, now rounding her mouth for a failure—while Theodore, on the sofa, leaned his head upon his hand that he might shade his eyes and watch her without seeming to watch.... He listened to Rathbone—and did not listen; and that, as he realized later, had been so far his attitude to interests in the mass. The realities of his life were immediate and personal—with, in the background, dim interests in the mass that were vaguely distasteful as politics. A collective game played with noisy idealism and flaring abuse, which served as copy to the makers of newspapers and gave rise at intervals to excited conversation and argument....

What was real, and only real while Rathbone talked, was the delicate poise of Phillida’s head, the decorative line of Phillida’s body, his pleasure in the sight of her, his comfort in a well-ordered room; these things were realities, tangible or æsthetic, in whose company a man, if he were so inclined, might discuss academically an Eastern imbroglio and the growing tendency to revolt against the centralized authority of the League. Between life, as he grasped

it, and public affairs there was no visible, essential connection. The Karthanian imbroglio, as he strolled to his chambers, was an item in the make-up of a newspaper, the subject of a recent conversation; it was the rhythm of Phillida's music that danced in his brain as a living and insistent reality. That, and not the stirrings of uneasy nations, kept him wakeful till long after midnight.

II

While Theodore Savage paid his court to Phillida Rathbone, the Karthanian decision was the subject of more than conversation; diplomatists and statesmen were busy while he drifted into love and dreamed through the sudden rumours that excited his fellows at the office. In London, for the most part, journalism was guarded and reticent, the threat of secession at first hardly mentioned; but in nations and languages that favoured secession the press was voicing the popular cry with enthusiasm that grew daily more heated. Through conflicting rumour this at least was clear: at the next meeting of the Council of the League its authority would be tested to the uttermost, since the measure of independent action demanded by the malcontent members would amount to a denial of the federal principle, to secession in fact if not in name.... Reaction against central and unified authority was not a phenomenon of yesterday; it had been gathering its strength through years of racial friction, finding an adherent in every community that considered itself aggrieved by a decision of the Council or award of the Court of Arbitration, and for years it had taxed the ingenuity of the majority of the Council to avoid open breach and defiance.

Before open breach and its consequences, both sides had so far manœuvred, hesitated, compromised; it had been left to a minor, a very minor, state, to rush in where others feared to tread. The flat refusal of a heady, half-civilized little democracy to accept the unfavourable verdict of the Court of Arbitration was the spark that might fire a powder-barrel; its frothy demonstrations, ridiculous in themselves, appealed to the combative instinct in others, to race-

hatreds, old herding feuds and jealousies. These found vent in answering demonstrations, outbursts of popular sympathy in states not immediately affected; the noisy rebel was hailed as a martyr and pioneer of freedom, and became the pretext for resistance to the Council's oppression. There was no doubt of the extent of the re-grouping movement of the nations, of the stirrings of a widespread combativeness which denounced Federation as a system whereby dominant interests and races exploited their weaker rivals. With the meeting of the Council would come the inevitable clash of interests; the summons to the offending member of the League to retreat from its impossible position, and—in case of continued defiance—the proposal to take punitive action. That proposal, to all seeming, must bring about a crisis; those members of the League who had encouraged the rebel in defiance would hardly consent to co-operate in punitive measures; and refusal—withdrawal of their military contingents—would mean virtual secession and denial of majority rule. If collective excitement and anger ran high, it might mean even more than secession; there were possibilities—first hinted at, later discussed without subterfuge—of actual and armed opposition should the Council attempt to enforce its decree and authority.... Humanity, once more, was gathering into herds and growing sharply conscious alike of division and comradeship.

It was some time before Theodore was even touched by the herding instinct and spirit; apart, in a delicate world of his own, he concerned himself even less than usual with the wider interests of politics. By his fellows in the Distribution Office he was known as an incurable optimist; even when the cloud had spread rapidly and darkened he saw “strained relations” through the eyes of a lover, and his mind, busied elsewhere, refused to dwell anxiously on

“incidents” and “disquieting possibilities.” They intruded clumsily on his delicate world and, so soon as might be, he thrust them behind him and slipped back to the seclusion that belonged to himself and a woman. All his life, thought and impulse, for the time being, was a negation, a refusal of the idea of strife and destruction; in his happy egoism he planned to make and build—a home and a lifetime of content.

Now and again, and in spite of his reluctance, his veil of happy egoism was brushed aside—some chance word or incident forcing him to look upon the menace. There was the evening in Vallance’s rooms, for instance—where the talk settled down to the political crisis, and Holt, the long journalist, turned sharply on Vallance, who supposed we were drifting into war.

“That’s nonsense, Vallance! Nonsense! It’s impossible—unthinkable!”

“Unpleasant, if you like,” said Vallance; “but not impossible. At least—it never has been.”

“That’s no reason,” Holt retorted; “we’re not living yesterday. There’ll be no war, and I’ll tell you why: because the men who will have to start it—daren’t!” He had a penetrating voice which he raised when excited, so that other talk died down and the room was filled with his argument. Politicians, he insisted, might bluff and use threats—menace with a bogey, shake a weapon they dared not use—but they would stop short at threats, manoeuvre for position and retreat. Let loose modern science, mechanics and chemistry, they could not—there was a limit to human insanity, if only because there was a limit to the endurance of the soldier. Unless you supposed that all politicians were congenital idiots or criminal

lunatics out to make holocausts. What was happening at present was manœuvring pure and simple; neither side caring to prejudice its case by open admission that appeal to force was unthinkable, each side hoping that the other would be the first to make the admission, each side trotting out the dummy soldiers that were only for show, and would soon be put back in their boxes.... War, he repeated, was unthinkable....

“Man,” said a voice behind Theodore, “does much that is unthinkable!”

Theodore turned that he might look at the speaker—Markham, something in the scientific line, who had sat in silence, with a pipe between his lips, till he dropped out his slow remark.

“Your mistake,” he went on, “lies in taking these people—statesmen, politicians—for free agents, and in thinking they have only one fear. Look at Meyer’s speech this morning—that’s significant. He has been moderate so far, a restraining influence; now he breathes fire and throws in his lot with the extremists. What do you make of that?”

“Merely,” said Holt, “that Meyer has lost his head.”

“In which happy state,” suggested Vallance, “the impossible and unthinkable mayn’t frighten him.”

“That’s one explanation,” said Markham. “The other is that he is divided between his two fears—the fear of war and the fear of his democracy, which, being in a quarrelsome and restless mood, would break him if he flinched and applauds him to the echo when he blusters. And, maybe, at the moment, his fear of being broken is greater than his fear of the impossible—at any rate the threat is

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