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Author: William J. Locke

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The Mountebank

by

William J. Locke

Chapter I

In the month of June, 1919, I received a long letter from Brigadier-General Andrew Lackaday together with a bulky manuscript.

The letter, addressed from an obscure hotel in Marseilles, ran as follows:--

MY DEAR FRIEND,

On the occasion of our last meeting when I kept you up to an ungodly hour of the morning with the story of my wretched affairs to which you patiently listened without seeming bored, you were good enough to suggest that I might write a book about myself, not for the sake of vulgar advertisement, but in order to interest, perhaps to encourage, at any rate to stimulate the thoughts of many of my old comrades who have been placed in the same predicament as myself. Well, I can't do it. You're a professional man of letters and don't appreciate the extraordinary difficulty a layman has, not only in writing a coherent narrative, but in composing the very sentences which express the things that he wants to convey. Add to this that English is to me, if not a foreign, at any rate, a secondary language--I have thought all my life in French, so that to express myself clearly on any except the humdrum affairs of life is always a conscious effort. Even this little prelude, in my best style, has taken me nearly two cigarettes to write; so I gave up an impossible task.

But I thought to myself that perhaps you might have the time or the interest to put into shape a whole mass of raw material which I have slung together--from memory (I have a good one), and from my diary. It may seem odd that a homeless Bohemian like myself should have kept a diary; but I was born methodical. I believe my mastery of Army Forms gained me my promotion! Anyhow you will find in it a pretty complete history of my career up to date. "I have cut out the war----"

Is there a _lusus naturæ of any nationality but English, who rising from Private to Brigadier-General, could write six hundred and seventy-three sprawling foolscap pages purporting to contain the story of his life from eighteen-eighty something to June nineteen hundred and nineteen and deliberately omit, as if it were neither here nor there, its four and a half years' glorious and astounding episode?

"_I have cut out the war!_"

On looking through the MS. I found that he had cut out the war, in so far as his military experiences were concerned. In khaki he showed himself to

be as English and John Bull as you please; and how the deuce his meteoric promotion occurred and what various splendid services compelled the exhibition on his breast of a rainbow row of ribbons, are matters known only to the War Office, Andrew Lackaday and his Maker. Well--that is perhaps an exaggeration of secrecy. The newspapers have published their official paragraphs. Officers who served under him have given me interesting information. But from the spoken or written word of Andrew Lackaday I have not been able to glean a grain of knowledge. That, I say, is where the intensely English side of him manifested itself. But, on the other hand, the private life that he led during the four and a half years of war, and that which he lived before and after, was revealed with a refreshing Gallic lack of reticence which could only proceed from his French upbringing.

To return to his letter:--

I have cut out the war. Thousands of brainy people will be spending the next few years of their lives telling you all about it. But I should rather like to treat it as a blank, a period of penal servitude, a drugged sleep afflicted with nightmare, a bit of metempsychosis in the middle of normal life--you know what I mean. The thing that is _I_ is not General Lackaday. It is Somebody Else. So I have given you, for what it is worth, the story of Somebody Else. The MS. is in a beast of a muddle like the earth before the Bon Dieu came in and made His little arrangements. Do with it what you like. At the present moment I am between the Devil and the Deep Sea. I am hoping that the latter will be the solution of my difficulties. (By the way, I'm not contemplating suicide.) In either case it doesn't matter.... If you are interested in the doings of a spent meteor, I shall be delighted to write to you from time to time. As you said, you are the oldest friend I have. You are almost the only living creature who knows the real identity of Andrew Lackaday. You have been charming enough to give me not only the benefit of your experience, riper than mine, of a man of the world, but also such a very human sympathy that I shall always think of you with sentiments of affectionate esteem.

Yours sincerely,

ANDREW LACKADAY

Well. There was the letter, curiously composed; half French, half English in the turning of the phrase. The last sentence was sheer translation. But it was sincere. I need not say that I sent a cordial reply. Our correspondence thenceforward became intimate and regular.

In his estimate of his manuscript from a literary point of view the poor General did not exaggerate. Anything more hopeless as a continuous narrative I have never read. But it supplied facts, hit off odds and ends of character, and--what the autobiography seldom does--it gave the _ipsissima verba_ of conversations written in helter-skelter fashion with flowing pen, sometimes in excellent French, sometimes in English, which beginning in the elaborate style of his letter broke down into queer vernacular; it was charmingly devoid of self-consciousness, so that the man as he was, and not as he imagined himself to be or would like others to

imagine him, stood ingenuously disclosed.

If the manuscript had been that of a total stranger I could not have undertaken the task of the Bon Dieu making His little arrangements to shape the earth out of chaos. An elderly literary dilettante, who is not a rabid archæologist, has an indolent way of demanding documents clear and precise. As a matter of fact, it was some months before I felt the courage to tackle the business. But knowing the man, knowing also Lady Auriol and having in the meantime made the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Elodie Figasso and Horatio Bakkus, playing, in fact, a minor rôle, say, that of Charles, his friend, in the little drama of his life, I eventually decided to carry out my good friend's wishes. The major part of my task has been a matter of arrangement, of joining up flats, as they say in the theatre, of translation, of editing, of winnowing, as far as my fallible judgment can decide, the chaff from the grain in his narrative, and of relating facts which have come within the horizon of my own personal experience.

I begin therefore at the very beginning.

Many a year ago, when the world, myself included, was young, I knew a circus. This does not mean that I knew it from the wooden benches outside the ring. I knew it behind the scenes. I was on terms of intimacy with the most motley crowd it has been my good fortune to meet. It was a famous French circus of the classical type that has by now, I fear me, passed away. Its _hautŁ Øcole_ was its pride, and it demanded for its _premiŁre Øquestrienne_ the homage due to the great artists of the world. Bernhardt of the ComØdie Francaise--I think she was still there in those far-off days, Patti of the Opera and Mlle RenØe Saint-Maur of the Cirque Rocambeau were three stars of equal magnitude. The circus toured through France from year's end to year's end. It pitched its tent--what else could it do, seeing that municipal ineptitude provided no building wherein could be run chariot races of six horses abreast? But the tent, in my youthful eyes, confused by the naphtha glares and the violent shadows cast on the many tiers of pink faces, loomed as vast as a Roman amphitheatre. It was a noble tent, a palace of a tent, the auditorium being but an inconsiderable section. There was stabling for fifty horses. There were decent dressing-rooms. There was a green-room, with a wooden, practicable bar running along one end, and a wizened, grizzled, old barman behind it who supplied your wants from the contents of a myriad bottles ranged in perfect order in some obscure nook beneath the counter. They did things in the great manner in the Cirque Rocambeau. It visited none but first-class towns which had open spaces worthy of its magnificence. It despised one or two night stands. The Cirque Rocambeau had a way of imposing itself upon a town as an illusory permanent institution, a week being its shortest and almost contemptuous sojourn. The Cirque Rocambeau maintained the stateliness of the old world.

Now the Cirque Rocambeau fades out of this story almost as soon as it enters it. But it affords the coincidence which enables this story to be written. For if I had not known the Cirque Rocambeau, I should never have won the confidence of Andrew Lackaday and I should have remained as ignorant, as you are, at the present moment, of the vicissitudes of that worthy man's career.

You see, we met as strangers at a country house towards the end of the war. Chance turned the conversation to France, where he had lived most of his life, to the France of former days, to my own early wanderings about that delectable land, to my boastful accounts of my two or three months' vagabondage with the Cirque Rocambeau. He jumped as if I had thrown a bomb instead of a name at him. In fact the bomb would have startled him less.

"The Cirque Rocambeau?"

"Yes."

He looked at me narrowly. "What year was that?"

I told him.

"Lord Almighty," said he, with a gasp. "Lord Almighty!" He stared for a long time in front of him without speaking. Then to my amazement he said deliberately: "I remember you! You were a sort of a young English god in a straw hat and beautiful clothes, and you used to take me for rides on the clown's pig. The clown was my foster father. And now I'm commanding a battalion in the British Army. By Gum! It's a damn funny world!"

Memory flashed back with almost a spasm of joy.

"'By Gum!'" I repeated. "Why, that was what my old friend Ben Flint used to say twenty times an hour!"

It was a shibboleth proving his story true. And I remembered the weedy, ugly, precocious infant who was the pride and spoiled darling of that circus crowd.

Why I, a young gentleman of leisure, fresh from Cambridge, chose to go round France with a circus, is neither here nor there. For one thing, I assure you it was not for the bright eyes of Mlle RenØe Saint-Maur or her lesser sister luminaries. Ben Flint, the English clown, classically styled "Auguste" in the arena, and his performing pig, Billy, somehow held the secret of my fascination. Ben Flint mystified me. He was a man of remarkable cultivation; save for a lapse here and there into North Country idiom, and for a trace now and then of North Country burr, his English was pure and refined. In ordinary life, too, he spoke excellent French, although in the ring he had to follow the classical tradition of the English clown, and pronounce his patter with a nerve-rasping Britannic accent. He never told me his history. But there he was, the principal clown, and as perfect a clown as clown could be, with every bit of his business at his fingers' ends, in a great and important circus. Like most of his colleagues, he knew the wide world from Tokio to Christiania; but, unlike the rest of the crowd, whose life seemed to be bounded by the canvas walls of the circus, and who differentiated their impressions of Singapore and Moscow mainly in terms of climate and alcohol, Ben Flint had observed men and things and had recorded and analysed his experiences, so that, meeting a more or less educated youth like myself--perhaps a rare bird in the circus world--standing on the brink of life, thirsting for the

knowledge that is not supplied by lectures at the Universities, he must have felt some kind of satisfaction in pouring out, for my benefit, the full vintage of his wisdom.

I see him now, squat, clean-shaven, with merry blue eyes in a mug of a face, sitting in a deck chair, on a scrap of ragged ground forming the angle between the row of canvas stables and the great tent, a cob pipe in his humorous mouth, a thick half litre glass of beer with a handle to it on the earth beside him, and I hear his shrewd talk of far-away and mysterious lands. His pretty French wife, who knows no English, charmingly dishevelled, uncorseted, free, in a dubious _peignoir_ trimmed with artificial lace--she who moulded in mirific tights, sea-green with reflections of mother-of-pearl, like Venus Anadyomene, does the tight rope act every afternoon and evening--sits a little way apart, busy with needle and thread repairing a sorry handful of garments which to-night will be tense with some portion of her shapely body. Between them sprawls on his side Billy, the great brown pig whom Ben has trained to stand on his hind legs, to jump through hoops, to die for his country....

"They don’t applaud. They don’t appreciate you, Billy," the clown would say, choosing his time when applause was scant. "Show them what you think of them."

And then Billy would deliberately turn round and, moving in a semicircle, present his stern to the delighted audience....

There lies Billy, the pig, the most human pig that ever breathed, adored by Ben Flint, who, not having given the beast one second’s pain in all its beatific life, was, in his turn, loved by the pig as only a few men are loved by a dog--and there, sitting on the pig’s powerful withers, his blue smock full of wilted daisies, is little eight-year-old tow-headed Andrew Lackaday making a daisy chain, which eventually he twines round the animal’s semi-protesting snout.

Yes. There is the picture. It is full summer. We have lunched, Madame and Ben and Andrew and I, at the little cafØ restaurant at the near-by straggling end of the town. At other tables, other aristocratic members of the troupe. The humbler have cooked their food in the vague precincts of the circus. We have returned to all that Ben and his wife know as home. It is one o’clock. At two, matinee. An hour of blissful ease. We are in the shade of the great tent; but the air is full of the heavy odour of the dust and the flowers and the herbs of the South, and of the pungent smell of the long row of canvas stables.

I call little Andrew. He dismounts from Billy the pig, and, insolent brat, screws an imaginary eyeglass into his eye, which he contrives to keep contorted, and assuming a supercilious expression and a languid manner, struts leisurely towards us, with his hands in his pockets, thereby giving what I am forced to admit is an imitation of myself perfect in its burlesque. Ben Flint roars with laughter. I clutch the imp and throw him across knee and pretend to spank him. We struggle lustily till Madame cries out:

"But cease, AndrØ. You are making Monsieur too hot."

And Andrew, docile, ceased at once; but standing in front of me, his back to Madame, he noiselessly mimicked Madame's speech with his lips, so drolly, so exquisitely, that Ben Flint's hearty laugh broke out again.

"Just look at the little devil! By Gum! He has a fortune in him."

I learned in the circus as much about Andrew as he knew himself. Perhaps more; for a child of eight has lost all recollection of parents who died before he was two. They were circus folk, English, trapeze artists, come, they said, from a long tour in Australia, where Andrew was born, and their first European engagement was in the Cirque Rocambeau. Their stay was brief; their end tragic. Lackaday _PŁre_ took to drink, which is the last thing a trapeze artist should do. Brain and hand at rehearsal one day lost co-ordination by the thousandth part of a second and Lackaday _MŁre_, swinging from her feet upwards, missed the anticipated grip, and fell with a thud on the ground, breaking her spine. Whereupon Lackaday _PŁre_ went out and hanged himself from a cross-beam in an empty stable.

Thus, at two years old, Andrew Lackaday started life on his own account. From that day, he was alone in the world. Nothing in his parents' modest luggage gave clue to kith or kin. Ben Flint who, as a fellow-countryman, went through their effects, found not even one letter addressed to them, found no sign of their contact with any human being living or dead. They called themselves professionally "The Lackadays." Whether it was their real name or not, no one in the world which narrowed itself within the limits of the Cirque Rocambeau, could possibly tell. But it was the only name that Andrew had, and as good as any other. It was part of his inheritance, the remainder being ninety-five francs in cash, some cheap trinkets, a couple of boxes of fripperies which were sold for a song, a tattered copy of Longfellow's Poems, and a brand new gilt-edged Bible, carefully covered in brown paper, with "For Fanny from Jim" inscribed on the flyleaf. From which Andrew Lackaday, as soon as his mind could grasp such things, deduced that his mother's name was Fanny, and his father's James. But Ben Flint assured me that Lackaday called his wife Myra, while she called him Alf, by which names they were familiarly known by their colleagues. So who were Fanny and Jim, if not Andrew's parents, remained a mystery.

Meanwhile there was the orphan Andrew Lackaday rich in his extreme youth and the fortune above specified, and violently asserting his right to live and enjoy. Meanwhile, too, Ben Flint and his wife had lost their pig Bob, Billy's predecessor. Bob had grown old and past his job and become afflicted with an obscure porcine disease, possibly senile decay, for which there was no remedy but merciful euthanasia. The Flints mourned him, desolate. They had not the heart to buy another. They were childless, pigless. But behold! There, to their hand was Andrew, fatherless, motherless. On an occasion, just after the funeral, for which Ben Flint paid, when Madame was mothering the tiny Andrew in her arms, and Ben stood staring, lost in yearning for the lost and beloved pig, she glanced up and said:

"_Tiens_, why should he not replace Bob, _ce petit cochon?_"

Ben Flint slapped his thigh.

"By Gum!" said he, and the thing was done. The responsibility of self dependence for life and enjoyment was removed from the shoulders of young Andrew Lackaday for many years to come.

In the course of time, when the child's _Øtat civil_, as a resident in France, had to be declared, and this question of nationality became of great importance in after years--Madame said:

"Since we have adopted him, why not give him our name?"

But Ben, with the romanticism of Bohemia, replied:

"No. His name belongs to him. If he keeps it, he may be able to find out something about his family. He might be the heir to great possessions. One never knows. It's a clue anyway. Besides," he added, the sturdy North countryman asserting itself, "I'm not giving my name to any man save the son of my loins. It's a name where I come from that has never been dishonoured for a couple of hundred years."

"But it is just as you like, _mon chØri_," said Madame, who was the placidest thing in France.

* * * * *

For thirty years I had forgotten all this; but the "By Gum!" of Colonel Lackaday wiped out the superscription over the palimpsest of memory and revealed in startling clearness all these impressions of the past.

"Of course we're fond of the kid," said Ben Flint. "He's free from vice and as clever as paint. He's a born acrobat. Might as well try to teach a duck to swim. It comes natural. Heredity of course. There's nothing he won't be able to do when I'm finished with him. Yet there are some things which lick me altogether. He's an ugly son of a gun. His father and mother, by the way, were a damn good-looking pair. But their hands were the thick spread muscular hands of the acrobat. Where the deuce did he get his long, thin delicate fingers from? Already he can pass a coin from back to front----" he flicked an illustrative conjuror's hand--"at eight years old. To teach him was as easy as falling off a log. Still, that's mechanical. What I want to know is, where did he get his power of mimicry? That artistic sense of expressing personality? 'Pon my soul, he's damn well nearly as clever as Billy."

During the talk which followed the discovery of our former meeting, I reported to Colonel Lackaday these encomiums of years ago. He smiled wistfully.

"Most of the dear old fellow's swans were geese, I'm afraid," said he. "And I was the awkwardest gosling of them all. They tried for years to teach me the acrobat's business; but it was no good. They might just as well have

spent their pains on a rheumatic young giraffe."

I looked at him and smiled. The simile was not inapposite. How, I asked myself, could the man into which he had developed, ever have become an acrobat? He was the leanest, scraggiest long thing I have ever seen. Six foot four of stringy sinew and bone, with inordinately long legs, around which his khaki slacks flapped, as though they hid stilts instead of human limbs. His arms swung long and ungainly, the sleeves of his tunic far above the bony wrist, as though his tailor in cutting the garment had repudiated as fantastic the evidence of his measurements. Yet, when one might have expected to find hands of a talon-like knottiness, to correspond with the sparse rugosity of his person, one found to one's astonishment the most delicately shaped hands in the world, with long, sensitive, nervous fingers, like those of the thousands of artists who have lived and died without being able to express themselves in any artistic medium. In a word, the fingers of the artiste manquØ. I have told you what Ben Flint, shrewd observer, said about his hands, as a child of eight. They were the same hands thirty years after. To me, elderly observer of human things, they seemed, as he moved them so gracefully--the only touch of physical grace about him--to confer an air of pathos on the ungainly man, to serve as an index to a soul which otherwise could not be divined.

From this lean length of body rose a long stringy neck carrying a small head surmounted by closely cropped carotty thatch. His skin was drawn tight over the framework of his face, as though his Maker had been forced to observe the strictest economy in material. His complexion was brick red over a myriad freckles. His features preserved the irregular ugliness of the child I half remembered, but it was redeemed by light blue candid eyes set in a tight net of humorous lines, and by a large, mobile mouth, which, though it could shut grimly on occasions, yet, when relaxed in a smile, disarmed you by its ear-to-ear kindliness, and fascinated you by the disclosure of two rows of white teeth perfectly set in the healthy pink streaks of gum. He had the air of a man physically fit, inured to hardship; the air, too, in spite of his gentleness, of a man accustomed to command. In the country house at which we met it had not occurred to me to speculate on his social standing, as human frailty determined that one should do in the case of so many splendid and gallant officers of the New Army. His manners were marked by shy simplicity and quiet reserve. It was a shock to preconceived ideas to find him bred in a circus, even in so magnificent a circus as the Cirque Rocambeau, and brought up by a clown, even by such a superior clown as Ben Flint,

"And my old friend?" I asked. For I had lost knowledge of Ben practically from the time I ended my happy vagabondage. _Maxima mea culpa_.

"He died when I was about sixteen," replied Colonel Lackaday, "and his wife a year or so later."

"And then?" I queried, eager for autobiographical revelations.

"Then," said he, "I was a grown up man, able to fend for myself."

That was all I could get out of him, without allowing natural curiosity to

outrun discretion. He changed the conversation to the war, to the France about which I, a very elderly Captain--have I not confessed to early twenties thirty years before?--was travelling most uncomfortably, doing queer odd jobs as a nominal liaison officer on the Quartermaster-General's staff. His intimacy with the country was amazing. Multiply Sam Weller's extensive and peculiar knowledge of London by a thousand, and you shall form some idea of Colonel Lackaday's acquaintance with the inns of provincial France. He could even trot out the family skeletons of the innkeepers. In this he became animated and amusing. His features assumed an actor's mobility foreign to their previous military sedateness, and he used his delicate hands in expressive gestures. In parenthesis I may say we had left the week-end party at their bridge or flirtation (according to age) in the drawing-room, neither pursuits having for us great attraction, in spite of Lady Auriol Dayne, of whom more hereafter, and we had found our way to cooling drinks and excellent cigars in our host's library. It was the first time we had exchanged more than a dozen words, for we had only arrived that Saturday afternoon. But after the amazing mutual recognition, we sat luxuriously chaired, excellent friends, and I, for my part, enjoying his society.

"Ah!" said he, "MontØlimar. I know that hotel. _Infect_. And the _patron_, eh? You remember him. Forty stone. Phoo!"

The gaunt man sat up in his chair and by what mesmeric magic it happened I know not, but before my eyes grew the living image of the gross, shapeless creature who had put me to bed in wringing wet sheets.

"And when you complained, he looked like this--eh?"

He did look like that. Bleary-eyed, drooping-mouthed, vacant. I recollected that the fat miscreant had the middle of his upper lip curiously sunken into the space of two missing front teeth. The middle of Colonel Lackaday's upper lip was sucked in.

"And he said: 'What would you have, Monsieur? _C'est la guerre?_'"

The horrible fat man, hundreds of miles away from the front, with every convenience for drying sheets, had said those identical words. And in the same greasy, gasping tone.

I gaped at the mimetic miracle. It was then that the memory of the eight-year-old child's travesty of myself flashed through my mind.

"Pardon me," said I, "but haven't you turned this marvellous gift of yours to--well to practical use?"

He grinned in his honest, wide-mouthed way, showing his incomparable teeth.

"Don't you think," said he, "I'm the model of a Colonel of the Rifles?"

He grinned again at the cloud of puzzlement on my face, and rose holding out his hand.

"Time for turning in. Will you do me a favour? Don’t give me away about the circus."

Somehow my esteem for him sank like thermometer mercury plunged into ice. I had thought him, with the blazing record of achievement across his chest, a man above such petty solicitude. His mild blue eyes searched my thoughts.

"I don’t care a damn, Captain Hylton," said he, in a tone singularly different from any that he had used in our pleasant talk--"if anybody knows I was born in a stable. A far better man than I once had that privilege. But as it happens that I am going out to command a brigade next week, it would be to the interest of my authority and therefore to that of the army, if no gossip led to the establishment of my identity."

"I assure you, sir----" I began stiffly--I was only a Captain, he, but for a formality or two, a Brigadier-General.

He clapped his hands on my shoulders--and I swear his ugly, smiling face was that of an angel.

"My dear fellow," said he, "so long as you regard me as an honest cuss, nothing matters in the world."

I went to bed with the conviction that he was as honest a cuss as I had ever met.

Chapter II

Our hosts, the Verity-Stewarts, were pleasant people, old friends of mine, inhabiting a Somerset manor-house which had belonged to their family since the days of Charles the Second. They were proud of their descent; the Stewart being hyphenated to the first name by a genealogically enthusiastic Verity of a hundred years ago; but the alternative to their motto suggested by the son of the house, Captain Charles Verity-Stewart, "The King can do no wrong," found no favour in the eyes of his parents, who had lived remote from the democratic humour of the officers of the New Army.

It was to this irreverent Cavalier, convalescent at home from a machine-gun bullet through his shoulder, and hero-worshipper of his Colonel, that Andrew Lackaday owed his shy appearance at Mansfield Court. He was proud of the boy, a gallant and efficient soldier; Lady Verity-Stewart had couched her invitation in such cordial terms that a refusal would have been curmudgeonly; and the Colonel was heartily tired of spending his hard-won leave horribly alone in London.

Perhaps I may seem to be explaining that which needs no explanation. It is not so. In England Colonel Lackaday found himself in the position of many an officer from the Dominions overseas. He had barely an acquaintance.

Hitherto his leave had been spent in France. But one does not take a holiday in France when the War Officer commands attention at Whitehall. He was very glad to go to the War Office, suspecting the agreeable issue of his visit. Yet all the same he was a stranger in a strange land, living on the sawdust and warmed-up soda-water of unutterable boredom. He had spent--so he said--his happiest hours in London, at the Holborn Empire. Three evenings had he devoted to its excellent but not soul-enthralling entertainment.

"In the name of goodness, why?" I asked puzzled.

"There was a troupe of Japanese acrobats," said he. "In the course of a roving life one picks up picturesque acquaintances. Hosimura, the head of them, is a capital fellow."

This he told me later, for our friendship, begun when he was eight years old, had leaped into sudden renewal; but without any idea of exciting my commiseration. Yet it made me think.

That a prospective Brigadier-General should find his sole relief from solitude in the fugitive companionship of a Japanese acrobat seemed to me pathetic.

Meanwhile there he was at Mansfield Court, lean and unlovely, but, as I divined, lovable in his unaffected simplicity, the very model of a British field-officer. At dinner on Saturday evening, he had sat between his hostess and Lady Auriol Dayne. To the former he had talked of the things she most loved to hear, the manifold virtues of her son. There were fallings away from the strict standards of military excellence, of course; but he touched upon them with his wide, charming smile, condoned them with the indulgence of the man prematurely mellowed who has kept his hold on youth, so that Lady Verity-Stewart felt herself in full sympathy with Charles's chief, and bored the good man considerably with accounts of the boy's earlier escapades. To Lady Auriol he talked mainly about the war, of which she appeared to have more complete information than he himself.

"I suppose you think," she said at last with a swift side glance, "that I'm laying down the law about things I'm quite ignorant of."

He said: "Not at all. You're in a position to judge much better than I. You people outside the wood can see it, in its entirety. We who are in the middle of the horrid thing can't see it for the trees."

It was this little speech so simple, so courteous and yet not lacking a touch of irony, that first made Lady Auriol, in the words which she used when telling me of it afterwards, sit up and take notice.

Bridge, the monomania which tainted Sir Julius Verity-Stewart's courtly soul, pinned Lady Auriol down to the green-covered table for the rest of the evening. But the next day she set herself to satisfy her entirely unreprehensible curiosity concerning Colonel Lackaday.

Lady Auriol, born with even more curiosities than are the ordinary

birthright of a daughter of Eve, had spent most of her life in trying to satisfy them. In most cases she had been successful. Here be it said that Lady Auriol was twenty-eight, unmarried, and almost beautiful when she took the trouble to do her hair and array herself in becoming costume. As to maiden's greatest and shyest curiosity, well--as a child of her epoch--she knew so much about the theory of it that it ceased to be a curiosity at all. Besides, love--she had preserved a girl's faith in beauty--was a psychological mystery not to be solved by the cold empirical methods which could be employed in the solution of other problems. I must ask you to bear this in mind when judging Lady Auriol. She had once fancied herself in love with an Italian poet, an Antinous-like young man of impeccable manners, boasting an authentic pedigree which lost itself in the wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus. None of your vagabond ballad-mongers. A guest when she first met him of the Italian Ambassador. To him, Prince Charming, knight and troubadour, she surrendered. He told her many wonders of fairy things. He led her into lands where woman's soul is free and dances on buttercups. He made exquisite verses to her auburn hair. But when she learned that these same verses were composed in a flat in Milan which he shared with a naughty little opera singer of no account, she dismissed Prince Charming offhand, and betook herself alone to the middle of Abyssinia to satisfy her curiosity as to the existence there of dulcimer-playing maidens singing of Mount Abora to whom Coleridge in his poem assigns such haunting attributes.

Lady Auriol, in fact, was a great traveller. She had not only gone all over the world--anybody can do that--but she had gone all through the world. Alone, she had taken her fate in her hands. In comparison with other geographical exploits, her journey through Abyssinia was but a trip to Margate. She had wandered about Turkestan. She had crossed China. She had fooled about Saghalien.... In her schooldays, hearing of the Sanjak of Novi Bazar, she had imagined the Sanjak to be a funny little man in a red cap. Riper knowledge, after its dull exasperating way, had brought disillusion; but like Mount Abora the name haunted her until she explored it for herself. When she came back, she knew the Sanjak of Novi Bazar like her pocket.

Needless to say that Lady Auriol had thrown all her curiosities, her illusions--they were hydra-headed--her enthusiasms and her splendid vitality into the war. She had organized and directed as Commandant a great hospital in the region of Boulogne. "I'm a woman of business," she told Lackaday and myself, "not a ministering angel with open-worked stockings and a Red Cross of rubies dangling in front of me. Most of the day I sit in a beastly office and work at potatoes and beef and army-forms. I can't nurse, though I daresay I could if I tried; but I hate amateurs. No amateurs in my show, I assure you. For my job I flatter myself I'm trained. A woman can't knock about the waste spaces of the earth by herself, head a rabble of pack-carrying savages, without gaining some experience in organization. In fact, when I'm not at my own hospital, which now runs on wheels, I'm employed as a sort of organizing expert--any old where they choose to send me. Do you think I'm talking swollen-headedly, Colonel Lackaday?"

She turned suddenly round on him, with a defiant flash of her brown eyes, which was one of her characteristics---the woman, for all her capable

modernity, instinctively on the defensive.

"It’s only a fool who apologizes for doing a thing well," said Lackaday.

"He couldn’t do it well if he was a fool," Lady Auriol retorted.

"You never know what a fool can do till you try him," said Lackaday.

It was a summer morning. Nearly all the house-party had gone to church. Lady Auriol, Colonel Lackaday and I, smitten with pagan revolt, lounged on the shady lawn in front of the red-brick, gabled manor house. The air was full of the scent of roses from border beds and of the song of thrushes and the busy chitter-chatter of starlings in the old walnut trees of the further garden. It was the restful England which the exiled and the war-weary used so often to conjure up in their dreams.

"You mean a fool can be egged on to do great things and still remain a fool?" asked Lady Auriol lazily.

Lackaday smiled--or grinned--it is all the same--a weaver of fairy nothings could write a delicious thesis on the question; is Lackaday’s smile a grin or is his grin a smile? Anyhow, whatever may be the definition of the special ear-to-ear white-teeth-revealing contortion of his visage, it had in it something wistful, irresistible. You will find it in the face of a tickled baby six months old. He touched his row of ribbons.

"_Voilà_," said he.

"It’s polite to say I don’t believe it," she said, regarding him beneath her long lashes. "But, supposing it true for the sake of argument, I should very much like to know what kind of a fool you are."

Lying back in her long cane chair, an incarnation of the summer morning, fresh as the air in her white blouse and skirt, daintily white hosed and shod, her auburn hair faultlessly dressed sweeping from the side parting in two waves, one bold from right to left, the other with coquettish grace, from left to right, the swiftness of her face calmed into lazy contours, the magnificent full physique of her body relaxed as she lay with her silken ankles crossed on the nether chair support, her hands fingering a long necklace of jade, she appealed to me as the most marvellous example I had ever come across of the woman’s power of self-transmogrification.

The last time I had seen her was in France, wet through in old short-skirted kit, with badly rolled muddy puttees, muddier heavy boots, a beast of a dripping hat pinned through rain-sodden strands of hair, streaks of mud over her face, ploughing through mud to a British Field Ambulance, yet erect, hawk-eyed, with the air of a General of Division. There sex was wiped out. During our chance meeting, one of the many queer chance meetings of the war, a meeting which lasted five minutes while I accompanied her to her destination, we spoke as man to man. She took a swig out of my brandy flask. She asked me for a cigarette--smoked out, she said. I was in nearly the same predicament, having only, at the moment, for all tobacco, the pipe I was then smoking. "For God’s sake, like a good chap, give me a puff or

two," she pleaded. And so we walked on through the rain and mud, she pipe in mouth, her shoulders hunched, her hands, under the scornfully hitched up skirt, deep in her breeches pockets. And now, this summer morning, there she lay, all woman, insidiously, devilishly alluring woman, almost voluptuous in her self-confident abandonment to the fundamental conception of feminine existence.

Lackaday's eyes rested on her admiringly. He did not reply to her remark, until she added in a bantering tone:

"Tell me."

Then he said, with an air of significance: "The most genuine brand you can imagine, I assure you."

"A motley fool," she suggested idly.

At that moment, Evadne, the thirteen-year-old daughter of the house, who, as she told me soon afterwards, in the idiom of her generation, had given the divine-services a miss, carried me off to see a litter of Sealyham puppies. That inspection over, we reviewed rabbits and fetched a compass round about the pigsties and crossed the orchard to the chicken's parade, and passed on to her own allotment in the kitchen garden, where a few moth-eaten cabbages and a wilting tomato in a planted pot seemed to hang degraded heads at our approach, and, lingering through the rose garden, we eventually emerged on the further side of the lawn.

"I suppose you want to go and join them," she said with a jerk of her bobbed head in the direction of Lady Auriol and Colonel Lackaday.

"Perhaps we ought," said I.

"They don't want us--you can bet your boots," said she.

"How do you know that, young woman of wisdom?"

She sniffed. "Look at 'em."

I looked at 'em; mole-visioned masculine fifty seeing through the eyes of feminine thirteen; and, seeing very distinctly indeed, I said:

"What would you like to do?"

"If you wouldn't mind very much," she replied eagerly, her interest in, or her scorn of, elderly romance instantly vanishing, "let us go back to the peaches. That's the beauty of Sundays. That silly old ass Jenkins"--Jenkins was the head gardener--"is giving his family a treat, instead of coming down on me. See?"

Evadne linked her arm in mine. Again I saw. She had already eaten two peaches. Who was I to stand in the way of her eating a third or a fourth or a fifth? With the after consequences of her crime against Jenkins, physical and otherwise, I had nothing to do. It was the affair of her parents, her

doctor, her Creator. But the sight of the rapturous enjoyment on her face when her white teeth bit into the velvet bloom of the fruit sped one back to one's own youth and procured a delight not the less intense because it was vicarious.

"Come along," said I.

"You're a perfect lamb," said she.

Before the perfect lamb was led to the peach slaughter, he looked again across the lawn. Colonel Lackaday had moved his chair very close to Lady Auriol's wicker lounge, so that facing her, his head was but a couple of feet from hers. They talked not so much animatedly as intimately. Lackaday's face I could not see, his back being turned to me; I saw Lady Auriol's eyes wide, full of earnest interest, and compassionate admiration. I had no idea that her eyes could melt to such softness. It was a revelation. No woman ever looked at a man like that, unless she was an accomplished syren, without some soul-betrayal. I am a _vieux routier_, an old campaigner in this world of men and women. Time was when--but that has nothing to do with this story. At any rate I think I ought to know something about women's eyes.

"Did you ever see anything so idiotic?" asked Evadne, dragging me round.

"I think I did once," said I.

"When was that?"

"Ah!" said I.

"Do tell me, Uncle Tony."

I, who have seen things far more idiotic a thousand times, racked my brain for an answer that would satisfy the child.

"Well, my dear," I began, "your father and mother, when they were engaged----"

She burst out: "But they were young. It isn't the same thing. Aunt Auriol's as old as anything. And Colonel Lackaday's about sixty."

"My dear Evadne," said I. "I happen to know that Colonel Lackaday is thirty-eight."

Thirteen shrugged its slim shoulders. "It's all the same," it said.

We went to the net-covered wall of ripe and beauteous temptation, trampling over Jenkins's beds of I know not what, and ate forbidden fruit. At least Evadne did, until, son of Adam, I fell.

"Do have a bite. It's lovely. And I've left you the blushy side."

What could I do? There she stood, fair, slim, bobbed-haired, green-kirtled,

serious-eyed, carelessly juicy-lipped, holding up the peach. I, to whom all wall-fruit is death, bit into the side that blushed. She anxiously watched my expression.

"Topping, isn't it?"

"Yum, yum," said I.

"Isn't it?" she said, taking back the peach.

That's the beauty of childhood. It demands no elaborate expression. Simplicity is its only coinage. A rhapsody on the exquisiteness of the fruit's flavour would have bored Evadne stiff. Her soul yearned for the establishment between us of a link of appreciation. "Yum, yum," said I, and the link was instantly supplied.

She threw away a peach stone and sighed.

"Let's go."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm not looking for any more trouble," she replied.

We returned to the lawn and Lady Auriol and Colonel Lackaday. Not a hole could be picked in the perfect courtesy of their greeting; but it lacked passionate enthusiasm. Evadne and I sat down, and our exceedingly dull conversation was soon interrupted by the advent of the church goers.

Towards lunch time Lackaday and I, chance companions, strolled towards the house.

"What a charming woman," he remarked.

"Lady Verity-Stewart," said I, with a touch of malice--our hostess was the last woman with whom he had spoken--"is a perfect dear."

"So she is, but I meant Lady Auriol."

"I've known her since she was that high," I said spreading out a measuring hand. "Her development has been most interesting."

A shade of annoyance passed over the Colonel's ugly good-humoured face. To treat the radiant creature who had swum into his ken as a subject for psychological observation savoured of profanity. With a smile I added:

"She's one of the very best."

His brow cleared and his teeth gleamed out my tribute.

"I've met very few English ladies in the course of my life," said he half apologetically. "The other day, a brother officer finding me fooling about Pall Mall insisted on my lunching with him at the Carlton. He had a party.

I sat next to a Mrs. Tankerville, who I gather is a celebrity."

"She is," said I. "And she said, 'You must really come and have tea with me to-morrow. I've a crowd of most interesting people coming.'"

"She did," cried Lackaday, regarding me with awestricken eyes, as Saul must have looked at the Witch of Endor. "But I didn't go. I couldn't talk to her. I was as dumb as a fish. Oh, damned dumb! And the dumber I was the more she talked at me. I had risen from the ranks, hadn't I? She thought careers like mine such a romance. I just sat and sweated and couldn't eat. She made me feel as if she was going to exhibit me as the fighting skeleton in her freak museum. If ever I see that woman coming towards me in the street, I'll turn tail and run like hell."

I laughed. "You mustn't compare Mrs. Tankerville with Lady Auriol Dayne."

"_Mon Dieu!_ I should think not!" he cried with a fervent gesture. "Lady Auriol----"

Our passage from the terrace across the threshold of the drawing-room cut short a possible rhapsody.

Later in the afternoon, in the panelled Elizabethan entrance hall, I came across Lady Auriol in tweed coat and skirt and business-like walking boots, a felt hat on her head and a stout stick in her hands.

"Whither away?" I asked.

"Colonel Lackaday and I are off for a tramp, over to Glastonbury." Her lips moved ironically. "Like to come?"

"God forbid!" I cried.

"Thought you wouldn't," she said, drawing on a wash-leather gauntlet, "but when I'm in Society, I do try to be polite."

"My teaching and example for the last twenty years," said I, "have not been without effect."

"You're a master of deportment, my dear Tony." I was old enough to be her father, but she had always called me Tony, and had no more respect for my grey hairs than her cousin Evadne. "Tell me," she said, with a swift change of manner, "do you know anything about Colonel Lackaday?"

"We met here as strangers," said I, "and I can only say that he impresses me as being a very gallant gentleman."

Her face beamed. She held out her hand. "I'm so glad you think so." She glanced at the clock.

"Good Lord! I'm a minute late. He's outside. I loathe unpunctuality. So long, Tony."

She waved a careless farewell and strode out.

In the evening she gave Sir Julius to understand that, for aught she cared, he could go into a corner and play Bridge by himself, thus holding herself free, as it appeared to my amused fancy, for any pleasanter eventuality. In a few moments Colonel Lackaday was sitting by her side. I drew a chair to a bridge-table, and idly looked over my hostess's hand. Presently, being dummy, she turned to me, with a little motion of her head towards the pair and whispered:

"Those two--Auriol and ---- don't you think it's rather rapid?"

"My dear Selina," said I. "What would you have? '_C'est la guerre_.'"

Chapter III

It was rather rapid, this intimacy between the odd assorted pair--the high-bred woman of fervid action and the mild and gawky Colonel born in a travelling circus. Holding the key to his early life, and losing myself in conjecture as to his subsequent career until he found himself possessed of the qualities that make a successful soldier, I could not help noticing the little things, unperceived by a generous war society, which pathetically proved that his world and that of Lady Auriol, for all her earth-wide Bohemianism, were star distances apart. Little tiny things that one feels ashamed to record. His swift glance round to assure himself of the particular knife and fork he should use at a given stage of the meal--the surreptitious pushing forward on the plate, of the knife which he had leaned, French fashion, on the edge; his queer distress on entering the drawing-room--his helplessness until the inevitable and unconscious rescue, for he was the honoured guest; the restraint, manifest to me, which he imposed on his speech and gestures. Everyone loved him for his simplicity of manners. In fact they were natural to the man. He might have saved himself a world of worry. But his trained observation had made him aware of the existence of a thousand social solecisms, his sensitive character shrank from their possible committal, and he employed his mimetic genius as an instrument of salvation. And then his English--his drawing-room English--was not spontaneous. It was thought out, phrased, excellent academic English, not the horrible ordinary lingo that we sling at each other across a dinner-table; the English, though without a trace of foreign accent, yet of one who has spent a lifetime in alien lands and has not met his own tongue save on the printed page; of one, therefore, who not being sure of the shade of slang admissible in polite circles, carefully and almost painfully avoids its use altogether.

Yet all through that long weekend--we were pressed to stay till the Wednesday morning--no one, so far as I know, suspected that Colonel Lackaday found himself in an unfamiliar and puzzling environment.

His appointment to the Brigade came on the Tuesday. He showed me the letter, during a morning stroll in the garden.

"Don’t tell anybody, please," said he.

"Of course not." I could not repress an ironical glance, thinking of Lady Auriol. "If you would prefer to make the announcement your own way."

He gasped, looking down upon me from his lean height. "My dear fellow--it’s the very last thing I want to do. I’ve told you because I let the thing out a day or two ago--in peculiar circumstances--but it’s in confidence."

"Confidence be hanged," said I.

Heaven sent me Evadne--just escaped from morning lessons with her governess, and scuttling across the lawn to visit her Sealyhams. I whistled her to heel. She raced up.

"If you were a soldier what would you do if you were made a General?"

She countered me with the incredulous scorn bred of our familiarity.

"You haven’t been made a General?"

"I haven’t," I replied serenely. "But Colonel Lackaday has."

She looked wide-eyed up into Lackaday’s face.

"Is that true?"

I swear he blushed through his red sun-glaze.

"Since Captain Hylton says so----"

She held out her hand with perfect manners and said:

"I’m so glad. My congratulations." Then, before the bewildered Lackaday could reply, she tossed his hand to the winds.

"There’ll be champagne for dinner and I’m coming down," she cried and fled like a doe to the house. At the threshold of the drawing-room she turned.

"Does Cousin Auriol know?"

"Nobody knows," I said.

She shouted: "Good egg!" and disappeared.

I turned to the frowning and embarrassed Lackaday.

"Your modesty doesn’t appreciate the pleasure that news will give all those dear people. They’ve shown you in the most single-hearted way that they’re your friends, haven’t they?"

"They have," he admitted. "But it’s very extraordinary. I don’t belong to their world. I feel a sort of impostor."

"With this--and all these?"

I flourished the letter which I still held, and with it touched the rainbow on his tunic. His features relaxed into his childish ear-to-ear grin.

"It’s all so incomprehensible--here--in this old place--among these English aristocrats--the social position I step into. I don’t know whether you can quite follow me."

"As a distinguished soldier," said I, "apart from your charming personal qualities, you command that position."

He screwed up his mobile face. "I can’t understand it. It’s like a nightmare and a fairy-tale jumbled up together. On the outbreak of war I came to England and joined up. In a few months I had a commission. I don’t know..." he spread out his ungainly arm--"I fell into the mØtier--the business of soldiering. It came easy to me. Except that it absorbed me body and soul, I can’t see that I had any particular merit. Whatever I have done, it would have been impossible, in the circumstances, not to do. Out there I’m too busy to think of anything but my day’s work. As for these things"--he touched his ribbons--"I put them up because I’m ordered to. A matter of discipline. But away from the Army I feel as though I were made up for a part which I’m expected to play without any notion of the words. I feel just as I would have done five years ago if I had been dressed like this and planted here. To go about now disguised as a General only adds to the feeling."

"If you’ll pardon me for saying so," said I, "I think you’re super-sensitive. You imagine yourself to be the same man that you were five years ago. You’re not. You’re a different human being altogether. Men with characters like yours must suffer a sea-change in this universal tempest."

"I hope not," said he, "for what will become of me when it’s all over? Everything must come to an end some day--even the war."

I laughed. "Don’t you see how you must have changed? Here you are looking regretfully to the end of the war. If it were only bloodless you would like it to go on for ever. Who knows whether you wouldn’t eventually wear two batons instead of the baton and sword."

"I’m not an ambitious man, if you mean that," said he, soberly. "Besides this war business is far too serious for a man to think of his own interests. Suppose a fellow schemed and intrigued to get high rank and then proved inefficient--it would mean death to hundreds or thousands of his men. As it is, I assure you I’m not cock-a-whoop about commanding a brigade. I was a jolly sight happier with a platoon."

"At any rate," said I, "other people are cock-a-whoop. Look at them."

The household, turned out like a guard by Evadne, emerged in a body from the house. Sir Julius beamed urbanely. Lady Verity-Stewart almost fell on the great man’s neck. Young Charles broke into enthusiastic and profane congratulations. From the point of view of eloquent compliment his speech was disgraceful; but I loved the glisten in the boy’s eyes as he gazed on his hero. A light also gleamed in the eyes of Lady Auriol. She shook hands with him in her direct fashion.

"I’m glad. So very very glad." Perhaps I alone--except Lackaday--detected a little tremor in her voice. "Why didn’t you want us to know?"

Instinctively I caught Evadne’s eye. She winked at me, acknowledging thereby that she had divulged the General’s secret. But by what feminine process of divination had she guessed it? Charles came to his chief’s rescue.

"The General couldn’t go around shouting ’I’m to command a brigade mother, I’m to command a brigade,’ could he?"

"He might have stuck on his badges and walked in as if nothing had happened. It would have been such fun to see who would have spotted them first."

Thus Evadne, immediately called to order by Sir Julius. The hero said very little. What in his modesty could the good fellow say? But it was obvious that the sincere and spontaneous tributes pleased him. Sir Julius, after the suppression of Evadne, made him the little tiniest well-bred ghost of an oration. That the gallant soldier under whom his son had the distinguished honour to serve should receive the news of his promotion under his roof was a matter of intense gratification to the whole household.

It was a gracious scene--the little group, on the lawn in shade of the old manor house, so intimate, so kindly, so genuinely emotional, yet so restful in its English restraint, surrounding the long, lank, khaki-clad figure with the ugly face, who, after looking from one to the other of them in a puzzled sort of way, drew himself up and saluted.

"You’re very kind," said he, in reply to Sir Julius. "If I have the same loyalty in my brigade as I had in my old regiment," he glanced at Charles, "I shall be a very proud man."

That ended whatever there was of ceremony. Lady Auriol drew me aside.

"Come for a stroll."

"To see the Sealyhams and the rabbits?"

"No, Tony. To talk of our friend. He interests me tremendously."

"I’m glad to hear it," said I.

We entered the rose garden heavy with the full August blooms.

"Well, my dear," said I. "Talk away."

"If you have a bit of sense in you, it would be you who would talk. If you were a bit _simpÆtico_ you would at once set the key of the conversation."

"All of which implied abuse means that you're dying to know, through the medium of subtle and psychological dialogue, which is entirely beyond my brain power, whether you're not just on the verge of wondering if you're not on the verge of falling in love with Colonel Lackaday."

"You put it with your usual direct brutality----"

"Well," said I. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Dying to know etcetera, etcetera--I am not addicted to vain repetition."

She sighed, tried to pick a black crimson Victor Hugo, pricked her fingers and said "Damn!" With my penknife I cut the stalk and handed her the rose, which she pinned on her blouse.

"I suppose I am," she eventually replied. Then she caught me by the arm. "Look here, Tony, do be a dear. You're old enough to be my ancestor and by all accounts you've had a dreadful past. Do tell me if I'm making an ass of myself. I only did it once," she went on, without giving me time to answer. "You know all about it--Vanucci, the little beast. I needn't put on frills with you. Since then I swore off that sort of thing. I've gone about in maiden meditation and man's breeches, fancy free. I've loved lots of men just as I've loved lots of women--as friends, comrades. I'm level-headed and, I think, level-hearted. I haven't gone about like David in his wrath, saying that all men are liars. They're not. They're just as good as women, if not better. I've no betrayed virgin's grouch against men. But I've made myself too busy to worry about sex. It's no use talking tosh. Sex is the root of the whole sentimental, maudlin----"

"But tremulous and bewildering and nerve-racking and delicious and myriad-adjectived soul-condition," I interrupted, "known generally as love. Ninety-nine point nine repeater per cent of the world's literature has been devoted to its analysis. It's therefore of some importance. It's even the vital principle of the continuity of the human race."

"I'm perfectly aware of it."

"Then why, my dear, resent, as you seem to do, the inevitable reassertion, in your own case, of the vital principle?"

She laughed. "_Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop_. But that's just it. Is it a gallop or is it a crawl? I tell you, I thought myself immune for many years. But now, these last two or three days I'm beginning to feel a perfect idiot. A few minutes ago if the whole lot of you hadn't

been standing round, I think I should have cried. Just for silly gladness. After all there are thousands of Brigadier-Generals."

"To be accurate, not more than a few hundreds."

"Hundreds or thousands, what does it matter?" she cried impatiently. "What's Hecuba to me or I to Hecuba?" Few women have the literary sense of apposite quotation--but no matter. She went on. "What's one Brigadier-General to me or I to one Brigadier-General? And yet--there it is. I'm beginning to fear lest this particular Brigadier-General may mean a lot to me. So I come back to my original question. Am I making an ass of myself?"

"One can't answer that question, my dear Auriol," said I, "without knowing how far your fears, feelings and all the rest of it are reciprocated."

"Suppose I think they are?"

"Then all I can say is: 'God bless you my children.' But," I added, after a pause, "I must warn you that your budding idyll is not passing unnoticed."

She snapped her fingers. "I've lived my private life in public too long to care a hang for that. I'm only concerned about my own course of action. Shall I go on, or shall I pull myself up with a jerk?"

"What would you like to do?"

She walked on for a few yards without replying. I glanced at her and saw that the colour had come into her cheeks, and that her eyes were downcast. At last she said:

"Now that I'm a woman again, I should like to get some happiness out of it. I should like to give happiness, too, full-handed." She flashed up and took my arm and pressed it. "I could do it, Tony."

"I know you could," said I.

After which the conversation became more intimate. Anybody, to look at us, as we walked, arm in arm, round the paths of the rose garden, would have taken us for lovers. Of course she wanted none of my advice. Her frank and generous nature felt the imperious need of expansion. I, to whom she could talk as to a sympathetic wooden idol, happened to be handy. I don't think she could have talked in the same way to a woman, I don't think she would have talked so even to me, who had taken her pick-a-back round about her nursery, if I had not with conviction qualified Lackaday as a gallant gentleman.

Eventually we came down to the practical aspect of a situation, as old as Romance itself. The valorous and gentle knight of hidden lineage and the Earl's daughter. Not daring to aspire, and ignorant of the flame he has kindled in the high-born bosom, he rides away without betraying his passion, leaving the fair owner of the bosom to pine in lonely ignorance.

"At this time of day, it’s all such damn nonsense," said Lady Auriol.

I pointed out to her that chivalrous souls still beautified God’s earth and that such damn nonsense could not be other than the essence of their being. To this knightly company Colonel Lackaday might well belong. On the other hand, there was she, the same old proud Earl’s daughter. For all her modernity, her independence, her democratic sympathies, she remained a great lady. She had little fortune; but she had position and an ancient name. Her father, the impoverished fourteenth Earl of Mountshire, and the thirtieth Baron of something else, refused to sit among the canaille of the present House of Peers. He bred shorthorns and Berkshire pigs, which he disposed of profitably, and grew grapes and melons for Covent Garden, read the lessons in church and wrote letters to the _Times_ about the war on which the late Guy Earl of Warwick would have rather prided himself when he took a fancy to make a King.

"The dear old idiot," said Lady Auriol. "He belongs to the time of Nebuchadnezzar."

But, all the same, in spite of her flouting, her birth assured her a social position from which she could be thrown by nothing less than outrageous immorality or a Bolshevist revolution. That Lackaday, to whom the British Peerage, in the ordinary way, was as closed a book as the Talmud, realized her high estate I was perfectly aware. Dear and garrulous Lady Verity-Stewart had given him at dinner the whole family history--she herself was a Dayne--from the time of Henry I. I was sitting on the other side of her and heard and amused myself by scanning the expressionless face of Lackaday who listened as a strayed aviator might listen to the social gossip of the inhabitants of Mars. Anyhow he left the table with the impression that the Earl of Mountshire was the most powerful noble in England and that his hostess and her cousin, Lady Auriol, regarded the Royal Family as upstarts and only visited Buckingham Palace in order to set a good example to the proletariat.

"I’m sure he does," said I, after summarizing Lady Verity-Stewart’s monologue.

"The family has been the curse of my life," said Auriol. "If I hadn’t anticipated them--or is it it?--by telling them to go to the devil, they would have disowned me long ago. Now they’re afraid of me, and I’ve got the whip hand. A kind of blackmail; so they let me alone."

"But if you made a _mØsalliance_, as they call it," said I, "they’d be down upon you like a cartload of bricks."

"Bricks?" she retorted, with a laugh. "A cartload of puff-balls. There isn’t a real brick in the whole obsolete structure. I could marry a beggar man to-morrow and provided he was a decent sort and didn’t get drunk and knock me about and pick his teeth with his fork, I should have them all around me and the beggar man in a week’s time, trying to save face. They’d move heaven and earth to make the beggar man acceptable. They know that if they didn’t, I’d be capable of going about with him like a raggle-taggle gipsy--and bring awful disgrace on them."

"All that may be true," said I, "but the modest Lackaday doesn't realize it."

"I'll put sense into him," replied Lady Auriol. And that was the end, conclusive or not, of the conversation.

In the afternoon they went off for a broiling walk together. What they found to say to each other, I don't know. Lady Auriol let me no further into her confidence, and my then degree of intimacy with the General did not warrant the betrayal of my pardonable curiosity as to the amount of sense put into him by the independent lady.

Now, from what I have related, it may seem that Lady Auriol had brought up all her storm troops for a frontal attack on the position in which the shy General lay entrenched. This is not the case. There was no question of attack or siege or any military operation whatever on either side. The blessed pair just came together like two drops of quicksilver. Each recognized in the other a generous and somewhat lonely soul; an appreciation of the major experiences of life and, with that, a craving for something bigger even than the war, which would give life its greater meaning. She, born on heights that looked contemptuously down upon a throne, he born almost in a wayside ditch, their intervening lives a mutual mystery, they met--so it seemed to me, then, as I mused on the romantical situation--on some common plane not only of adventurous sympathy but of a humanity simple and sincere. From what I could gather afterwards, they never exchanged a word, during this intercourse, of amorous significance. Nor did they steer the course so dear to modern intellectuals (and so dear too to the antiquated wanderers through the Land of Tenderness) which led them into analytical discussions of their respective sentimental states of being. They talked just concrete war, politics and travel. On their tramps they scarcely talked at all. They kept in step which maintained the rhythm of their responsive souls. She would lay an arresting touch on his arm at the instant in which he pointed his stick at some effect of beauty; and they would both turn and smile at each other, intimately, conscious of harmony.

We left the next morning, Lackaday to take over his brigade in France, I to hang around the War Office for orders to proceed on my further unimportant employment. Lady Auriol and Charles saw us off at the station.

"It's all very well for your new brigade, sir," said the latter when the train was just coming into the station. "They're in luck. But the regiment's in the soup."

He wanted to discuss the matter, but with, elderly tact I drew the young man aside, so that the romantic pair should have a decent leave-taking. But all she said was:

"You'll write and tell me how you get on?"

And he; with a flash in his blue eyes and his two-year-old grin:

"May I really?"

"You may--if a General in the field has time to write to obscure females."

She looked adorable, provoking, with the rich colour rising beneath her olive cheek--I almost fell in love with her myself and I was glad that the ironical Charles had his back to her. An expression of shock overspread Lackaday's ingenuous features. He shot out both hands in protest, and mumbled something incoherent. She took the hands with a happy laugh, as the train lumbered noisily in.

Lackaday was silent and preoccupied during the run to London.

At the terminus we parted. I asked him to dinner at my club. He hesitated for a moment, then declined on the plea of military business. I did not see him or the Verity-Stewarts or Lady Auriol till after the Armistice.

Chapter IV

Like Ancient Gaul, time is nowadays divided into three parts, before, during and after the war. The lives of most men are split into these three hard and fast sections. And the men who have sojourned in the Valley of the Shadow of Death have emerged, for all their phlegm, their philosophy, their passionate carelessness and according to their several temperaments, not the same as when they entered. They have taken human life, they have performed deeds of steadfast and reckless heroism unimagined even in the war-like daydreams of their early childhood. They have endured want and misery and pain inconceivable. They have witnessed scenes of horror one of which, in their former existence, would have provided months of shuddering nightmare. They have made instant decisions affecting the life or death of their fellows. They have conquered fear. They have seen the scale of values upon which their civilized life was so carefully based swept away and replaced by another strange and grim to which their minds must rigidly conform. They return to the world of rest where humanity is still struggling to maintain the old scale. The instinct born of generations of tradition compels a facile reacceptance. They think: "The blood and mud and the hell's delight of the war are things of the past. We take up life where we left it five years ago; we come back to plough, lathe, counter, bank, office, and we shall carry on as though a Sleeping Beauty spell had been cast on the world and we were awakening, at the kiss of the Fairy Prince of peace, to our suspended tasks."

Are they right or are they wrong in their surmise, these millions of men, who have passed through the Valley of the Shadow, haunted by their memories, tempered by their plunge into the elemental, illumined by the self-knowledge gained in the fierce school of war?

Does the Captain V.C. of Infantry, adored and trusted by his men, from

whose ranks he rose by reason of latent qualities of initiative command and inspiration, contentedly return to the selling of women's stockings in his old drapery establishment, to the vulgar tyranny of the oily shopwalker, to the humiliating restrictions and conditions of the salesman's life? Return he must--perhaps. He has but two trades, both of which he knows profoundly; the selling of hosiery and the waging of war. As he can no longer wage war, he sells hosiery. But does he do it contentedly? If his soul, through reaction, is contented at first, will it continue to be so through the long uneventful stocking-selling years? Will not the war change he has suffered cause nostalgias, revolts? Will it bring into his resumed activities a new purpose or more than the old lassitudes?

These questions were worrying me, as they were worrying most demobilized men, although I, an elderly man about town, had no personal cause for anxiety, when, one morning, my man brought me in the card of Brigadier-General Lackaday. It was early March. I may mention incidentally that I had broken down during the last wild weeks of the war, and that an unthinkingly beneficent War Office had flung me into Nice where they had forgotten me until a few days before.

During my stay in the South I led the lotus life of studious self-indulgence. I lived entirely for myself and neglected my correspondence to such a point that folks ceased to write to me. As a matter of fact I was a very sick man, under the iron rule of doctors and nurses and such like oppressors; but, except to explain why I had lost touch with everybody, that is a matter of insignificant importance. The one or two letters I did receive from Lady Auriol did not stimulate my interest in The Romance. I gathered that she was in continuous relations with General Lackaday, who, it appeared, was in the best of health. But when a man of fifty has his heart and lungs and liver and lights all dislocated he may be pardoned for his chilly enthusiasm over the vulgar robustness of a very young Brigadier.

On this March morning, however, when I was beginning, in sober joyousness, to pick up the threads of English social life, the announcement of General Lackaday gave me a real thrill of pleasure.

He came in, long, lean, khaki clad, red-tabbed, with, I swear, more rainbow lines on his breast, and a more pathetically childish grin on his face than ever. We greeted each other like old friends long separated, and fell immediately into intimate talk, exchanging our personal histories of seven months. Mine differed only in brevity from an old wife's tale. His had the throb of adventure and the sting of failure. In October his brigade had found immortal glory in heroic death. He had obeyed high orders. The slaughter was no fault of his. But after the disaster--if the capture of an important position can be so called--he had been summarily appointed to a Home Command, and now was demobilized.

"Demobilized?" I cried, "what on earth do you mean?"

"It appears that there are more Brigadier-Generals in the dissolving Army," said he, "than there are brigades. I can retire with my honorary rank, but if I care to stay on, I must do so with the rank and pay of a Major."

I flared up indignant. I presumed that he had consigned the War Office to flamboyant perdition. In his mild way he had. The War Office had looked pained. By offering a permanent Major's commission in the Regular Army, with chance of promotion and pension, it thought it had dealt very handsomely by Lackaday. It hinted that though he had led his brigade to victory, he might have employed a safer, a more Sunday school method. Oh! the hint was of the slightest, the subtlest, the most delicate. The War Office very pointedly addressed him as General, and, regarding his row of ribbons, implicitly declared him an ingrate. But for a certain stoniness of glance developed in places where Bureaucracy would have been very frightened, the War Office would have so proclaimed him in explicit speech.

"I would have stayed on as a Brigadier," said he. "But the Major's job's impossible. I should have thought any soldier would have appreciated the position--and it was a soldier, a colonel whom I saw--but it seems that if you stay long enough in that place you're at the mercy of the little girls who run you round, and eventually you arrive at their level of intelligence. However," he grinned and lit a cigarette, "it's all over. I can call myself General Lackaday till the day of my death, but not a sou does it put into my pocket. And, odd as it may appear, I've got to earn my living. Well, I suppose something will turn up."

Before I had time to question him as to his plans and prospects, he shifted the talk to our friends, the Verity-Stewarts. He had stayed with them two or three times. Once Lady Auriol had again been a fellow guest. He had met her in London, dined at her tiny house in Charles Street, Mayfair--a little dinner party, doubtless in his honour--and he had called once or twice. Evidently the Romance was in the full idyllic stage. I asked somewhat maliciously what Lady Auriol thought of it. He rose to my question like a simple fish.

"She's far more indignant than I am, I've had to stop her writing to the newspapers and sending the old Earl down to the House of Lords."

"Lady Auriol ought to be able to pull some strings," said I.

"There are not any strings going to be pulled for me in this business," said Lackaday. He rose, stalked about the room--it is a modest bachelor St. James's Street sitting-room, and he took up about as much of its space as a daddy-long-legs under a tumbler--and suddenly halted in front of me. "Do you know why?"

I made a polite gesture of enquiring ignorance.

"Because it's a damn sight too sacred."

I bowed. I understood.

"I can find it in my heart to owe many things to Lady Auriol," he continued. "She's a great woman. But even to her I couldn't owe my position in the British Army."

"Did you tell her so?"

"I did."

I pictured the scene, knowing my Auriol. I could see the pride in her dark eyes and masterful lips. His renunciation had in it that of the _beau geste_ which she secretly adored. It put the final stamp on the man.

Upon this little emotional outburst he left, promising to dine with me the next day. For a month I saw him frequently, once or twice with Lady Auriol. He was still in uniform, waiting for the final clip of the War Office scissors severing the red tape that still bound him to the Army.

Lady Auriol said to me: "I think the day he puts off khaki he'll cry."

He stuck to it till the very last day possible. Then he appeared, gaunt and miserable, in an ill-fitting blue serge suit which, in the wind, flapped about his lean body. He had the pathetic air of a lost child. On this occasion--Lady Auriol and he were lunching with me--she adopted a motherly attitude which afforded me both pleasure and amusement. She seemed bent on assuring him that the gaudy vestments of a successful General went for nothing in her esteem; that, like Semele, she felt (had that unfortunate lady been given a second chance) more at ease with her Jupiter in the common guise of ordinary man.

How the Romance had progressed I could not tell. Nothing of it was perceptible from their talk, which was that of mutually understanding friends. I hinted a question after the meal, when she and I were alone for a few moments. She shrugged her shoulders, and regarded me enigmatically.

"I'm a little more mid-Victorian than I thought I was."

"Which means?"

"Whatever you like it to."

And that is all I had a chance of getting out of her. Well, the relations between Lackaday and Lady Auriol were no business of mine. I had plenty to do and to think about, and anxiety over their tender affairs did not rob me of an hour's slumber.

Then came a day when the offer of a humble mission in connection with the Peace Conference sent me to Paris. Before starting I had a last interview with Lackaday. He dined with me alone in my chambers.

He looked ill and worried. His scraggy neck rising far above an evening collar too low for him seemed to betray by its stringy workings the perturbation of his spirit. His carroty thatch no longer crisp from the careful military cut had grown into a kind of untamable towslement. The last month or two had aged him. He was the last person one would have imagined to be a distinguished soldier in the Great War.

We talked pleasantly of indifferent things till the cigars were lit--he was

always a charming companion, possessing a gentle and somewhat plaintive humour--and then he began, against his habit, to speak of himself. Like thousands of demobilized officers he was looking around for some opening in civil life. As to what particular round hole his square peg could fit he was most vague. Perhaps a position in one of the far-away regions that were to be administered by the League of Nations. Something in Syria or German East Africa.

"Look here, my dear fellow," I said at last, "I presume I'm the very oldest surviving acquaintance you have in the world. And you can't accuse me of indiscreet curiosity. But surely you must have had some kind of profession before the war."

"Of course I had."

"Then why not go back to it?"

It was the first time I had ventured to question him on his antecedents. For all his gentleness, he had a personal dignity which was enhanced by the symbolism of his uniform and forbade impertinent questioning. As he had kept the shutters pulled down over his pre-war career, having in all our intercourse given me no hint of the avocations that had led him to know the Inns of France with the accuracy of a Michelin guide, it was obvious that he had done so for his own good and deliberate reasons. I had got it into my stupid head that the qualities which had raised him from private to Brigadier-General had served him in a commercial pursuit; that he had been, at the time of his pilgrimage through the country, the agent of some French business house.

On my question he stared at his cigar, twisting it backwards and forwards between his delicate thumb and two fingers, with the air of a man hesitating on a decision, until the inevitable happened; the long ash of the cigar fell over his trousers. He rose with a laugh and a damn and brushed himself. Then he said:

"Did you ever hear of Les Petit Patou?"

"No," said I, mystified.

"Scarcely anyone in this country ever has. That's the advantage of obscurity." He reflected for a moment then he said: "I never realized, until I went very shyly among them, the exquisite delicacy of English gentlefolk. Not one of you, not even Lady Auriol who has given me the privilege of her intimate friendship, has ever pressed me to give an account of myself. I'm not ashamed of Les Petit Patou. But it seems so--so----" he snapped his fingers for the word--"so incongruous. My military rank demanded that I should preserve it from ridicule--you'll remember I asked you to say nothing of the circus."

"Still," said I, "the name Petit Patou conveys nothing to me."

"I'm the original Petit Patou. When I took a partner we became plural. _Regardez un instant._"

It was only later that I saw the significance of the instinctive French phrase.

He rose, glanced around him, pounced on a little silver match-box and an empty wire waste-paper basket, and contorting his mobile face into a hideous grimace of imbecility, began to juggle with these two objects and his cigar, displaying the faultless technique of the professional. After a few throws, the cigar flew into his mouth, the matchbox fell into the opened pocket of his dinner jacket and the waste-paper basket descended over his head. For a second he stood grinning through the wire cage, in the attitude of one waiting for applause. Then swiftly he disembarrassed himself of the basket and threw the insulted cigar into the fire.

"Do you think that's a dignified way for General Andrew Lackaday, C.B., to make his living--in the green skin tights of Petit Patou?"

We talked far into the night. My sleep was haunted by the nightmare of the six foot four of the stringy, bony emaciation of General Lackaday in green skin tights.

Chapter V

To realize Petit Patou in the British General of Brigade, we must turn to the manuscript mentioned at the beginning of this story.

We meet him, a raw youth, standing, one blazing summer day on the Bridge of Avignon. He insists on this episode, because, says he, the bridge is associated with important events in his life. It was not, needless to remark, the Pont d'Avignon of the gay old song, for the further arch of that was swept away by floods long ago, and it now remains a thing of pathetic uselessness. Three-quarters of the way across the Rhone might you go, and then you would come to abrupt nothingness, just the swirling river far below your arrested feet. It was the new suspension bridge, some three hundred yards further up, sadly inharmonious with the macchiolated battlements of the city and the austere mass, rising above them, of the Palace of the Popes on the one side, and, on the other, the grey antiquity of the castle of Villeneuve brooding like an ancient mother over its aged offspring, the clustering sun-baked town. The joyous generation of the Old Bridge has long since passed away, but to the present generation the New Bridge affords the same wonder and delight. For it entices like the old, from stifling streets to the haunts of Pan. There do you find leafy walks, and dells of shade, and pathways by the great cool river leading to sequestered spots where you may sit and forget the clatter of flagstones and the stuffy apartment above them for which the rent is due; where the air of early June is perfumed by wild thyme and marjoram and the far-flung sweetness of new mown hay, and where the nightingales sing. So, whenever it can, all Avignon turns out, as it has turned out for hundreds of years, on

its to and fro adventure across the Bridge of Promise.

It was on a Sunday afternoon when young Lackaday stood there, leaning moodily over the parapet, regarding it not as a bridge of Promise, but as a Bridge of Despair. He had fled from the dressing-room of the little music-hall just outside the city walls, which he shared with three others of the troupe, from its horrible reek of escaping gas and drainage and grease-paint and the hoarded human emanations of years, and had come here instinctively to breathe the pure air that swept down the broad stream. He had come for rest of mind and comfort of soul; but only found himself noisily alone amid an unsympathetic multitude.

He had failed. He had learned it first from the apathy of the audience. He had learned it afterwards from the demeanour and the speech far from apathetic of the manager and leader of the troupe. They were a company of six, Les Merveilleux, five jugglers, plate spinners, eccentric musicians, ventriloquists, and one low comedian. Lackaday was the low comedian, his business to repeat in burlesque most of the performance of his fellow artists. It was his first engagement, outside the Cirque Rocambeau, his first day with the troupe. Everything had gone badly. His enormous lean length put the show out of scale. The troupe, accustomed to the business of a smaller man, whose sudden illness caused the gap which Lackaday came from Paris to fill, resented the change, and gave him little help. They demanded impossibilities. Although they had rehearsed--and the rehearsals had been a sufficient nightmare of suffering--everybody had seemed to devote a ferocious malice to his humiliation. Where the professional juggler is accustomed to catch things at his hip, they threw them at his knees; they appeared to decide that his head should be on the level of his breast. The leading lady, Madame Coinçon, wife of the manager, a compact person of five foot two, roundly declared that she could not play with him, and in his funniest act, dependent on her co-operation, she left him to be helplessly funny by himself. The tradition of the troupe required the comedian to be attired in a loud check suit, green necktie and white felt bowler hat. On the podgy form of Lackaday's predecessor it produced its comic effect. On the lank Lackaday it was characterless. In consequence of all this, he had been nervous, he had missed cues, he had fumbled when he ought to have been clear, and been clear when he ought comically to have fumbled. He had gone about his funny business with the air of a curate marrying his vicar to the object of his hopeless affections.

And Coinçon had devastatingly insulted him. What worm was in the head of Moignon (the Paris music-hall agent) that he should send him such a monstrosity? He wasn't, _nom de Dieu_, carrying about freaks at a fair. He wanted a comedian and not a giant. No wonder the Cirque Rocambeau had come to grief, if it depended on such canaries as Lackaday. Didn't he know he was there to make the audience laugh?--not to give a representation of Monsieur Mounet-Sully elongated by the rack.

"_Hop, man petit_," said he at last. "_F---- moi le camp_," which is a very vulgar way of insisting on a person's immediate retirement. "Here is your week's salary. I gain by the proceeding. The baggage-man will see us through. He has done so before. As for Moignon--"

Although Lackaday regarded Moignon as a sort of god dispensing fame and riches, enthroned on unassailable heights of power, he trembled at the awful destiny that awaited him. He would be cast, like Lucifer from heaven. He would be stripped of authority. Coinçon's invective against him was so terrible that Lackaday pitied him even more than he pitied himself. Yet there was himself to consider. As much use to apply to the fallen Moignon for an engagement as to the Convent of the Daughters of Calvary. He and Moignon and their joint fortunes were sent hurtling down into the abyss.

On the parapet of the Bridge of Despair leant young Lackaday, gazing unseeingly down into the Rhone. His sudden misfortune had been like the stunning blow of a sandbag. His brain still reeled. What had happened was incomprehensible. He knew his business. He could conceive no other. He had been trained to it since infancy. There was not a phase of clown's work with which he was not familiar. He was a passable gymnast, an expert juggler, a trick musician, an accomplished conjurer. All that the Merveilleux troupe act required from him he had been doing successfully for years. Why then the failure? He blamed the check suit, the ill-will of the company, the unreason of Madame Coinçon....

It did not occur to him that he had emerged from an old world into a new. That between the old circus public and the new music-hall public there was almost a generation's change of taste and critical demand. The Cirque Rocambeau had gone round without perceiving that the world had gone round too. It wondered why its triumphant glory had declined; and it could not take steps to adapt itself to the new conditions which it could not appreciate. Everyone grew old and tradition-bound in the Cirque Rocambeau, even the horses, until gradually it perished of senile decay. Andrew Lackaday carrying on the traditions of his foster father, the clown Ben Flint, had remained with it, principal clown, to the very end. Now and then, rare passers through from the outer world, gymnasts down on their luck, glad to take a makeshift engagement while waiting for better things, had counselled him to leave the antiquated concern. But the Cirque Rocambeau had been the whole of his life, childhood, boyhood, young manhood; he was linked to it by the fibres of a generous nature. All those elderly anxious folk were his family. Many of the children, his contemporaries, trained in the circus, had flown heartlessly from the nest, and the elders had fatalistically lamented. Madame Rocambeau, bowed, wizened, of uncanny age, yet forceful and valiant to the last--carrying on for the old husband now lying paralysed in Paris who had inherited the circus from his father misty years ago, would say to the young man, when one of these defections occurred: "And you AndrØ, you are not going to leave us? You have a fine position, and if you are dissatisfied, perhaps we can come to an arrangement. You are a child of the circus and I love you like my own flesh and blood. We shall turn the corner yet. All that is necessary is faith--and a little youth." And Andrew, a simple soul, who had been trained in the virtues of honour and loyalty by the brave Ben Flint, would repudiate with indignation the suggestion of any selfish desire to go abroad and seek adventure.

At last, one afternoon, when the tent, a miserable gipsy thing compared with the proud pavilion of the days of the glory of Billy the pig, was pitched on the outskirts of a poor little town, they found Madame Rocambeau

dead in the canvas box-office which she had occupied for fifty years, the heartbreaking receipts in front of her, counted out into little piles of bronze and small silver. The end had come. The circus could not be sold as a going concern. It crumbled away. Somebody bought the old horses, Heaven knows for what purpose. Somebody bought the antiquated harness and moth-eaten trappings. Somebody else bought the tents and fittings. But nobody bought the old careworn human beings, riders and gymnasts and stable hands who crept away into the bright free air of France, dazed and lost, like the prisoners released from the Bastille.

It was not so long ago; long enough ago, however, for young Andrew Lackaday to have come perilously near the end of his savings in Paris, before the Almighty Moignon (now curse-withered), but then vast and unctuous, reeking of fat food and diamonds and great cigars, had found him this engagement at Avignon. He had journeyed thither full of the radiant confidence of twenty. He stood on the bridge overwhelmed by the despair whose Tartarean blackness only twenty can experience.

Not a gleam anywhere of hope. His humiliation was absolute. The maniacal Coinçon had not even given him an opportunity of redeeming his failure. He had been paid to go away. The disgusting yet necessary price of his shame rattled in his pockets. To-night the baggage man would play his part--a being once presumably trained, yet sunk so low in incompetence that he was glad to earn his livelihood as baggage man. And he, Andrew Lackaday, was judged more incompetent even than this degraded outcast. Why? How could it be? What was the reason? He dug his nails into his burning temples.

The summer sun beat down on him, and set a-glitter the currents in the Rhone. The ceaseless, laughing stream of citizens passed him by. Presently youth's need of action brought him half-unconsciously to an erect position. He glanced dully this way and that, and then slowly moved along the bridge towards the Villeneuve bank. Girls bare-headed, arm-in-arm, looked up at him and laughed, he was so long and lean and comical with his ugly lugubrious face and the little straw hat perched on top of his bushy carroty poll. He did not mind, being used to derision. In happier days he valued it, for the laugh would be accompanied by a nudge and a "_Voilà Auguste!_" He took it as a tribute. It was fame. Now he was so deeply sunk in his black mood that he scarcely heeded. He walked on to the end of the bridge, and turned down the dusty pathway by the bank.

Suddenly he became aware of sounds of music and revelry, and a few yards further on he came to a broad dell shaded by plane trees and set out as a restaurant garden, with rude tables and benches, filled with good-humoured thirsty folk; on one side a weather-beaten wooden châlet, having the proud title of Restaurant du Rhône, served apparently but to house the supply of drinks which nondescript men and sturdy bare-headed maidens carried incessantly on trays to the waiting tables. On the dusty midway space--the garden boasted no blade of grass--couples danced to the strains of a wheezing hurdy-gurdy played by a white bearded ancient who at the end of each tune refreshed himself with a draught from a chope of beer on the ground by his side, while a tiny anæmic girl went round gathering sous in a shell. When the music stopped you could hear the whir and the click of the bowls in an adjoining dusty and rugged alley and the harsh excited cries

of the players. During these intervals the serving people in an absent way would scatter an occasional carafe-full of water on the dancing floor to lay the dust.

Young Lackaday hung hesitatingly on the outskirts under the wooden archway that was at once the entrance and the sign-board. The music had ended. The tables were packed. He felt very thirsty and longed to enter and drink some of the beer which looked so cool in the long glasses surmounted by its half inch of white froth--inviting as sea-foam. Shyness held him. These prosperous, care-free bourgeois, almost indistinguishable one from the other by racial characteristics, and himself a tragic failure in life and physically unique among men, were worlds apart. It had never occurred to him before that he could find himself anywhere in France where the people were not his people. He felt heart-brokenly alien.

Presently the hurdy-gurdy started the ghostly tinkling of the _Il Bacio_ waltz, and the ingenuous couples of Avignon rose and began to dance. The thirst-driven Lackaday plucked up courage, and strode to a deserted wooden table. He ordered beer. It was brought. He sipped luxuriously. One tells one's thirst to be patient, when one has to think of one's sous. He was half-way through when two girls, young and flushed from dancing together, flung themselves down on the opposite bench--the table between.

"We don't disturb you, Monsieur?"

He raised his hat politely. "By no means, Mesdemoiselles."

One of them with a quick gesture took up from the table a forgotten newspaper and began to fan herself and her companion, to the accompaniment of giggling and chatter about the heat. They were very young. They ordered grenadine syrup and eau-de-seltz. Andrew Lackaday stared dismally beyond them, at the dancers. In the happy, perspiring girls in front of him he took no interest, for all their youth and comeliness and obviously frank approachability. He saw nothing but the fury-enflamed face of Coinçon and heard nothing but the rasping voice telling him that it was cheaper to pay him his week's salary than to allow him to appear again. And "_f---- moi le camp!_" Why hadn't he taken Coinçon by the neck then and there with his long strong fingers and strangled him? Coinçon would have had the chance of a rabbit. He had the strength of a dozen Coinçons--he, trained to perfection, with muscle like dried bull's sinews. He could split an apple between arm and forearm, in the hollow of his elbow. Why shouldn't he go back and break Coinçon's neck? No man alive had the right to tell him to _f---- le camp!_

"You don't seem very gay," said a laughing voice.

With a start he recovered consciousness of immediate surroundings. Instead of two girls opposite, there was only one. Vaguely he remembered that a man had come up.

"_Un tour de valse, Mademoiselle?_"

"_Je vieux bien_."

And one of the girls had gone, leaving her just sipped grenadine syrup and seltzer-water. But it had been like some flitting unreality of a dream.

At his blinking recovery the remaining girl laughed again.

"You look like a somnambulist."

He replied: "I beg pardon, Mademoiselle, but I was absorbed in my reflections."

"Black ones--_hein?_ They have made you little infidelities?"

He frowned. "They? Who do you mean--they?"

"_Un joli garçon is not absorbed in his reflections_"--she mimicked his tone--"unless there is the finger of a _petite femme_ to stir them round and darken them."

"Mademoiselle," said he, seriously. "You are quite mistaken. There's not a woman in the world against whom I have the slightest grudge."

He spoke truly. It was a matter of love, and Mme Coinçon's hostility did not count.

"Word of honour," he added looking into the smiling ironical face.

Love had entered very little into his serious scheme of life. He had had his entanglements of course. There was Francine Dumesnil, who had fluttered into the Cirque Rocambeau as a slack wire artist, and after making him vows of undying affection, had eloped a week afterwards with Hans Petersen, the only man left who could stand on the bare back of a horse that was not thick with resin. But the heart of Andrew Lackaday had nothing to do with the heart of Francine Dumesnil. He had agreed with the aged Madame Rocambeau. _Sales types_, both of them.

"If it had been _chagrin d'amour_--sorrow of love, Mademoiselle," said he, "I should not have been so insensible to the presence of two such charming young ladies."

"We are polite, all the same," she remarked approvingly.

She sipped her grenadine. Having nothing further to say he sipped his beer. Presently she said:

"I saw you this afternoon at the _boite_." He looked at her with a touch of interest. No one would allude to the music-hall as the "box" except a fellow professional engaged there.

"You too?" he asked.

She nodded. She belonged to a troupe of dancing girls. As they were the

first number, they got away early. She and her friend had gone for a walk and found this restaurant. It was gay, wasn't it? He said, soberly:

"You were dancing at rehearsal this morning. You've danced at the music-hall this afternoon, you'll be dancing again this evening--why do you dance here?"

"One can only be young once," she replied.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen. And you?"

"Twenty-two."

She would have given him thirty, she said, he looked so serious. And he, regarding her more narrowly, would have given her fifteen. She was very young, slight, scarcely formed, yet her movements were lithe and complete like those of a young lizard. She had laughing, black eyes and a fresh mouth set in a thin dark face that might one day grow haggard or coarse, according to her physical development, but was now full with the devil's beauty of youth. A common type, one that would not arrest masculine eyes as she passed by. Dozens of the girls there round about might have called her sister. She was dressed with cheap neatness, the soiled white wing of a bird in her black hat being the only touch of bravura. She spoke with the rich accent of the South.

"You are of the _Midi?_" he said.

Yes. She came from Marseilles. Ingenuously chattering she gave him her family history. In the meanwhile her companions and her partner having finished their dance had retired to a sequestered corner of the restaurant, leaving the pair here to themselves. Lackaday learned that her name was Elodie Figasso. Her father was dead. Her mother was a dressmaker, in which business she, too, had made her apprenticeship. But an elderly man, a _huissier_, one of those people who go about with a tricolour-rosetted cocked hat, and steel buttons and canvas trousers and a leather satchel chained to their waist, had lately diverted from Elodie the full tide of maternal affection. As she hated the _huissier_, a vulgar man who thought of nothing but the good things that the Veuve Figasso could put into his stomach, and as her besotted mother starved them both in order to fulfil the _huissier's_ demands, and as she derived no compensating joy from her dressmaking, she had found, thanks to a friend, a positron as _figurante_ in a Marseilles Revue, and, _voilà_--there she was free, independent, and, since she had talent and application, was now earning her six francs a day.

She finished her grenadine. Then with a swift movement she caught a passing serving maid and slipped into her hand the money for her companion's scarcely tasted drink and her own. Instantly Andrew protested--Mademoiselle must allow him to have the pleasure.

But no--never in life, she had not intruded on his table to have free

drinks. As for the _consommation_ of the feather-headed Margot--from Margot herself would she get reimbursement.

"But yet, Mademoiselle," said he, "you make me ashamed. You must still be thirsty--like myself."

"_ça ne vous gŒnera pas?_"

She asked the question with such a little air of serious solicitude that he laughed, for the first time. Would it upset his budget, involve the sacrifice of a tram ride or a packet of tobacco, if he spent a few sous on more syrup for her delectation? And yet the delicacy of her motive appealed to him. Here was a little creature very honest, very much of the people, very proud, very conscientious.

"On the contrary, Mademoiselle," said he, "I shall feel that you do me an honour."

"It is not to be refused," said she politely, and the serving maid was despatched for more beer and syrup.

"I waited to see your turn," she said, after a while.

"Ah!" he sighed.

She glanced at him swiftly. "It does not please you that I should talk about it?"

"Not very much," said he.

"But I found you admirable," she declared. "Much better than that _espŁce de poule mouillØe_--I already forget his name--who played last week. Oh--a wet hen--he was more like a drowned duck. So when I heard a comedian from Paris was coming, I said: 'I must wait' and Margot and I waited in the wings--and we laughed. Oh yes, we laughed."

"It's more than the audience did," said the miserable Andrew.

The audience! Of Avignon! She had never played to such an audience in her her life. They were notorious, these people, all over France. They were so stupid that before they would laugh you had to tell them a thing was funny, and then they were so suspicious that they wouldn't laugh for fear of being deceived.

All of which, of course, is a libel on the hearty folk of Avignon. But Elodie was from Marseilles, which naturally has a poor opinion of the other towns of Provence. She also lied for the comforting of Lackaday.

"They are so unsympathetic," said he, "that I shall not play any more."

She knitted her young brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I play neither to-night nor to-morrow night, nor ever again.

To-morrow I return to Paris."

She regarded him awe-stricken. "You throw up an engagement--just like that--because the audience doesn't laugh?"

She had heard vague fairy-tales of pampered opera-singers acting with such Olympian independence; but never a music-hall artist on tour. He must be very rich and powerful.

Lackaday read the thought behind the wide-open eyes.

"Not quite like that," he admitted honestly. "It did not altogether depend on myself. You see the _patron_ found that the audience didn't laugh and the _patronne_ found that my long body spoiled her act--and so--I go to Paris to-morrow."

She rose from the depths of envying wonder to the heights of pity. She flashed indignation at the abominable treatment he had received from the Coinçons. She scorched them with her contempt. What right had that _tortoise_ of a Madame Coinçon to put on airs? She had seen better juggling in a booth at a fair. Her championship warmed Andrew's heart, and he began to feel less lonely in a dismal and unappreciative world. Longing for further healing of an artist's wounded vanity he said:

"Tell me frankly. You did see something to admire in my performance?"

"Haven't I always said so? _Tiens_, would you like me to tell you something? All my life I have loved Auguste in a circus. You know Auguste--the clown? Well, you reminded me of Auguste and I laughed."

"Until lately I was Auguste--in the Cirque Rocambeau."

She clapped her hands.

"But I have seen you there--when I was quite little--three--four years ago at Marseilles."

"Four years," said Andrew looking into the dark backward and abysm of time.

"Yes, I remember you well, now. We're old friends."

"I hope you'll allow me to continue the friendship," said Andrew.

They talked after the way of youth. He narrated his uneventful history. She added details to the previous sketch of her own career. The afternoon drew to a close. The restaurant garden emptied; the good folks of Avignon returned dinnerwards across the bridge. They looked for Margot, but Margot had disappeared, presumably with her new acquaintance. Elodie sniffed in a superior manner. If Margot didn't take care, she would be badly caught one of these days. For herself, no, she had too much character. She wouldn't walk about the streets with a young man she had only known for five minutes. She told Andrew so, very seriously, as they strolled over the bridge arm-in-arm.

They parted, arranging to meet at 10 o'clock when she was free from the music-hall, at the CafØ des NØgociants or the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville.

Andrew, shrinking from the table d'hôte in the mangy hotel in a narrow back street where the Merveilleux troupe had their crowded being, dined at a cheap restaurant near the railway station, and filled in the evening with aimless wandering up and and down the thronged Avenue de la Gare. Once he turned off into the quiet moonlit square dominated by the cathedral and the walls and towers of the Palace of the Popes. The austere beauty of it said nothing to him. It did not bring calm to a fevered spirit. On the contrary, it depressed a spirit longing for a little fever, so he went back to the broad, gay Avenue where all Avignon was taking the air. A girl's sympathy had reconciled him with his kind.

She came tripping up to him, almost on the stroke of ten, as he sat at the outside edge of the cafØ terrace, awaiting her. The reconciliation was complete. Like most of the young men there, he too had his maid. They met as if they had known each other for years. She was full of an evil fellow, _un gros type_, with a roll of fat at the back of his neck and a great diamond ring which flashed in the moonlight, who had waited for her at the stage door and walked by her side, pestering her with his attentions.

"And do you know how I got rid of him? I said: 'Monsieur, I can't walk with you through the streets on account of my comrades. But I swear to you that you will find me at the CafØ des NØgotiants at a quarter past ten.' And so I made my escape. Look," said she excitedly, gripping Andrew's arm, "here he is."

She met the eyes of the _gros type_ with the roll of fat and the diamond ring, who halted somewhat uncertainly in front of the cafe. Whereupon Andrew rose to his long height of six foot four and, glaring at the offender, put him to the flight of over-elaborated unconcern. Elodie was delighted.

"You could have eaten him up alive, _n'est-ce pas_, AndrØ?"

And Andrew felt the thrill of the successful Squire of Dames. For the rest of the evening, there was no longer any 'Monsieur' or 'Mademoiselle.' It was AndrØ and Elodie.

Yes, he would write to her from Paris, telling her of his fortunes. And she too would write. The Agence Moignon would always find him. It is parenthetically to be noted how his afternoon fears of the impermanence of the Agence Moignon had vanished. Time flew pleasantly. She seemed to have set herself, her youth and her femininity, to the task of evoking the wide baby smile on his good-natured though dismal face. It was only on their homeward way, after midnight, that she mentioned the '_boîle_.' There had been discussions. Some had said this and some had said that. There had been partisans of the Coinçons and partisans of AndrØ. There was subject matter for one of the pretty quarrels dear to music-hall folk. But Elodie summed up the whole matter, with her air of precocious wisdom--a wisdom gained in the streets and sewing-rooms and cafØs-concerts of Marseilles.

"What you do is excellent, _mon cher_; but it is _vieux jeu_. The circus is not the music-hall. You must be original."

As originality was banned from the circus tradition, he stood still in the narrow, quiet street and gasped.

"Original?"

"You are so long and thin," she said.

"That has always been against me; it was against me to-day."

"But you could make it so droll," she declared. "And there would be no one else like you. But you must be by yourself, not with a troupe like the Merveilleux. _Tiens_," she caught him by the lapels of his jacket and a passer-by might have surmised a pleading stage in a lovers' discussion, "I have heard there is a little little man in London--oh, so little, _et pas du tout joli_."

"I know," said Andrew, "but he is a great artist."

"And so are you," she retorted. "But as this little man gets all the profit he can out of his littleness--it was _la grosse_ LØonie--the _brune_, number three, you know--ah, but you haven't seen us--anyhow she has been in London and was telling me about him this evening--all that nature has endowed him with he exaggerates--_eh bien!_ Why couldn't you do the same?"

The street was badly lit with gas; but still he could see the flash in her dark eyes. He drew himself up and laid both his hands on her thin shoulders.

"My little Elodie," said he--and by the dim gaslight she could see the flash of his teeth revealed by his wide smile--"My little Elodie, you have genius. You have given me an idea that may make my fortune. What can I give you in return?"

"If you want to show me that you are not ungrateful, you might kiss me," said Elodie.

Chapter VI

A kiss must mean either very much or very little. There are maidens to whom it signifies a life's consecration. There are men whose blood it fires with burning passion. There are couples of different sex who jointly consider their first kiss a matter of supreme importance, and, the temporary rapture over, at once begin to discuss the possibilities of parental approbation

and the ways and means of matrimony. A kiss may be the very devil of a thing leading to two or three dozen honourably born grandchildren, or to suicide, or to celebate addiction to cats, or to eugenic propaganda, or to perpetual crape and the boredom of a community, or to the fate of Abelard, or to the Fall of Troy, or to the proud destiny of a William the Conqueror. I repeat that it is a ticklish thing to go and meddle with it without due consideration. And in some cases consideration only increases the fortuity of its results. Volumes could be written on it.

If you think that the kiss exchanged between Andrew and Elodie had any such immediate sentimental or tragical or heroical consequences you are mistaken. Andrew responded with all the grace in the world to the invitation. It was a pleasant and refreshing act. He was grateful for her companionship, her sympathy, and her inspired counsel. She carried off her frank comradeship with such an air of virginal innocence, and at the same time with such unconscious exposure of her half fulfilled womanhood, that he suffered no temptations of an easy conquest. The kiss therefore evoked no baser range of emotion. As his head was whirling with an artist's sudden conception--and, mark you, an artist's conception need no more be a case of parthenogenesis than that of the physical woman--it had no room for the higher and subtler and more romantical idealizations of the owner of the kissed lips. You may put him down for an insensible young egoist. Put him down for what you will. His embrace was but gratefully fraternal.

As for Elodie, if it were not dangerous--she had the street child's instinct--what did a kiss or two matter? If one paid all that attention to a kiss one's life would be a complicated drama of a hundred threads.

"A kiss is nothing"--so ran one of her _obiter dicta_ recorded somewhere in the manuscript--"unless you feel it in your toes. Then look out."

Evidently this kiss Elodie did not feel in her toes, for she walked along carelessly beside him to the door of her hotel, a hostelry possibly a shade more poverty-stricken in a flag paved by-street, a trifle staler-smelling than his own, and there put out a friendly hand of dismissal.

"We will write to each other?"

"It is agreed."

"Alors, au revoir."

"Au revoir, Elodie, et merci."

And that was the end of it. Andrew went back to Paris by the first train in the morning, and Elodie continued to dance in Avignon.

If they had maintained, as they vaguely promised, an intimate correspondence, it might have developed, according to the laws of the interchange of sentiment between two young and candid souls, into a reciprocal expression of the fervid state which the kiss failed to produce. A couple of months of it, and the pair, yearning for each other, would have

effected by hook or crook, a delirious meeting, and young Romance would have had its triumphant way. But to the gods it seemed otherwise. Andrew wrote, as in grateful duty bound. He wrote again. If she had replied, he would have written a third time; but as there are few things more discouraging than a one-sided correspondence, he held his hand. He felt a touch of disappointment. She was such a warm, friendly little creature, with a sagacious little head on her--by no means the _tŒte de linotte_ of so many of her sisters of song and dance. And she had forgotten him. He shrugged philosophic shoulders. After all, why should she trouble herself further with so dull a dog? Man-like he did not realize the difficulties that beset even a sagacious-headed daughter of song and dance in the matter of literary composition, and the temptation to postpone from day to day the grappling with them, until the original impulse has spent itself through sheer procrastination. It is all very well to say that a letter is an easy thing to write, when letter-writing is a daily habit and you have writing materials and table all comfortably to hand. But when, like Elodie, you would have to go into a shop and buy a bottle of ink and a pen and paper and envelopes and take them up to a tiny hotel bedroom shared with an untidy, space-usurping colleague, or when you would have to sit at a cafØ table and write under the eyes of a not the least little bit discreet companion--for even the emancipated daughters of song and dance cannot, in modesty, show themselves at cafØs alone; or when you have to stand up in a post office--and then there is the paper and envelope difficulty--with a furious person behind you who wants to send a telegram--Elodie's invariable habit when she corresponded, on the back of a picture post card, with her mother; when, in fact, you have before you the unprecedented task of writing a letter--picture post cards being out of the question--and a letter whose flawlessness of expression is prescribed by your vanity, or better by your nice little self-esteem, and you are confronted by such conditions as are above catalogued, human frailty may be pardoned for giving it up in despair.

With this apologia for Elodie's unresponsiveness, conscientiously recorded later by Andrew Lackaday, we will now proceed. The fact remains that they faded pleasantly and even regretlessly from each other's lives.

There now follow some years, in Lackaday's career, of high endeavour and fierce struggle. He has taken to heart Elodie's suggestion of the exploitation of his physical idiosyncracy. He seeks for a formula. In the meanwhile he gains his livelihood as he can. His powers of mimicry stand him in good stead. In the outlying cafØ-concerts of Paris, unknown to fashion or the foreigner, he gives imitations of popular idols from Le Bargy to Polin. But the Ambassadeurs, and the Alcazar d'EtØ and the Folies Marigny and Olympia and such-like stages where fame and fortune are to be found, will have none of him. Paris, too, gets on his vagabond nerves. But what is the good of presenting the unsophisticated public of Brest or BØziers with an imitation of Monsieur le Bargy? As well give them lectures on Thermodynamics.

Sometimes he escapes from mimicry. He conjures, he juggles, he plays selections from Carmen and Cavaleria Rusticana on a fiddle made out of a cigar box and a broom-handle. The Provinces accept him with mild

approbation. He tries Paris, the Paris of Menilmontant and the Outer Boulevards; but Paris, not being amused, prefers his mimicry. He is alone, mind you. No more Coinçon combinations. If he is to be insulted, let the audience do it, or the vulgar theatre management; not his brother artists. Away from his imitations he tries to make the most of his grotesque figure. He invents eccentric costumes; his sleeves reach no further than just below his elbows, his trouser hems flick his calves; he wears, inveterate tradition of the circus clown, a ridiculously little hard felt hat on the top of his shock of carroty hair. He paints his nose red and extends his grin from ear to ear. He racks his brain to invent novelties in manual dexterity. For hours a day in his modest _chambre garnie_ in the Faubourg Saint Denis he practises his tricks. On the dissolution of the Cirque Rocambeau, where as "Auguste" he had been practically anonymous, he had unimaginatively adopted the professional name of Andrew-AndrØ. He is still Andrew-AndrØ. There is not much magic about it on a programme. But, _que voulez-vous?_ It is as effective as many another.

During this period we see him a serious youth, absorbed in his profession, striving towards success, not for the sake of its rewards in luxurious living, but for the stamp that it gives to efficiency. The famous mountebank of Notre Dame did not juggle with greater fervour. Here and there a woman crosses his path, lingers a little and goes her way. Not that he is insensible to female charms, for he upbraids himself for over-susceptibility. But it seems that from the atavistic source whence he inherited his beautiful hands, there survived in him an instinct which craved in woman the indefinable quality that he could never meet, the quality which was common to Melisande and PhŁdre and Rosalind and FØdora and the child-wife of David Copperfield. It is, as I have indicated, the ladies who bid him _bonsoir_. Sometimes he mourns for a day or two, more often he laughs, welcoming regained freedom. None touches his heart. Of men, he has acquaintances in plenty, with whom he lives on terms of good comradeship; but he has scarcely an intimate.

At last he makes a friend--an Englishman, Horatio Bakkus; and this friendship marks a turning-point in his history.

They met at a cafØ-concert in Montmartre, which, like many of its kind, had an ephemeral existence--the nearest, incidentally, to the real Paris to which Andrew Lackaday had attained. It tried to appeal to a catholicity of tastes; to outdo its rivals inscabrousness--did not Farandol and Lizette Blandy make their names there?--and at the same time to offer to the purer-minded an innocent entertainment. To the latter both Lackaday, with his imitations, and Horatio Bakkus, with his sentimental ballads, contributed. Somehow the mixture failed to please. The one part scared the virtuous, at the other the deboshed yawned. _La Boîte Blanche_ perished of inanition. But during its continuance, Lackaday and Bakkus had a month’s profitable engagement.

They bumped into each other, on their first night, at the stage-door. Each politely gave way to the other. They walked on together and turned down the Rue Pigalle and, striking off, reached the Grands Boulevards. The Brasserie Tourtel enticed them. They entered and sat down to a modest supper, sandwiches and brown beer.

"I wish," said Andrew, "you would do me the pleasure to speak English with me."

"Why?" cried the other. "Is my French so villainous?"

"By no means," said Andrew, "but I am an Englishman."

"Then how the devil do you manage to talk both languages like a Frenchman?"

"Why? Is my English then so villainous?"

He mimicked him perfectly. Horatio Bakkus laughed.

"Young man," said he, "I wish I had your gift."

"And I yours."

"It's the rottenest gift a man can be born with," cried Bakkus with startling vindictiveness. "It turns him into an idle, sentimental, hypocritical and dissolute hound. If I hadn't been cursed young with a voice like a Cherub, I should possibly be on the same affable terms with the Almighty as my brother, the Archdeacon, or profitably paralysing the intellects of the young like my brother, the preparatory schoolmaster."

He was a lean and rusty man of forty, with long black hair brushed back over his forehead, and cadaverous cheeks and long upper lip which all the shaving in the world could not redeem for the blue shade of the strong black beard which at midnight showed almost black. But for his black, mocking eyes, he might have been taken for the seedy provincial tragedian of the old school.

"Young man----" said he.

"My name," said Andrew, "is Lackaday."

"And you don't like people to be familiar and take liberties."

Andrew met the ironical glance. "That is so," said he quietly.

"Then, Mr. Lackaday----"

"You can omit the 'Mr.,'" said Andrew, "if you care to do so."

"You're more English than I thought," smiled Horatio Bakkus.

"I'm proud that you should say so," replied Andrew.

"I was about to remark," said Bakkus, "when you interrupted me, that I wondered why a young Englishman of obviously decent upbringing should be pursuing this contemptible form of livelihood."

"I beg your pardon," said Andrew, pausing in the act of conveying to his

mouth a morsel of sandwich. He was puzzled; comrades down on their luck had cursed the profession for a _sale mØtier_ and had wished they were road sweepers; but he had never heard it called contemptible. It was a totally new conception.

Bakkus repeated his words and added: "It is below the dignity of one made in God’s image."

"I am afraid I do not agree with you," replied Andrew, stiffly. "I was born in the profession and honourably bred in it and I have known no other and do not wish to know any other."

"You were born an imitator? It seems rather a narrow scheme of life."

"I was born in a circus, and whatever there could be learned in a circus I was taught. And it was, as you have guessed, a decent upbringing. By Gum, it was!" he added, with sudden heat.

"And you’re proud of it?"

"I don’t see that I’ve got anything else to be proud of," said Andrew.

"And you must be proud of something?"

"If not you had better be dead," said Andrew.

"Ah!" said Bakkus, and went on with his supper.

Andrew, who had hitherto held himself on the defensive against impertinence, and was disposed to dislike the cynical attitude of his new acquaintance, felt himself suddenly disarmed by this "Ah!" Perhaps he had dealt too cruel a blow at the disillusioned owner of the pretty little tenor voice in which he could not take very much pride. Bakkus broke a silence by remarking:

"I envy you your young enthusiasm. You don’t think it better we were all dead?"

"I should think not!" cried Andrew.

"You say you know all that a circus can teach you. What does that mean? You can ride bare back and jump through hoops?"

"I learned to do that--for Clown’s business," replied Andrew. "But that’s no good to me now. I am a professional juggler and conjurer and trick musician. I’m also a bit of a gymnast and sufficient of a contortionist to do eccentric dancing."

Bakkus took a sip of beer, and regarded him with his mocking eyes.

"And you’d sooner keep on throwing up three balls in the air for the rest of your natural life than just be comfortably dead? I should like to know your ideas on the point. What’s the good of it all? Supposing you’re the

most wonderful expert that ever lived--supposing you could keep up fifty balls in the air at the same time, and could balance fifty billiard cues, one on top of another, on your nose--what's the good of it?"

Andrew rubbed his head. Such problems had never occurred to him. Old Ben Flint's philosophy pounded into him, at times literally with a solid and well-deserved paternal cuff, could be summed up in the eternal dictum: "That which thou hast to do, do it with all thy might." It was the beginning and end of his rule of life. He looked not, nor thought of looking, further. And now came this Schopenhaurian with his question. "What's the good of it?"

"I suppose I'm an artist, in my way," he replied, modestly.

"Artist?" Bakkus laughed derisively. "Pardon me, but you don't know what the word means. An artist interprets nature in concrete terms of emotion, in words, in colour, in sound, in stone--I don't say that he deserves to live. I could prove to you, if I had time, that Michael Angelo and Dante and Beethoven were the curses of humanity. Much better dead. But, anyhow, they were artists. Even I with my tinpot voice singing 'Annie Laurie' and 'The Sands of Dee' and such-like clap-trap which brings a lump in the throat of the grocer and his wife, am an artist. But you, my dear fellow--with your fifty billiard cues on top of your nose? There's a devil of a lot of skill about it of course--but nothing artistic. It means nothing."

"Yet if I could perform the feat," said Andrew, "thousands and thousands of people would come to see me; more likely a million."

"No doubt. But what would be the good of it, when you had done it and they had seen it? Sheer waste of half your lifetime and a million hours on the part of the public, which is over forty thousand days, which is over a hundred years. Fancy a century of the world's energy wasted in seeing you balance billiard cues on the end of your nose!"

Andrew reflected for a long time, his elbow on the cafe table, his hand covering his eyes. There must surely be some fallacy in this remorseless argument which reduced his life's work to almost criminal futility. At last light reached him. He held out his other hand and raised his head.

"_Attendez_. I must say in French what has come into my mind. Surely I am an artist according to your definition. I interpret nature, the marvellous human mechanism in terms of emotion--the emotion of wonder. The balance of fifty billiard cues gives the million people the same catch at the throat as the song or the picture, and they lose themselves for an hour in a new revelation of the possibilities of existence, and so I save the world a hundred years of the sorrow and care of life."

Bakkus looked at him approvingly. "Good," said he. "Very good. Thank God, I've at last come across a man with a brain that isn't atrophied for want of use. I love talking for talking's sake--good talk--don't you?"

"I cannot say that I do," replied Andrew honestly, "I have never thought of

it.'

"But you must, my dear Lackaday. You have no idea how it stimulates your intellect. It crystallizes your own vague ideas and sends you away with the comforting conviction of what a damned fool the other fellow is. It's the cheapest recreation in the world--when you can get it. And it doesn't matter whether you're in purple and fine linen or in rags or in the greasy dress-suit of a cafØ-concert singer." He beckoned the waiter. "Shall we go?"

They parted outside and went their respective ways. The next night they again supped together, and the night after that, until it became a habit. In his long talks with the idle and cynical tenor, Andrew learned many things.

Now, parenthetically, certain facts in the previous career of Andrew Lackaday have to be noted.

Madame Flint had brought him up nominally in the Roman Catholic Faith, which owing to his peripatetic existence was a very nebulous affair without much real meaning; and Ben Flint, taking more pains, had reared him in a sturdy Lancashire Fear of God and Duty towards his Neighbour and Duty towards himself, and had given him the Golden Rule above mentioned. Ben had also seen to his elementary education, so that the _rØgime du participe passØ_ had no difficulties for him, and Racine and Bossuet were not empty names, seeing that he had learned by heart extracts from the writings of these immortals in his school primer. That they conveyed little to him but a sense of paralysing boredom is neither here nor there. And Ben Flint, most worthy and pertinacious of Britons, for the fourteen impressionable years during which he was the arbiter of young Andrew's destiny, never for an hour allowed him to forget that he was an Englishman. That Andrew should talk French, his stepmother tongue, to all the outside world was a matter of necessity. But if he addressed a word of French to him, Ben Flint, there was the devil to pay. And if he picked up from the English stable hands vulgarisms and debased vowel sounds, Ben Flint had the genius to compel their rejection.

"My father," writes Lackaday--for as such he always regarded Ben Flint--"was the most remarkable man I have ever known. That he loved me with his whole nature I never doubted and I worshipped the ground on which he trod. But he was remorseless in his enforcement of obedience. Looking back, I am lost in wonder at his achievement."

Still, even Ben Flint could not do everything. The eternal precepts of morality, the colloquial practice of English speech, the ineradicable principles of English birth and patriotism, the elementary though thorough French education, the intensive physical training in all phases of circus life, took every hour that Ben Flint could spare from his strenuous professional career as a vagabond circus clown. I who knew Ben Flint, and drank of his wisdom gained in many lands, have been disposed to wonder why he did not empty it to broaden the intellectual and æsthetic horizon of his adopted son. But on thinking over the matter--how could he? He had spent all his time in filling up the boy with essentials. Just at that time when

Andrew might have profited by the strong, rough intellectuality that had so greatly attracted me as a young man, Ben Flint died. In the realm of gymnasts, jugglers, circus-riders, dancers in which Andrew had thence found his being, there was no one to replace the mellow old English clown, who travelled around with Sterne and Montaigne and Shakespeare and Bunyan and the Bible, as the only books of his permanent library. Such knowledge as he possessed of the myriad activities of the great world outside his professional circle he had picked up in aimless and desultory reading.

In Horatio Bakkus, therefore, Andrew met for the first time a human being interested in the intellectual aspect of life; one who advanced outrageous propositions just for the joy of supporting them and of refuting counter-arguments; one, in fact, who, to his initial amazement, could juggle with ideas as he juggled with concrete objects. In this companionship he found an unknown stimulus. He would bid his friend adieu and go away, his brain catching feverishly at elusive theories and new conceptions. Sometimes he went off thrilled with a sense of intellectual triumph. He had beaten his adversary. He had maintained his simple moral faith against ingenious sophistry. He realized himself as a thinking being, impelled by a new force to furnish himself with satisfying reasons for conduct. It was through Horatio Bakkus that he discovered The Venus of Milo and Marcus Aurelius and Longchamps races....

From the last he derived the most immediate benefit.

"If you've never been to a race-meeting," said Bakkus, "you've missed one of the elementary opportunities of a liberal education. Nowhere else can you have such a chance of studying human imbecility, knavery and greed. You can also glut your eyes with the spectacle of useless men, expensive women, and astounded, sensitive animals."

"I prefer," replied Andrew, with his wide grin, "to keep my faith in mankind and horses."

"And I," said Bakkus, "love to realize myself for what I really am, an imbecile, a knave, and a useless craver of money for which I've not had the indignity of working. It soothes me to feel that for all my heritage of culture I am nothing more or less than one of the rabble-rout. I've backed horses ever since I was a boy and in my time I've had a pure delight in pawning my underwear in order to do so."

"It seems to be the height of folly," said sober Andrew.

Bakkus regarded him with his melancholy mocking eyes.

"To paraphrase a remark of yours on the occasion of our first meeting--if a man is not a fool in something he were better dead. At any rate let me show you this fool's playground."

So Andrew assented. They went to Longchamps, humbly, on foot, mingling with the Paris crowd. Bakkus wore a sun-stained brown and white check suit and an old grey bowler hat and carried a pair of racing-glasses slung across his shoulders, all of which transformed his aspect from that, in evening

dress, of the broken old tragedian to that of the bookmaker’s tout rejected of honest bookmaking men. As for Andrew, he made no change in his ordinary modest ill-fitting tweeds, of which the sleeves were never long enough; and his long red neck mounted high above the white of his collar and his straw hat was, as usual, clamped on the carroty thatch of his hair. For them no tickets for stands, lawn or enclosure. The far off gaily dressed crowd in these exclusive demesnes shimmered before Andrew’s vision as remote as some radiant planetary choir. The stir on the field, however, excited him. The sun shone through a clear air on this late meeting of the season, investing it with an air of innocent holiday gaiety which stultified Bakkus’s bleak description. And Andrew’s great height overtopping the crowd afforded him a fair view of the course.

Bakkus came steeped in horse-lore and confidently prophetic. To the admiration of Andrew he ran through the entries for each race, analysing their histories, summarizing their form, and picking out dead certainties with an esoteric knowledge derived from dark and mysterious sources. Andrew followed him to the booths of the _Pari Mutuel_, and betting his modest five franc piece, on each of the first two events, found Bakkus infallible. But on looking down the list of entries for the great race of the day he was startled to find a name which he had only once met with before and which he had all but forgotten. It was "Elodie."

"My friend," said Bakkus, "now is the time to make a bold bid for a sure fortune. There is a horse called Goffredo who is quoted in the sacred inner ring of those that know at 8 to 1. I have information withheld from this boor rabble, that he will win, and that he will come out at about 15 to 1. I shall therefore invest my five louis in the certain hope of seventy-five beautiful golden coins clinking into my hand. Come thou and do likewise."

"I’m going to back Elodie," said Andrew.

Bakkus stared at him. "Elodie--that ambulatory assemblage of cat’s meat! Why she has never been placed in a race in her life. Look at her." He pulled Andrew as near the railings as they could get and soon picked her out of the eight or nine cantering down the straight--a sleek, mild, contented bay whose ambling gentleness was greeted with a murmur of derision. "Did you ever see such a cow?"

"I like the look of her," said Andrew.

"Why--in the name of----"

"She looks as if she would be kind to children," replied Andrew.

They rushed quickly to the _Pari Mutuel_. Bakkus paid his five louis for his Goffredo ticket. He turned to seek Andrew, but Andrew had gone. In a moment or two they met among the scurrying swarm about the booths.

"What have you done?"

"I’ve put a louis on Elodie," said Andrew.

"The next time I want to give you a happy day I'll take you to the Young Men's Christian Association," said Bakkus witheringly.

"Let us see the race," said Andrew.

They paid a franc apiece for a stand on a bench and watched as much of the race as they could see. And Bakkus forgot to share his glasses with Andrew, who caught now and then an uncomprehending sight of coloured dots on moving objects and gaped in equally uncomprehensible bewilderment when the racing streak flashed home up the straight. A strange cry, not of gladness but of wonder, burst from the great crowd. Andrew turned to Bakkus, who, with glasses lowered, was looking at him with hollow eyes from which the mockery had fled.

"What's the matter?" asked Andrew.

"The matter? Your running nightmare has won. Why the devil couldn't you have given me the tip? You must have known something. No one could play such a game without knowing. It's damned unfriendly."

"Believe me, I had no tip," Andrew protested. "I never heard of the beast before."

"Then why the blazes did you pick her out?"

"Ah!" said Andrew. Then realizing that his philosophical and paradoxical friend was in sordid earnest he said mildly:

"There was a girl of that name who once brought me good luck."

The gambler, alive to superstitious intuitions, repented immediately of his anger.

"That's worth all the tips in the world. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't wear my heart upon my sleeve," replied Andrew.

So peace was made. They joined the thin crowd round their booth of the _Pari Mutuel_, mainly composed of place winners, and when the placards of the odds went up, Bakkus gripped his companion's arm.

"My God! A hundred and three to one. Why didn't you plank on your last penny."

"I'm very well content with two thousand francs," said Andrew. "It's something against a rainy day."

They reached the _guichet_ and Andrew drew his money.

"Suppose the impossible animal hadn't won--you would have been rather sick."

"No," Andrew replied, after a moment's thought. "I should have regarded my

louis as a tribute to the memory of one who did me a great service."

"I believe," said Bakkus, "that if I could only turn sentimentalist, I should make my fortune."

"Let us go and find a drink," said Andrew.

For the second time Elodie brought him luck. This time in the shape of a hundred and three louis, a goodly sum when one has to live from hand to mouth. And the time came, at the end of their engagement at _La Boîte Blanche_, when they lost even that precarious method of existence. For the first time in his life Andrew spent a month in vain search for employment. Dead season Paris had more variety artists than it knew what to do with. The provinces, so the rehabilitated Moignon and his confrŁres, the other agents, declared, in terms varying from apologetic stupor to frank brutality, had no use for Andrew-AndrØ and his unique entertainment.

"But what shall I do?" asked the anxious AndrØ.

"Wait, _mon cher_, we shall soon well arrange it," said Moignon.

"?" pantomimed the other agents, with shrugged shoulders and helplessly outspread hands.

And it happened too that Bakkus, the sweet ballad-monger, found himself on the same rocks of unemployment.

"I have," said he, one evening, when the stranded pair were sitting outside a horrid little liquor retreat with a zinc bar in the Faubourg Saint-Denis--the luxury of _consommations_ at sixty centimes on the Grands Boulevards had faded from their dreams--"I have, my dear friend, just enough to carry me on for a fortnight."

"And I too," said Andrew.

"But your hundred louis at Longchamps?"

"They’re put away," said Andrew.

"Thank God," said Bakkus.

Andrew detected a lack of altruism in the pious note of praise. He did not love Bakkus to such a pitch of brotherly affection as would warrant his relieving him of responsibility for self support. He had already fed Bakkus for three days.

"They’re put away," he repeated.

"Bring them out of darkness into the light of day," said Bakkus. "What are talents in a napkin? You are a capitalist--I am a man with ideas. May I order another of this _mastroquet’s_ bowel-gripping absinthes in order to expound a scheme? Thank you, my dear Lackaday. _Oui, encore une_.

Tell me have you ever been to England?"

"No," said Lackaday.

"Have you ever heard of Pierrots?"

"On the stage--masked balls--yes."

"But real Pierrots who make money?"

"In England? What do you mean?"

"There is in England a blatant, vulgar, unimaginative, hideous institution known as the Seaside."

"Well?" said Andrew.

The dingy proprietor of the "Zingue" brought out the absinthe. Bakkus arranged the perforated spoon, carrying its lump of sugar over the glass and began to drop the water from the decanter.

"If you will bear with me for a minute or two, until the sugar's melted, I'll tell you all about it."

Chapter VII

It was a successful combination. Bakkus sang his ballads and an occasional humorous song of the moment to Andrew's accompaniment on mandolin or one-stringed violin, and Andrew conjured and juggled comically, using Bakkus as his dull-witted foil. A complete little performance, the patter and business artistically thought out and perfectly rehearsed. They wore the conventional Pierrot costume with whited faces and black skull caps.

Bakkus, familiar with English customs, had undertaken to attend to the business side of their establishment on the sands of the great West Coast resort, Andrew providing the capital out of his famous hundred louis. But it came almost imperceptibly to pass that Andrew made all the arrangements, drove the bargains and kept an accurate account of their varying finances.

"You'll never be a soldier of fortune, my dear fellow," said Bakkus once, when, returning homewards, he had wished to dip his hand into the leather bag containing the day's takings in order to supply himself lavishly with comforting liquid.

"It's the very last thing I want to be," replied Andrew, hugging the bag tight under his long arm.

"You're bourgeois to your finger-tips, your ideal of happiness is a meek

female in a parlour and half a dozen food-sodden brats."

Andrew hunched his shoulders good-naturedly at the taunt. A home, and wife and offspring seemed rather desirable of attainment.

"You've lots of money in your pocket to pay for a drink," said he. "It's mere perversity that makes you want to touch the takings. We haven't counted them."

"Perversity is the only thing that makes this rotten life worth living," retorted Bakkus.

It was his perversity, thus exemplified, which compelled Andrew to constitute himself the business manager of the firm. He had a sedate, inexorable way with him, a grotesque dignity, to which, for all his gibes, Bakkus instinctively submitted. Bakkus might provide ideas, but it was the lank and youthful Andrew who saw to their rigid execution.

"You've no more soul than a Prussian drill sergeant," Bakkus would say.

"And you've no more notion of business than a Swiss Admiral," Andrew would reply.

"Who invented this elegant and disgustingly humiliating entertainment?"

Andrew would laugh and give him all the credit. But when Bakkus, in the morning, clamouring against insane punctuality, and demanding another hour's sloth, refused to leave his bed, he came up against an incomprehensible force, and, entirely against his will, found himself on the stroke of eleven ready to begin the performance on the sands. Sometimes he felt an almost irresistible desire to kick Andrew, so mild and gentle, with his eternal idiotic grin; but he knew in his heart that Andrew was not one of the idiots whom people kicked with impunity. He lashed him, instead, with his tongue, which Andrew, within limits, did not mind a bit. To Bakkus, however, Andrew owed the conception of their adventure. He also owed to him the name of the combination, and also the name which was to be professionally his for the rest of his stage career.

It all proceeded from the miraculous winning of the mare Elodie. Bakkus had made some indiscreet remark concerning her namesake. Andrew, quick in his dignity, had made a curt answer. Ironical Bakkus began to hum the old nursery song:

_Il Øtait une bergŁre
Et ron, ron, ron, petit patapon_.

Suddenly he stopped.

"By George! I have it! The names that will _Øpater_ the English bourgeois. Ron-ron-ron and Petit Patapon. I'll be Ron-ron-ron and you'll be dear little Patapon."

As the English seaside public, however, when he came to think of it, have

never heard of the shepherdess who guarded her muttons and still less of the refrain which illustrated her history, he realized that the names as they stood would be ineffective. Ron-ron and Patapon therefore would they be. But Andrew, remembering Elodie's wise counsel, stuck to the "petit." His French instinct guiding him, he rejected Patapon. Bakkus found Ron-ron an unmeaning appellation. At last they settled it. They printed it out in capital letters.

THE GREAT PATAPON AND LITTLE PATOU

So it came to pass that a board thus inscribed in front of their simple installation on the sands advertised their presence.

Now, Lackaday in his manuscript relates this English episode, not so much as an appeal to pity for the straits to which he was reduced, although he winces at its precarious mountebankery, and his sensitive and respectable soul revolts at going round with the mendicant's hat and thanking old women and children for pennies, as in order to correlate certain influences and coincidences in his career. Elodie seems to haunt him. So he narrates what seems to be another trivial incident.

Andrew was a lusty swimmer. In the old circus summer days Ben Flint had seen to that. Whenever the Cirque Rocambeau pitched its tent by sea or lake, Ben Flint threw young Andrew into the water. So now every morning, before the world was awake, did Andrew go down to the sea. Once, a week after their arrival, did he, by some magnetic power, drag the protesting Bakkus from his bed and march him down, from the modest lodgings in a by-street, to the sea front and the bathing-machines. Magnetic force may bring a man to the water, but it can't make him go in. Bakkus looked at the cold grey water--it was a cloudy morning--took counsel with himself and, sitting on the sands, refused to budge from the lesser misery of the windy shore. He smoked the pipe of disquiet on an empty stomach for the half-hour during which Andrew expended unnecessary effort in progressing through many miles in an element alien to man. In the cold and sickly wretchedness of a cutting wind, he cursed Andrew with erudite elaboration. But when Andrew eventually landed, his dripping bathing-suit clinging close to his gigantic and bony figure, appearing to derisive eyes like the skin covered fossil of a prehistoric monster of a man, his bushy hair clotted, like ruddy seaweed, over his staring, ugly face, Bakkus forgot his woes and rolled on his back convulsed with vulgar but inextinguishable laughter.

"My God!" he cried later, when summoned by an angry Andrew to explain his impolite hilarity. "You're the funniest thing on the earth. Why hide the light of your frame under a bushel of clothing? My dear boy, I'm talking sense"--this was at a hitherto unfriendly breakfast-table--"You've got an extraordinary physique. If I laughed, like a rude beast, for which I apologize, the public would laugh. There's money in it. Skin tights and your hair made use of, why--you've got 'em laughing before you even begin a bit of business. Why the devil don't you take advantage of your physical peculiarities? Look here, don't get cross. This is what I mean."

He pulled out a pencil and, pushing aside plates and dishes, began to sketch on the table-cloth with his superficial artistic facility. Andrew

watched him, the frown of anger giving way to the knitted brow of interest. As the drawing reached completion, he thought again of Elodie and her sage counsel. Was this her mental conception which he had been striving for years to realize? He did not find the ideal incongruous with his lingering sense of romance. He could take a humorous view of anything but his profession. That was sacred. Everything did he devote to it, from his soul to his skinny legs and arms. So that, when Bakkus had finished, and leaned back to admire his work, Andrew drew a deep breath, and his eyes shone as if he had received an inspiration from on High. He saw himself as in an apotheosis.

There he was, self-exaggeratingly true to life, inordinately high, inordinately thin, clad in tights that reached to a waistband beneath his armpits giving him miraculous length of leg, a low-cut collar accentuating his length of neck, his hair twisted up on end to a fine point.

"And I could pad the feet of the tights and wear high heels that would give me another couple of inches," he cried excitedly. "By Gum!" said he, clutching Bakkus's shoulder, a rare act of demonstrativeness, "what a thing it is to have imagination."

"Ah!" said Bakkus, "what a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!"

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Andrew.

Bakkus waved a hand towards the drawing.

"If only I had your application," said he, "I should make a great name as an illustrator of Hamlet."

"One of these days," said Andrew, the frown of anger returning to his brow, "I'll throw you out of the window."

"Provided it is not, as now, on the ground floor, you would be committing an act of the loftiest altruism."

Andrew returned to his forgotten breakfast, and poured out a cup of tepid tea.

"What would you suggest--just plain black or red--Mephisto--or stripes?"

He was full of the realization of the Elodesque idea. His brain became a gushing fount of inspiration. Hundreds of grotesque possibilities of business, hitherto rendered ineffective by flapping costume, appeared in fascinating bubbles. He thought and spoke of nothing else.

"Once I denied you the rank of artist," said Bakkus. "I retract. I apologize. No one but an artist would inflict on another human being such intolerable boredom."

"But it’s your idea, bless you, which I’m carrying out, with all the gratitude in the world."

"If you want to reap the tortures of the damned," retorted Bakkus, "just you be a benefactor."

Andrew shrugged his shoulders. That was the way of Horatio Bakkus, perhaps the first of his fellow-creatures whom he had deliberately set out to study, for hitherto he had met only simple folk, good men and true or uncomplicated fools and knaves, and the paradoxical humour of his friend had been a puzzling novelty demanding comprehension; the first, therefore, who put him on the track of the observation of the twists of human character and the knowledge of men. That was the way of Bakkus. An idea was but a toy which he tired of like a child and impatiently broke to bits. Only a week before he had come to Andrew:

"My dear fellow, I’ve got a song. I’m going to write it, set it and sing it myself. It begins:--

_I crept into the halls of sleep
And watched the dreams go by._

I’ll give you the accompaniment in a day or two and we’ll try it on the dog. It’s a damned sight too good for them--but no matter."

Andrew was interested. The lines had a little touch of poetry. He refrained for some time from breaking through the gossamer web of the poet’s fancy. At last, however, as he heard nothing further, he made delicate enquiries.

"Song?" cried Bakkus. "What song? That meaningless bit of moonshine ineptitude I quoted the other day? I have far more use for my intellect than degrading it to such criminal prostitution."

Yes, he was beginning to know his Bakkus. His absorption in his new character was not entirely egotistic. Both his own intelligence and his professional experience told him that here, as he had worked out-the business in his mind, was an entirely novel attraction. In his young enthusiasm he saw hundreds crowding round the pitch on the sands. It was as much to Bakkus’s interest as to his own that the new show should succeed. And even before he had procured the costume from Covent Garden, Bakkus professed intolerable boredom. He shrugged his shoulders. Bored or not, Bakkus should go through with it. So again under the younger man’s leadership Bakkus led the strenuous life of rehearsal.

It took quite a day for their fame to spread. On the second day they attracted crowds. Money poured in upon them. Little Patou, like a double-tailed serpent rearing himself upright on his tail tips, appeared at first a creature remote, of some antediluvian race--until he talked a familiar, disarming patter with his human, disarming grin. The Great Patapon, contrary to jealous anticipation, saw himself welcomed as a contrast and received more than his usual meed of applause. This satisfied, for the time, his singer’s vanity which he professed so greatly to despise. They entered on a spell of halcyon days.

The brilliant sunny season petered out in hopeless September, raw and chill. A week had passed without the possibility of an audience. Said Bakkus:

"Of all the loathsome spots in a noisome universe this is the most purulent. In order to keep up our rudimentary self-respect we have done our best to veil our personal identity as images of the Almighty from the higher promenades of the vulgar. Our sole associates have been the blatant frequenters of evil smelling bars. We've not exchanged a word with a creature approaching our intellectual calibre. I am beginning to conceive for you the bitter hatred that one of a pair of castaways has for the other; and you must regard me with feelings of equal abhorrence."

"By no means," replied Andrew. "You provide me with occupation, and that amuses me."

As the occupation for the dismal week had mainly consisted in dragging a cursing Bakkus away from public-house whisky on damp and detested walks, and in imperturbably manoeuvring him out of an idle--and potentially vicious--intrigue with the landlady's pretty and rather silly daughter, his reply brought a tragic scowl to Bakkus's face.

"There are times when I lie awake, inventing lingering deaths for you. You occupy yourself too much with my affairs. It's time our partnership in this degrading mountebankery should cease."

"Until it does, it's going to be efficient," said Andrew. "It's a come down for both of us to play on the sands and pass the hat round. I hate it as much as you do, but we've done it honourably and decently--and we'll end up in the same way."

"We end now," said Bakkus, staring out of their cheap lodging house sitting-room window at the dismal rain that veiled the row of cheap lodging houses opposite.

Andrew made a stride across the room, seized his shoulder and twisted him round.

"What about our bookings next month?"

For their success had brought them an offer of a month certain from a northern Palladium syndicate, with prospects of an extended tour.

"Dust and ashes," said Bakkus.

"You may be dust," cried Andrew hotly, "but I'm damned if I'm ashes."

Bakkus bit and lighted a cheap cigar and threw himself on the dilapidated sofa. "No, my dear fellow, if it comes to that, I'm the ashes. Dead! With never a recrudescent Phoenix to rise up out of them. You're the dust, the merry sport of the winds of heaven."

"Don’t talk foolishness," said Andrew.

"Was there ever a man living who used his breath for any other purpose?"

"Then," said Andrew, "your talk about breaking up the partnership is mere stupidity."

"It is and it isn’t," replied Bakkus. "Although I hate you, I love you. You’ll find the same paradoxical sentimental relationship in most cases between man and wife. I love you, and I wish you well, my dear boy. I should like to see you Merry-Andrew yourself to the top of the Merry-Andrew tree. But for insisting on my accompanying you on that uncomfortable and strenuous ascent, without very much glory to myself, I frankly detest you."

"That doesn’t matter a bit to me," said Andrew. "You’ve got to carry out your contract."

Bakkus sighed. "Need I? What’s a contract? I say I am willing to perform vocal and other antics for so many shillings a week. When I come to think of it, my soul revolts at the sale of itself for so many shillings a week to perform actions utterly at variance with its aspirations. As a matter of fact I am tired. Thanks to my brain and your physical cooperation, I have my pockets full of money. I can afford a holiday. I long for bodily sloth, for the ragged intellectual companionship that only Paris can give me, for the resumption of study of the philosophy of the excellent Henri Bergson, for the absinthe that brings forgetfulness, for the Tanagra figured, broad-mouthed, snub-nosed shrew that fills every day with potential memories."

"Oh that’s it, is it?" cried Andrew, with a glare in his usually mild eyes and his ugly jaw set. They had had many passages at arms. Bakkus’s sophistical rhetoric against Andrew’s steady common sense; and they had sharpened Andrew’s wit. But never before had they come to a serious quarrel. Feeling his power he had hitherto exercised it with humorous effectiveness. But now the situation appeared entirely devoid of humour. He was coldly and sternly angry.

"That’s the beginning and end of the whole thing? It all comes down to a worthless little Montmartroise? For a little thing of _rien du tout,_ the artist, the philosopher, the English public school man will throw over his friend, his partner, his signed word, his honour? _Mon Dieu!_ Well go--I can easily--No, I’ll not say what I have in my mind."

Bakkus turned over on his side, facing his adversary, his under arm outstretched, the cigar in his fingers.

"I love to see youth perspiring--especially with noble rage. It does it good, discharges the black humours of the body. If I could perspire more freely I should be singing in Grand Opera."

"You can break your contract and I’ll do without you," cried the furious Andrew.

"I'm not going to break the contract, my young friend," replied Bakkus, peering at him through lowered eyelids. "When did I say such a thing? We end the damp and dripping folly of the sands."

"We don't," said Andrew.

"As you will," said Bakkus. "Again I prophesy that you'll be drilling awkward squads in barrack yards before you've done. It's all you're fit for."

Andrew smiled or grinned with closed lips. It was his grim smile, many years afterwards to become familiar to larger bodies of men than awkward squads. Once more he had won his little victory.

So peace was made. They finished up the miserable fag end of the season and with modest success carried out their month's contract in the northern towns. But even Andrew's drastic leadership could not prevail on Bakkus's indolence to sign an extension. Montmartre called him. An engagement. He also spoke vaguely of singing lessons. Now that Parisians had returned to Paris, he could not afford to lose his connections. With cynical frankness he also confessed his disinclination to be recognized in a music-hall Punch and Judy show by his brother the Archdeacon.

"Archdeacons," said Andrew--he had a confused idea of their prelatical status, "don't go to music-halls."

"They do in this country," said Bakkus. "They're everywhere. They infest the air like microbes. You only have to open your mouth and you get your lungs filled with them. It's a pestilential country and I've done with it."

"All right," replied Andrew, "I'll run the show on my own."

But the Palladium syndicate, willing to book "The Great Patapon and Little Patou" for a further term, declined to rebook Little Patou by himself. He returned to Paris, where he found Bakkus wallowing in absinthe and philosophic sloth.

"We might have made our fortune in England," said he.

Said Bakkus coolly sipping his absinthe, "I have no desire to make my fortune. Have you?"

"I should like to make my name and a big position," replied Andrew.

"And I, my young friend? As the fag end of the comet's tail should I have made my name and a big position? Ah egotist! Egotist! Sublime egotist! The true artist using human souls as the rungs of his ladder! Well, go your ways. I have no reproach against you. Now that I'm out of your barrack square, my heart is overflowing with love for you. You have ever a friend in Horatio Bakkus. When you fall on evil days and you haven't a sou in your pocket, come to me--and you'll always find an inspiration."

"I wish you would give me one now," said Andrew, who had spent a fruitless

morning at the Agence Moignon.

"You want a foil, an intelligent creature who will play up to you--a creature far more intelligent than I am. A dog. Buy a dog. A poodle."

"By Gum!" cried Andrew, "I believe you're right again."

"I'm never wrong," said Bakkus. "Garcon!" He summoned the waiter and waved his hand towards the little accusing pile of saucers. "Monsieur always pays for my inspirations."

Chapter VIII

We behold Petit Patou now definitely launched on his career. Why the execution of Bakkus's (literally) cynical suggestion should have met with instant success, neither he nor Andrew nor PrØpimpin, the poodle, nor anyone under heaven had the faintest idea. Perhaps PrØpimpin had something to do with it. He was young, excellently trained, and expensive. As to the methods of his training Andrew made no enquiries. Better not. But, brought up in the merciful school of Ben Flint, in which Billy the pig had many successors, both porcine and canine, he had expert knowledge of what kind firmness on the part of the master and sheer love on that of the animal could accomplish.

PrØpimpin went through his repertoire with the punctilio of the barrack square deprecated by Bakkus.

"I buy him," said Andrew. "_Viens, mon ami_."

PrØpimpin cast an oblique glance at his old master.

"_Va-t-en_," said the latter.

"_Allons_" said Andrew with a caressing touch on the dog's head.

PrØpimpin's topaz eyes gazed full into his new lord's. He wagged the tuft at the end of his shaven tail. Andrew knelt down, planted his fingers in the lion shagginess of mane above his ears and said in the French which PrØpimpin understood:

"We're going to be good friends, eh? You're not going to play me any dirty tricks? You're going to be a good and very faithful colleague?"

"You mustn't spoil him," said the vendor, foreseeing, according to his lights, possible future recriminations.

Andrew, still kneeling, loosed his hold on the dog, who forthwith put both paws on his shoulder and tried to lick the averted human face.

"I've trained animals since I was two years old, Monsieur Berguinan. Please tell me something that I don't know." He rose. "_Alors_, PrØpimpin, we belong to each other. _Viens_."

The dog followed him joyously. The miracle beyond human explanation was accomplished, the love at first sight between man and dog.

Now, in the manuscript there is much about PrØpimpin. Lackaday, generally so precise, has let himself go over the love and intelligence of this most human of animals. To read him you would think that PrØpimpin invented his own stage business and rehearsed Petit Patou. As a record of dog and man sympathy it is of remarkable interest; it has indeed a touch of rare beauty; but as it is a detailed history of PrØpimpin rather than an account of a phase in the career of Andrew Lackaday, I must wring my feelings and do no more than make a passing reference to their long and, from my point of view, somewhat monotonous partnership. It sheds, however, a light on the young manhood of this earnest mountebank. It reveals a loneliness ill-becoming his years--a loneliness of soul and heart of which he appears to be unconscious. Again, we have here and there the fleeting shadow of a petticoat. In Stockholm--during these years he went far afield--he fancies himself in love with one Vera Karynska of vague Mid-European nationality, who belongs to a troupe of acrobats. Vera has blue eyes, a deeply sentimental nature, and, alas! an unsympathetic husband who, to Andrew's young disgust depends on her for material support, seeing that every evening he and various other brutes of the tribe form an inverted pyramid with Vera's amazonian shoulders as the apex. He is making up a besotted mind to say, "Fly with me," when the Karinski troupe vanishes Moscow-wards and an inexorable contract drives him to Dantzic. In that ancient town, looking into the faithful and ironical eyes of PrØpimpin, he thanks God he did not make a fool of himself.

You see, he succeeds. If you credited his modesty, you would think that PrØpimpin made Petit Patou. _Quod est absurdum_. But the psychological fact remains that Andrew Lackaday needed some magnetic contact with another individuality, animal or human, to exhibit his qualities. There, in counselling splendid isolation, Elodie Figasso, the little Marseilles gutter fairy was wrong. She saw, clearly enough, that, subordinated to others, with no chance of developing his one personality he must fail. But she did not perceive--and poor child, how could she?--that given the dominating influence over any combination, even over one poodle dog, he held the key of success.

So we see him, the born leader, unconscious of his powers for lack of opportunity, instinctively craving their exercise for his own spiritual and moral evolution, and employing them in the benign mastery of the dog PrØpimpin.

They were happy years of bourgeois vagabondage. At first he felt the young artist's soreness that, with the exception of rare, sporadic engagements, neither London nor Paris would have him. Once he appeared at the Empire, in Leicester Square, an early turn, and kept on breaking bits of his heart every day, for a week, when the curtain went down in the thin applause that

is worse than silence.

"PrØpimpin felt it," he writes, "even more than I did. He would follow me off, with his head bowed down and his tail-tuft sweeping the floor, so that I could have wept over his humiliation."

Why the great capitals fail to be amused is a perpetual mystery to Andrew Lackaday. PrØpimpin and he give them the newest things they can think of. After weeks and weeks of patient rehearsal, they bring a new trick to perfection. It is the _clou_ of their performance for a week's engagement at the Paris Folies-BergŁre. After a conjuring act, he retires. Comes on again immediately, Petit Patou, apparently seven foot high, in the green silk tights reaching to the arm-pit waist, a low frill round his neck, his hair up to a point, a perpetual grin painted on his face. On the other side enters PrØpimpin on hind legs, bearing an immense envelope. Petit Patou opens it--shows the audience an invitation to a ball.

"Ah! dress me, PrØpimpin."

The dog pulls a hidden string and Petit Patou is clad in a bottle green dress-coat. PrØpimpin barks and dances his delight.

"But _nom d'un chien_, I can't go to a ball without a hat."

Prepimpin bolts to the wings and returns with an opera hat.

"And a stick."

Prepimpin brings the stick.

"And a cigar."

PrØpimpin rushes to a little table at the back of the stage and on his hind legs offers a box of cigars to his master, who selects one and lights it. He begins the old juggler's trick of the three objects. The dog sits on his haunches and watches him. There is patter in which the audience is given to understand that PrØpimpin, who glances from time to time over the footlights, with a shake of his leonine mane, is bored to death by his master's idiocy. At last the hat descends on Petit Patou's head, the crook-handled stick falls on his arm, and he looks about in a dazed way for the cigar, and then he sees PrØpimpin, who has caught it, swaggering off on his hind legs, the still lighted cigar in his mouth.

"No," writes Lackaday, "it was a failure. Poor PrØpimpin and I left Paris with our tails between our legs. We were to start a tour at Bordeaux. '_Mon pauvre ami_,' said I, on the journey--PrØpimpin never suffered the indignity of a dog cage--'There is only one thing to be done. It is you who will be going to the ball and will juggle with the three objects, and I who will catch the cigar in my mouth.' But it was not to be. At Bordeaux and all through the tour we had a _succŁs fou_."

Thus Andrew washed his hands of Paris and London and going where he was appreciated roved the world in quiet contentment. He was young, rather

scrupulously efficient within his limits, than ambitious, and of modest wants, sober habits, and of a studious disposition which his friendship with Horatio Bakkus had both awakened and stimulated. Homeless from birth he never knew the nostalgia which grips even the most deliberately vagrant of men. As his ultimate goal he had indeed a vague dream of a home with wife and children--one of these days in the future, when he had put by enough money to justify such luxuries. And then there was the wife to find. In a wife sewing by lamp-light between a red-covered round table and the fire, a flaxen haired cherub by her side--for so did his ingenuous inexperience picture domestic happiness--he required the dominating characteristic of angelic placidity. Perhaps his foster-mother and the comfort Ben Flint found in her mild and phlegmatic devotion had something to do with it.

In his manuscript he tries to explain--and flounders about in a psychological bog--that his ideal woman and his ideal wife are two totally different conceptions. The woman who could satisfy all his romantic imaginings was the Princesse Lointaine--the Highest Common Factor of the ladies I have already mentioned--MØlisande, PhŁdre, Rosalind, FØdora, and Dora Copperfield--it is at this stage that he mentions them by name, having extended his literary horizon. Her he did not see sewing, in ox-eyed serenity, by a round table covered with a red cloth. With Her it was a totally different affair. It was a matter of spring and kisses and a perfect spiritual companionship.... As I have said, he gets into a terrible muddle. Anyhow, between the two conflicting ideals, he does not fall to the ground of vulgar amours. At the risk of tedium I feel bound to insist on this aspect of his life. For in the errant cosmopolitan world in which he, irresponsible and now well salaried bachelor had his being, he was thrown into the free and easy comradeship of hundreds of attractive women, as free and irresponsible as himself. He lived in a sea of temptation. On the other hand, I should be doing as virile a creature as ever walked a great wrong if I presented him to you under the guise of a Joseph Andrews. He had his laughter and his champagne and his kisses on the wing. But it was:

"We'll meet again one of these days."

"One of these days when our paths cross again."

And so--in effect--_Bon soir_.

It is difficult to compress into a page or two the history of several years. But that is what I have to do.

He is not wandering all the time over France, or flashing meteor-like about Europe. He has periods of repose, enforced and otherwise. But his position being ensured, he has no anxieties. Paris is his headquarters. He lives still in his old _hôtel meublØ_ in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. But instead of one furnished room on the fifth floor, he can afford an apartment, salon, salle àmanger, bedrooms, cabinet de toilette, on the prosperous second, which he retains all the year round. And Petit Patou can now stride through the waiting crowd in Moignon's antechamber and enter the sacred office, cigar in mouth, and with a "look here, _mon vieux_," put the fear of God into him. Petit Patou and PrØpimpin, the idols of the

Provinces, have arrived.

In Paris, when their presences coincide, he continues to consort with Bakkus, whose exquisite little tenor voice still affords him a means of livelihood. In fact Bakkus has had a renewed lease of professional activity. He sings at watering places, at palace hotels; which involves the physical activity which he abhors.

"Bound to this Ixion wheel of perpetual motion," says he, "I suffer tortures unimagined even by the High Gods. Compared with it our degrading experience on the sands seven years ago was a blissful idyll."

"By Gum!" says Andrew, "seven years ago. Who would have thought it?"

"Yes, who?" scowled the pessimist, now getting grey and more gaunt of blue, ill-shaven cheek. "To me it is seven æons of Promethean damnation."

"To me it seems only yesterday," says Andrew.

"It's because you have no brain," says Bakkus.

But they are good friends. Away from Paris they carry on a fairly regular correspondence. Such of Bakkus's letters as Lackaday has kept and as I have read, are literary gems with--always--a perverse and wilful flaw ... like the man's life.

* * * * *

From Paris, after this particular meeting with Bakkus, Andrew once more goes on tour with PrØpimpin. But a PrØpimpin grown old, and, though pathetically eager, already past effective work. Nine years of strenuous toil are as much as any dog can stand. Rheumatism twinged the hind legs of PrØpimpin. Desire for slumber stupefied his sense of duty. He could no longer catch the lighted cigar and swagger off with it in his mouth, across the stage.

"And yet, I'm sure," writes Lackaday, "that every time I cut his business, it nearly broke his heart. And it had come to PrØpimpin's business being cut down to an insignificant minimum. I could, of course, have got another dog. But it would have broken his heart altogether. And one doesn't break the hearts of creatures like PrØpimpin. I managed to arrange the performance, at last, so that he should think he was doing a devil of a lot...."

Then the end came. It was on the Bridge of Avignon, which, if you will remember, Lackaday superstitiously regards as a spot fraught with his destiny.

Fate had not taken him to the town since his last disastrous appearance. No one recognized in the Petit Patou of provincial fame the lank failure of many years ago. Besides, this time, he played not at the wretched music-hall without the walls, but at the splendid Palace of Varieties in the Boulevard de la Gare. He was a star--_en vedette_, and he had

a dressing-room to himself. He stayed at the Hôtel d'Europe, the famous hostelry by the great entrance gates. To avoid complication, he went everywhere now as Monsieur Patou. Folks passing by the open courtyard of the hotel where he might be taking the air, pointed him out to one another. "_Le voilà-Petit Patou_"

It was in the middle of his week's engagement--once more in summer time. He lunched, saw to PrØpimpin's meal, smoked the cheap cigar of content, and then, crossing the noisy little flagged square, went through the gates, PrØpimpin at his heels, and made his way across the dusty road to the bridge. The work-a-day folk, on that week-day afternoon, had all returned to their hives in the town, and the pathways of the bridge contained but few pedestrians.

In the roadway, too, there was but lazy life, an occasional omnibus, the queer old diligence of Provence with its great covered hood in the midst of which sat the driver amid a cluster of peasants, hidden like the queen bee by the swarm, a bullock cart bringing hay into the city, a tradesman's cart, a lumbering wine waggon, with its three great white horses and great barrels. Nothing hurried in the hot sunshine. The Rhone, very low, flowed sluggishly. Only now and then did a screeching, dust-whirling projectile of a motor-car hurl itself across this bridge of drowsy leisure.

Andrew leaned over the parapet, finding rest in a mild melancholy, his thoughts chiefly occupied with the decay of PrØpimpin who sat by his heels gazing at the roadway, occupied possibly by the same sere reflections. Presently the flea-catching antics of a ragged mongrel in the middle of the roadway disturbed PrØpimpin's sense of the afternoon's decorum. He rose and with stiff dignity stalked towards him. He stood nose to nose with the mongrel, his tufted tail in straight defiance up in the air.

Then suddenly there was a rush and a roar and a yell of voices--and the scrunch of swiftly applied brakes. Andrew turned round and saw a great touring car filled with men and women--and the men were jumping out. And he saw a mongrel dog racing away for dear life. And then at last he saw a black mass stretched upon the ground. With horror in his heart he rushed and threw himself down by the dog's body. He was dead. He had solved the problem--_solverat ambulando_. Andrew heard English voices around him; he raised a ghastly face.

"You brutes, you have killed my dog."

He scarcely heard the explanations, the apologies. The dog seeing the car far off, had cleared himself. Then without warning he had flung himself suicidally in the path of the car. What could they do now by way of amends? The leader of the little company of tourists, a clean-shaven, florid man, obviously well bred and greatly distressed, drew a card from his pocket-book.

"I am staying a couple of days at the Hôtel Luxembourg at Nîmes--I know that nothing can pay for a dog one loves--but--"

"Oh, no, no, no," said Andrew waving aside the card.

"Can we take the dog anywhere for you?"

"You're very kind," said Andrew, "but the kindest thing is to leave me alone."

He bent down again and took PrØpimpin in his arms and strode with him through the group of motorists and the little clamouring crowd that had gathered round. One of the former, a girl in a blue motor veil, ran after him and touched his arm. Her eyes were full of tears.

"It breaks my heart to see you like that. Oh can't I do anything for you?"

Andrew looked at her. Through all his stunning grief he had a dim vision of the Princesse Lointaine. He said in an uncertain voice:

"You have given me your very sweet sympathy. You can't do more."

She made a little helpless gesture and turned and joined her companions, who went on their way to Nîmes. Andrew carried the bleeding body of PrØpimpin, and there was that in his face which forbade the idle to trail indiscreetly about his path. He strode on, staring ahead, and did not notice a woman by the pylon of the bridge who, as he passed, gave a bewildered gasp, and after a few undecided moments, followed him at a distance. He went, carrying the dog, up the dirty river bank outside the walls, where there was comparative solitude, and sat down on a stone seat, and laid PrØpimpin on the ground. He broke down and cried. For seven years the dog's life and his had been inextricably interwoven. Not only had they shared bed and board as many a good man and dog have done, but they had shared the serious affairs of life, its triumphs, its disillusions. And PrØpimpin was all that he had to love in the wide world.

"_Pardon, monsieur_," said a voice.

He looked up and saw the woman who had followed him. She was dark, of the loose build of the woman predisposed to stoutness who had grown thin, and she had kind eyes in which pain seemed to hold in check the promise of laughter and only an animal wistfulness lingered. Her lips were pinched and her face was thin and careworn. And yet she was young--obviously under thirty. Her movements retained all the lissomeness of youth. Although dressed more or less according to the fashion of the year, she looked poor. Yet there was not so much of threadbare poverty in her attire, as lack of interest--or pathetic incongruity; the coat and skirt too heavy for the sultry day; the cheap straw hat trimmed with uncared for roses; the soiled white gloves with an unmended finger tip.

"Madame?" said he.

And as he saw it, the woman's face and form became vaguely familiar. He had seen her somewhere. But in the last few years he had seen thousands of women.

"You have had a great misfortune, monsieur?"

"That is true, madame."

She sat on the bench beside him.

"_Vous pleurez_. You must have loved him very much."

It was not a stranger speaking to him. Otherwise, he would have risen and, as politely as anguished nerves allowed, would have told her to go to the devil. She made no intrusion on his grief. Her voice fell with familiar comfort on his ear. He was vaguely conscious of her right to offer sympathy. He regarded her, grateful but perplexed.

"You don't recognize me? _Enfin_, why should you?" She shrugged her shoulders. "We only met for a few hours many years ago--here in Avignon--but we were good friends."

Then Andrew drew a deep breath and turned swiftly round on the bench and shot out both his hands.

"_Mon Dieu!_ Elodie!"

She smiled sadly.

"Ah," said she, "I'm glad you remember."

Chapter IX

They sat awhile and talked of the tragedy, the dead PrØpimpin, at once a link and a barrier between them, lying at their feet. Her ready sympathy brought her near; but while the dog lay there, mangled and bloody, he could think of nothing else. It was Elodie who suggested immediate and decent burial. Why should he not go to the hotel for a workman and a spade?

He smiled. "You always seem to come to my help in time of trouble. But while I am absent, what will happen to him?"

"I will guard him, my friend," said Elodie.

He marched off. In a few minutes he came back accompanied by one of the hotel baggage porters. The grave, on the waste land by the Rhone, was quickly dug, and PrØpimpin covered over for ever with the kindly earth. As soon as the body was hidden, Andrew turned away, the tears in his eyes.

"And now," said he, "let us sit somewhere else and you shall tell me about yourself. I have been selfish."

The tale she had to tell was very old and very sad. She did not begin

it, however, until, drawing off her old gloves, for coolness' sake, she disclosed a wedding ring on her finger. His eye caught it at once.

"Why, you are married."

"Yes," she said, "I am married."

"You don't speak in the tone of a happy woman."

She shrugged hopeless shoulders. "A woman isn't happy with a _goujat_ for a husband."

Now a _goujat_ is a word for which scoundrel, and miscreant, are but weak translations. It denotes lowest depths of infamy.

Andrew frowned terribly. "He ill-treats you?"

"He did. But that is past. Fortunately I am alone. He has deserted me."

"Children?"

"Thank God, no," replied Elodie.

And then it all came out in the unrestrained torrent of the south. She had been an honest girl, in spite of a thousand temptations. When AndrØ met her, she was as pure as any young girl in a convent. It wasn't that she was ignorant. Oh no. The girl who had gone through the workrooms of Marseilles and the music-halls of France and could retain virginal innocence would be either a Blessed Saint or an idiot. It was knowledge that had kept her straight; knowledge and pride. She was not for sale. _Grand Dieu_, no! And love? If a man's love fell short of the desire for marriage, well, it didn't amount to a row of pins. Besides, even where there could be a love quite true without the possibility of marriage, she had seen enough of the world to know the unhappinesses that could happen to women. No. AndrØ must not think she was cold or prudish. She had set out to be merely reasonable. To AndrØ the girl's apology for preserving her chastity seemed perfectly natural. In her world it was somewhat of an eccentric feat.

"_Et puis, enfin._" And then, at last, came the conquering male, a singer in a light opera touring company in the chorus of which she was engaged. He was young, handsome--played secondary parts; one of the great ones, in fact, in her limited theatrical hierarchy. He fell in love with her. She, flattered, responded. Of course, he suggested setting up house together, then and there. But she had her aforesaid little principles. His infatuation, however, was such that he consented to run the terrific gauntlet of French matrimonial procedure. Why people in France go to the nerve-racking trouble of getting married Heaven only knows. Camels can gallop much more easily through needles' eyes. Anybody can be born in France, anybody can die; against these phenomena the form-multiplying and ream-writing _Ad-min-is-tra-tion_ is powerless. But when you come to the intermediate business of world population, then bureaucracy steps in and plays the very devil. Elodie and Raoul Marescaux desired to be married. In England they would have got a special license, or gone to a registry

office, and the thing would have been over. But in France, Monsieur and Madame Marescaux, and Madame Figasso, and the _huissier_ Boudin, who insisted on coming forward although he was not legally united to Madame, and lawyers representing each family, were set all agog, and there were meetings and quarrels, and delays--Elodie had not a cent to her dowry--which of course was the stumbling-block--with the final result that nothing was done which might not have been done at once, namely, that the pair were doubly married--once by Monsieur le Maire and then by Monsieur le CurØ.

For a few months she was happy. Then the handsome Raoul became enamoured of a fresh face. Then Elodie fell ill, oh, so ill, they thought she was going to die. And during her illness and slow recovery Raoul became enamoured of every fresh face he saw. A procession. If it had been one, said Elodie philosophically, she could perhaps have arranged matters. But they had been endless. And what little beauty she had her illness had taken away, so her only weapon was gone; and Raoul jeered at her and openly flaunted his infidelities in her presence. When she used beyond a certain point the ready tongue with which Providence had endowed her, she was soundly beaten. "_Le goujat!_" cried Andrew. Ah! It was a life of hell. But they had kept nominally together, in the same companies, she singing in the chorus, he playing his second rôles. And then there came a day when he obtained an engagement in the Opera at Buenos Ayres. She was to accompany him. Her berth was booked, her luggage packed. He said to her, "I have to go away for a day or two on business. Meet me at the boat train for Havre on Wednesday." She went to the Gare St. Lazare on Wednesday to find that the boat train had gone on Tuesday. _Un sale tour_--eh? Did ever anyone hear of such a dirty trick? And later she learned that her berth was occupied by a little modiste of the Place de la Madeleine with whom he had run away.

That was two years ago. Since then she had not heard of him; and she wished never to hear of him again.

"And you have been supporting yourself all the time, on the stage?"

"Yes, I have lived. But it has been hard. My illness affected my voice. No one wants me very much. But still"--she smiled wanly--"I can manage. And now, you. I saw you yesterday at the Palace. They know me there and give me my _entrØe_. You have had a _beau succŁs_. You are famous. I am so glad."

Modestly he depreciated the fame, but acknowledged the success which was due to her encouragement. He told her of the racehorse Elodie and his lucky inspiration. For the first time she laughed and clapped her hands.

"Oh, I am flattered! Yes, and greatly touched. Now I know that you have remembered me. But if the horse had lost wouldn’t you have pested against me? Say?"

Andrew replied soberly: "I could not possibly have lost. I knew it would win, just as I know that five minutes hence the sun will continue to shine. I had faith in your star, Elodie."

"My star--it’s not worth very much, my star."

"It has been to me," said Andrew.

They talked on. By dint of questioning she learned most of his not over-eventful history. He told her of Horatio Bakkus, and of the season on the sands, when first he realized her original idea of exploiting his figure; of PrØpimpin in his prime and their wanderings about Europe. And now alas! there was no longer a PrØpimpin.

"But how will you give the performance this evening without him?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. He had not given a thought to that yet. It was the loss of his friend that wrung his heart.

"You are so gentle and sympathetic. Why is it that no woman has loved you?"

"Perhaps because I’ve not found a woman I could love," said he.

She did not pursue the subject, but sighed and looked somewhat drearily in front of her. It was then that he became aware of the cruel treatment that the years had inflicted on her youth. He knew that she was under thirty, yet she looked older. The colour had gone from her olive skin, leaving it sallow; her cheeks were drawn; haggard lines appeared beneath her eyes; her cheekbones and chin were prominent. It struck him that she might be fighting a hard battle against poverty. She looked underfed. He asked her.

"Have you an engagement here in Avignon?"

She shook her head. No, she was resting.

"How long have you been out?"

She couldn’t tell. Many weeks. And prospects for the immediate future? The TournØe Tardieu was coming next Monday to Avignon. She knew the manager. Possibly he would give her a short engagement.

"And if he doesn’t?"

"I will arrange," said Elodie with a show of bravery.

Andrew frowned again, and his mild blue eyes narrowed keenly. He stretched out his arm and put his delicate fingers on her hand.

"You have given me your help and sympathy. Do you refuse mine? Why does your pride forbid you to tell me that you are in great distress?"

"What would be the good?" she replied with averted face. "How could you help me? Money? Oh no. I would sooner fling myself in the river."

"You’re talking foolishness," said he. "You know that you are in debt for

your little room, and that the _propriØtaire_ won't let you stay much longer. You know that you have not sufficient food. You know that you have had nothing to-day but a bit of bread and a cup of coffee, if you have had that. Confess!"

The corners of her mouth worked pathetically. In spite of heroic effort, a sob came into her throat and tears into her eyes. Then she broke down and wept wretchedly.

Yes, it was true. She had but a few sous in the world. No other clothes but those she wore. Oh, she was ashamed, ashamed that he should guess. If she had not been weak, he would have gone away and never have known. And so on, and so forth. The situation was plain as day to Andrew. Elodie, if not his guardian angel, at any rate his mascot, was down and out. While she was crying, he slipped, unperceived, a hundred-franc note into the side pocket of her jacket. At all events she should have a roof over her head and food to eat for the next few days, until he could devise some plan for her future welfare. Her future welfare! For all his generous impulses, it gave him cause for cold thought. How the deuce could a wandering, even though successful, young mountebank assure the future of a forlorn and untalented young woman?

"_Voyons, chŁre amie_," said he comfortingly, "all is not yet lost. If the theatre does not give you a livelihood, we might try something else. I have my little savings. I could easily lend you enough to buy a _petit commerce_, a little business. You could repay me, bit by bit, at your convenience. _Tiens!_ Didn't you tell me you were apprenticed to a dressmaker?"

But Elodie was hopeless. All that she had learned as a child she had forgotten. She was fit for nothing but posturing on the stage. If AndrØ could get her a good engagement, that was all the aid she would accept.

Andrew looked at his watch. The afternoon had sped with magical rapidity. He reflected that not only must he dine, but he must think over and rehearse the evening's performance with PrØpimpin's part cut out. He dared not improvise before the public. He rose with the apologetic explanation--

"My little Elodie," said he, as they walked along the battlemented city walls towards the great gate, "have courage. Come to the Palace to-night. I will arrange that you shall have a loge. You only have to ask for it. And after my turn, you shall meet me, as long ago, at the CafØ des NØgociants, and we shall sup together and talk of your affairs."

She meekly consented. And when they parted at the entrance to the Hôtel d'Europe, he said:

"If I do not ask you to dine, it is because I have to think and work. You understand? But in your pocket you will find _de quoi bien dîner. Au revoir, chŁre amie_."

He put out his hand. She held it, while her eyes, tragically large and dark, searched his with painful intensity.

"Tell me," she said, "is it better that I should come and see you to-night or that I should throw myself over the bridge into the Rhone?"

"If you meet me to-night," said Andrew, "you will still be alive, which, after all, is a very good thing."

"_Je viendrai,_" said Elodie.

"The devil!" said Andrew, entering the courtyard of the hotel, and wiping a perspiring brow, "here am I faced with a pretty responsibility!"

Experience enabled him to give a satisfactory performance; and his manager prepared his path by announcing the unhappy end of PrØpimpin and craving the indulgence of the audience. But Andrew passed a heartbroken hour at the music-hall. In his dressing-room were neatly stored the dog's wardrobe and properties--the gay ribbons, the harness, the little yellow silk hat which he wore with such a swaggering air, the little basket carried over his front paw into which he would sweep various objects when his master's back was turned, the drinking dish labelled "Dog" ... He suffered almost a human bereavement. And then, the audience, for this night, was kind. But, as conscientious artist, he was sensitively aware of makeshift. A great element of his success lay in the fact that he had trained the dog to appear the more clever of the two, to score off his pretended clumsiness and to complete his tricks. For years he had left uncultivated the art of being funny by himself. Without PrØpimpin he felt lost, like a man in a sculling race with only one oar. He took off his make-up and dressed, a very much worried man. Of course he could obtain another trained dog without much difficulty, and the special training would not take long; but he would have to love the animal in order to establish that perfect partnership which was essential to his performance. And how could he love any other dog than PrØpimpin? He felt that he would hate the well-meaning but pretentious hound. He went out filled with anxieties and repugnances.

Elodie was waiting for him by the stage door. She said:

"You got out of the difficulty marvellously."

"But it was nothing like the performance you saw yesterday."

"_Ah non_" she replied frankly.

"_Voilà_," said he, dejectedly.

They walked, almost in silence, along the Avenue de la Gare, thronged, as it was at the time of their first meeting, with the good citizens of Avignon, taking the air of the sultry summer evening. She told him afterwards that she felt absurdly small and insignificant trotting by the side of his gaunt height, a feeling which she had not experienced years before when their relative positions were reversed. But now she regarded him as a kind of stricken god; and womanlike she was conscious of haggard face and shrunken bosom, whereas before, she had stepped beside him proud of the ripe fulness of her youth.

Whither the commonplace adventure was leading them neither knew. For his part pity compelled superstitious sentiment to the payment, in some vague manner, of a long-standing obligation. She had also given him very rare sympathy that afternoon, and he was grateful. But things ended there, in a sort of blind alley.

For her part, she let herself go with the current of destiny into which, by strange hazard, she had drifted. She had the humility which is the fiercest form of pride. Although she clung desperately to him, as to the spar that alone could save her from drowning, although the feminine within her was drawn to his kind and simple manliness, and although her heart was touched by his grief at the loss of the dog, yet never for a moment did she count upon the ordinary romantic _dØnouement_ of such a situation. The idea came involuntarily into her mind. Into the mind of what woman of her upbringing would not the idea come? But she banished it savagely. Who was she, waste rag of a woman, to attract a man? And even had she retained the vivid beauty and plenitude of her maidenhood, it would have been just the same. Elodie Figasso had never sold herself. No. All that side of things was out of the question. She wished, however, that he was less of an enigmatic, though kindly, sphinx.

Over their modest supper of sandwiches and Côtes du Rhône wine, in an inside corner of the CafØ des NØgociants--it was all the cafØ could offer, and besides she swore to a plentiful dinner--they discussed their respective forlorn positions. Adroitly she tacked away from her own concerns towards his particular dilemma. If he shrank from training another dog and yet distrusted a solo performance, what was he going to do? Take a partner like his friend--she forgot the name--yes, Bakkus, on whom perhaps he couldn’t rely, and who naturally would demand half his salary?

"Never again," Andrew declared, feeling better after a draught of old Hermitage. "The only thing I can think of is to engage a competent assistant."

Then Elodie’s swift brain conceived a daring idea.

"You would have to train the assistant."

"Of course. But," he added in a dismal tone, "most of the assistants I have seen are abysmally stupid. They are dummies. They give nothing of themselves, for the performer to act up to."

"In fact," said Elodie, trying hard to steady her voice, "you want someone entirely in sympathy with you, who can meet you half-way--like PrØpimpin."

"Precisely," said Andrew. "But where can I find a human PrØpimpin?"

She abandoned knife and fork and, with both arms resting on the table, looked across at him, and it suddenly struck him that her great dark eyes, intelligent and submissive, were very much like the eyes of PrØpimpin. And so, womanlike, she conveyed the Idea from her brain to his.

He said very thoughtfully, "I wonder--"

"What?"

"What have you done on the stage? What can you do? Tell me. Unfortunately I have never seen you."

She could sing--not well now, because her voice had suffered--but still she sang true. She had a musical ear. She could accompany anyone on the piano, _pas trop mal_. She could dance. Oh, to that she owed her first engagement. She had also learned to play the castagnettes and the tambourine, _àl'Espagnole_. And she was accustomed to discipline....
As she proceeded with the unexciting catalogue of her accomplishments she lost self-control, and her eyes burned and her lips quivered and her voice shook in unison with the beatings of a desperately anxious heart. Our Andrew, although an artist dead set on perfection and a shrewd man of business, was young, pitiful and generous. The pleading dog's look in Elodie's eyes was too much for him. He felt powerless to resist. His brain worked swiftly, devising all kinds of artistic possibilities. Besides, was not Fate accomplishing itself by presenting this solution of both their difficulties?

"I wonder whether you would care to try the experiment?"

With an effort of feminine duplicity she put on a puzzled and ingenuous expression.

"What experiment?"

He was somewhat taken aback: surely he must have misinterpreted her pleading. From the dispenser of fortune, he became the seeker of favours.

"I know it's not much of a position to offer you," said he, almost apologetically, "but if you care to accept it----"

"Of your assistant?" she asked, as though the idea had never entered her head.

"Why, yes. If you will consent to a month of very hard work. You would have to learn a little elementary juggling. You would have to give me instantaneous replies in act and speech. But if you would give yourself up to me I could teach you."

"But, _mon pauvre AndrØ_," she said, with an astonished air, "this is the last thing I ever dreamed of. I am so ignorant. I should put you to shame."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," said he, confidently. "I know my business. Wait. _Les affaires sont les affaires_. I should have to give you a little contract. Let us see. For the remainder of my tour--ten weeks--ten francs a day with hotel _en pension_ and railway fares."

To Elodie, independent waif in theatre-land, this was wealth beyond her

dreams. She stretched both hands across the table.

"Do you mean that? It is true? And, if I please you, you will keep me always?"

"Why not?" said Andrew. "And, if you show talent, we may come to a better arrangement for the next tour."

"And if I show no talent at all?"

He made a deprecating gesture and grinned in his charming way. But Elodie's intuition taught her that there was the stern purpose of a man behind the grin. She had imposed her helplessness on him this once. But if she failed him she would not have, professionally, a second chance.

"I insist on your having talent," said Andrew.

The walk home to her dingy lodgings repeated itself. She felt very humble yet triumphant. More than ever did she regard him as a god who had raised her, by a touch, from despair and starvation to hope and plenty, and in her revulsion of gratitude she could have taken both his hands and passionately kissed them. And yet she was proudly conscious of something within her, unconquerably feminine, which had touched his godship and wrought the miracle.

They halted in the narrow, squalid street, before the dark entry of the house where she lodged. Andrew eyed the poverty-stricken hole in disgust. Obviously she had touched the depths.

"To-morrow you must move," said he. "I shall arrange a room for you at the hotel. We shall have much business to discuss. Can you be there at ten o'clock?"

"Whatever you say shall be done," she replied humbly.

He put out his hand.

"Good-night, Elodie. Have courage and all will be well."

She murmured some thanks with a sob in her voice and, turning swiftly, disappeared up the evil-smelling stone stairs. The idea of kissing her did not occur to him until he found himself alone and remembered the pretty idyll of their leave-taking long ago. He laughed, none too gaily. Between boy and girl and man and woman there was a vast difference.

Chapter X

That was the beginning of the combination known a little while afterwards

as _Les Petit Patou_. Elodie, receptive, imitative, histrionic, showed herself from the start an apt pupil. To natural talent she added the desire, born of infinite gratitude, to please her benefactor. She possessed the rare faculty of perfect surrender. Andrew marvelled. Had he hypnotized her she could not have more completely executed his will. And yet she was no automaton. She was artist enough to divine when her personality should be effaced and when it should count. She spoke her patter with intelligent point. She learned, thanks to Andrew's professional patience, and her own vehement will, a few elementary juggling tricks. Andrew repeated the famous PrØpimpin cigar-act. Open-mouthed, Elodie followed his manipulations. When he threw away the cigar it seemed to enter her mouth quite naturally, against her will. She removed it with an expression of disgust and hurled it at Andrew, who caught it between his lips, smoked it for a second or two and grinned his thanks. With a polite gesture he threw it, as the audience thought, back to her; but by a sleight-of-hand trick the cigar vanished and she caught, to her delighted astonishment, a pearl necklace, which, as she clasped it round her neck, vanished likewise. After which he overwhelmed her with disappearing jewels. At once it became a popular item in their entertainment.

In the course of a few months he swore she was worth a hundred PrØpimpins. He could teach her anything. By the end of the year he evolved the grotesque performance that made Les Petit Patou famous in provincial France, brought them for a season to Paris at the Cirque MØdrano, to London (for a week) at the Hippodrome, to the principal cities of Italy, and doubled and trebled the salary which he enjoyed as Petit Patou all alone with the dog.

Meanwhile it is important to note a very swift physical change in Elodie. When a young woman, born to plumpness, is reduced by misery to skin and bone, a short term of succulent nourishment and absence of worry, will suffice to restore her to a natural condition. She had no beauty, save that of her dark and luminous eyes and splendid teeth. Her features were coarse and irregular. Her uncared for skin gave signs of future puffiness. But still--after two or three happy months, she more or less regained the common attractiveness and the audacious self-confidence of the Marseilles _gamine_ who had asked him to kiss her long ago.

Thus, imperceptibly, she became less an assistant than a partner, less a paid servant on the stage than a helpmeet in his daily life. Looking at the traditions of their environment and at the enforced intimacy of their vagabondage, one sees the inevitability of this linking of their fortunes. That there was any furious love about the affair I have very grave doubts. Andrew in his secret soul still hankered after the Far-away Princess, and Elodie had spent most of her passionate illusions on the unspeakable Raoul. But they had a very fair basis of mutual affection to build upon. Philosophers will tell you that such is the basis of most happy marriages. You can believe them or not, as you please. I am in no position to dogmatise.... At any rate Les Petit Patou started off happily. If Elodie was not the perfect housewife, you must remember her upbringing and her devil-may-care kind of theatrical existence. Andrew knew that hers were not the habits of the Far-away One, who like himself would be a tidy soul, bringing into commonplace tidiness an exquisitely harmonious sense of

order; but the Far-away One was a mythical being endowed with qualities which it would be absurd to look for in Elodie. Besides, their year being mainly spent in hotels, she had little opportunity of cultivating housewifely qualities. If she neglected the nice conduct of his underlinen after the first few months of their partnership, he could not find it in his heart to blame her. Professional work was tiring. Her own clothes needed her attention. But still, the transient comfort had been very agreeable.... In Paris, too, at first she had played at house-keeping in the apartment of the Faubourg Saint-Denis. But Elodie did not understand the _bonne_, and the _bonne_ refused to understand Elodie in the matter of catering, and they emphasized their mutual misunderstanding with the unrestrained speech of children of the people. Once or twice Andrew went hungry. In his sober and dignified way he drew Elodie's attention to his unusual condition. It led to their first quarrel. After that they ate, very comfortably, at a little restaurant round the corner.

It was not the home life of which Andrew had dreamed--not even the reincarnation of Madame Flint sitting by the round table darning socks by the light of the shaded lamp. Elodie loathed domestic ideals.

"_Mon vieux_," she would declare, "I had enough sewing in my young days. My idea of happiness would be a world without needles and thread."

He noted in her, too, a curious want of house-pride. Dust gave her no great concern. She rather loved a litter of periodicals, chiffons, broken packets of cigarettes, tobacco and half-eaten fruit on the tables. A picture askew never attracted her attention. To remain in the house, dressed in her out-of-door clothes, seemed to her vain extravagance and discomfort. A wrapper and slippers, the more soiled and shapeless the better, were the only indoor wear. Andrew deplored her lack of literary interest. She would read the feuilletons of the _Petit Journal_ and the _Matin_ in a desultory fashion; but she could not concentrate her mind on the continuous perusal of a novel. She spent hours over a pack of greasy cards, telling her fortune by intricate methods. The same with music; though in this case she had a love for it in the open air when a band was playing, and was possessed of a natural ear, and could read easy pieces and accompaniments at sight with some facility. But she would never try to learn anything difficult; would never do more than strum a popular air or two until swift boredom paralysed her nerves.

Yet, for all her domestic slatternness, the moment she emerged from private into professional life, her phlegmatic indolence was transformed into quick energy. No rehearsal wearied her. Into every performance she concentrated the whole of her being. If it were a question of mastering a grotesque accompaniment to a new air on Andrew's one-string fiddle, she would slave for hours until it was perfect. She kept her stage costume in scrupulous repair. Her make-up box was a model of tidiness. She would be late for lunch, late for dinner, late for any social engagement, but never once was she late for a professional appointment. On the stage her loyalty to Andrew never wavered. No man could have a more ideal co-worker. She never lost her head, demanded a more prominent position, or grudged him the lion's share of the applause. In her praiseworthy lack of theatrical vanity, writes Lackaday, by way of encomium, she was unique among women. A pearl of great

price.

Also, when they walked abroad, she dressed with neatness. Her hair, a stringy bush at home, appeared a miracle of coiffure. Lips and eyes received punctilious attention. The perfection of her high-heeled shoes was a matter of grave concern. Whatever may have been underneath, the outside of her toilette received anxious care. She thought much of externals. Andrew came within her purview. She did her best to remodel his outer man more in accordance with his prosperity; but what woman can have sartorial success with the man who is the tailor's despair?

Lackaday is pathetically insistent on her manifold virtues. She retains all through the years her street-child's swift intelligence. She has _flair_. She predicts instinctively the tastes of varying audiences. She has a vivid imagination curiously controlled by the most prosaic common sense. He rarely errs in taking her advice.... To her further credit balance, she is more saving than extravagant. Bits of jewellery please her, but she does not crave inordinate adornment. When he buys a touring-car for the greater comfort of their vagrant life, she is appalled by the cost and upbraids him with more than a touch of shrewishness. Her tastes do not rise with her position. She would sooner have a _chou-croßte garnie_ than a fore-quarter of Paris lamb or a duck _àla presse_. She could never understand why Andrew should pay four or five francs for a bottle of wine, when they could buy a good black or grey for three sous a litre. On tour gaieties were things unthought of. But during periods of rest, in Paris, she cared little for excitement. With an income relieving her from the necessity of work, she would have been content to lounge slipshod about the house till the day of her death.

Once Andrew, having to entertain, for politic reasons, the director of a Paris music-hall, took her to the CafØ de Paris. The guest, in a millionaire way, had suggested that resort of half-hungry wealth. Modest Andrew had never entered such a place in his life; nor, naturally, had Elodie. Knowing, however, that one went there in full dress, he disinterred a dress-suit which he had bought three years before in order to attend the funeral of a distinguished brother artist, and sent Elodie with a thousand-franc note to array herself in an adequate manner, at the Galeries La Fayette. Elodie's economical soul shrank in horror from the expenditure, at one fell swoop, of a thousand francs. She bought God knows what for less than half the money.

Proud of her finery, secretly exulting also that she had a matter of twenty pounds or so put away in her private stocking, she flaunted down the crowded restaurant, followed by the little fat director, only remarkable for a diamond flash-light in his shirt-front, and by Andrew, inordinately long and gawky, in his ill-fitting, short-sleeved evening suit, his ready made white tie already wandering in grievance towards a sympathetic ear. Women in dreams of diaphanous and exiguous raiment stared derisively at the trio as they passed their tables. Elodie stared back at them. Now, Lackaday, honest soul, had, not the remotest notion of what was wrong with her attire. In his eyes she was dressed like a queen. She wore, says he, a beautiful emerald green dress, and a devil of a hat with a lot of dark blue feathers in it. But, as she was surrendering her cloak to the white-capped

lady of the vestiare, there came from a merry adjoining table the clear-cut remark of a young woman, all bare arms, back and bosom, but otherwise impeccably vestured:

"They oughtn't to allow it, in a place like this--_des grues des Batignolles_."

Unsuccessful ladies of easy virtue from Whitechapel, perhaps, is the nearest rendering of the phrase.

Elodie had quick ears. She also had the quick temper and tongue of Marseilles. She hung behind the two men, who proceeded to their table unconscious of drama.

"In these places," she spat, "they pay naked women like you to come to attract men. You fear the competition of the modest, _ma fille_."

The indiscreet young woman had no retort. She flushed crimson over neck and shoulders, while Elodie, triumphant, swept away. But the ensuing dinner was not an exhilarating meal. She burned with the insult, dilated upon it, repeated over and over again her repartee, offered her costume to the frank criticism of Andrew and their guest. Did she look like a _grue?_ Did her toilette in any way suggest the Batignolles? In vain did the fat director proclaim her ravishing. Andrew, at first indignant, assured her that the insulter had been properly set down. If it had been a man, he would have lifted the puppy from his chair and beaten him before the whole restaurant. But a woman! She had met her match in Elodie. In vain he confirmed the director's opinion. Elodie could not eat. Food stuck in her throat; she could only talk interminably of the outrage. The little fat director made his escape as soon as he had eaten the last mouthful of dinner.

"_Eh bien_," said Elodie, as they were driving home to the Faubourg Saint-Denis, "and is it all fixed up, the Paris contract?"

"My dear," replied Andrew gently, "you gave us little chance to discuss it."

"I prevented you?" cried Elodie. "I? _Bon Dieu!_ Oh no. It is too much. You first take me to a place where I am insulted, and then reproach me for being an obstacle between you and your professional success. No doubt the naked woman would be a better partner for you. She could wheedle and coax that little horror of a manager. I, who am an honest woman, am a drag on you--"

And so on, with a whirling unreason, with which Andrew had grown familiar. But the episode of the CafØ de Paris marks the beginning and the end of Elodie's acquaintance with the smart world. She hates it with a fierce jealousy, knowing that it is a sphere beyond her ken. Herein lay a fundamental principle of her character. The courtesan, with her easy adaptability to the glittering environment which she craves, and Elodie, essentially child of the people, proud, and virtuous according to her lights, were worlds apart. A bit of a socialist, Elodie, she stuck fiercely

to her class. People she was. People she would remain. A daw of the people, she had tried to peacock it among the gentry. She had been detected in her borrowed plumes. At the stupid reference to her supposed morals she snapped her fingers. It was idiotic. It was the detection of the plumage that rankled in her soul. From that moment she hated society and every woman in it with an elaborate ostentation. The very next day she sold the emerald green dress and the devil of a hat and, with a certain grim satisfaction, stuffed the proceeds into the stocking of economy. In spite of the disastrous dinner, Andrew obtained the Paris engagement. He was not, however, greatly surprised--so far had his education advanced--when Elodie claimed the credit.

"At that dinner--what did you do? You sat silent as the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde. It was I who made all the conversation. Monsieur Wolff was very enchanted."

Andrew grinned.

"I don’t know what I should do without you, Elodie," said he.

Now, in sketching the life of Andrew Lackaday and Elodie, I again labour under the difficulty of having to compress into a few impressionistic strokes the history of years. The task is in one way made easier, in that these years of work and wandering scarcely show the development of anything. What was true at the end of the first year of their partnership seems to be true at the end of the second, third, fourth and fifth. After a time when their grotesque performance was a fixed and settled thing, there was little need for the invention of novelty or for rehearsal. Week after week, month after month, year after year, they reproduced their almost stereotyped entertainment. Here and there, according to the idiosyncrasy of the audience, they introduced some variety. But the very variations, in course of time, became stereotyped. Too violent a change proved disastrous. The public demanded the particular antics with which the name of Les Petit Patou was identified. Thus life was reduced to terms of beautiful simplicity.

Yet, perhaps, after all, their sentimental relations did undergo an imperceptible development, as subtle as that which led in the first place to their union. This union had its original promptings in a not unromantic chain of circumstances. Of vulgarity or sordidness it had nothing. Had Elodie been free it would never have entered Andrew’s head not to marry her, and she would have married him offhand. Lackaday insists on our remembering this vital fact. Sincere affection drew them together. Then the first couple of years or so were devoted to mutual discoveries. There was no question on either part of erring after strange fancies. Elodie carried her air of propriety in the happy-go-lucky music-hall world almost to the point of the absurd. As for Andrew, he had ever shown himself the most lagging Lothario of his profession. Indeed, for a period during which she suffered an exaggeration of her own sentiments, she upbraided him for not being the perfect lover of her half-forgotten dreams....

"Why don’t you love me any longer, AndrØ?"

"But I love you, surely. That goes without saying."

"Then why do you go on reading, reading all the time instead of telling me so?"

She would be lying on a couch, dressed in her soiled wrapper and old bedroom slippers, occupied with nothing but boredom, while Andrew devoted himself to the unguided pursuit of knowledge, the precious pleasure of his life. He would put the book face downwards on his knee and pucker his brows.

"_Mon Dieu, ma chØrie_, what do you want me to say?"

"That you love me."

"I've just said it."

"Say it again."

"_Je l'aime bien. Voilà_"

"And that's all?"

"Of course it's all. What remains to be said?"

The honest fellow was mystified. He could not keep on repeating the formula for the two or three hours of their repose. It would be the monotonous reiteration of the idiot. And he could no more have knelt by her side and poured out his adoration in the terms, let us say, of Chastelard, than he could have lectured her on Hittite inscriptions. What did she want?

She sighed. He cared for his old book much more than for her.

"My dear," said he, "if you would only read a bit you would find it a great comfort and delight."

You see, at this rather critical period, each had their grievance--Elodie only, of course, as far as their private lives were concerned. Elodie, somewhat romantically inclined, wanted she knew not what. Perhaps a recrudescence of the fine frenzy of the early days of her marriage with Raoul. Sober Andrew craved some kind of intellectual companionship. If Elodie grudged him the joy of books and he yielded to her resentment, he was a lost mountebank. And the very devil of it was that, just at this time, he had discovered the most fascinating branch of literature imaginable. Creasy's _Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World_, picked up in a cheap edition, had put him on the track. He procured Kinglake's _Crimea_. He was now deep in the study of Napier's _Peninsular War_. He studied it, pencil in hand and notebook by his side, filled with diagrams and contours of country and little parallelograms all askew denoting Army Corps or divisions. Of course, he did not expect Elodie to interest herself in military history, but he deplored her unconcealed hatred of his devotion to a darling pursuit. Why could not she find pleasure in some intelligent occupation? To spend one's leisure in untidy

sloth did not consort with the dignity of a human being. Why didn't she do this or that? She rejected all suggestions. Retorted: Why couldn't he spend a few hours in relaxation like everybody else? If only he would go and play billiards at the cafØ. That he should amuse himself outside among men was only natural. Sitting at home, in her company, over a book, got on her nerves.

Horatio Bakkus encouraged her maliciously. In Paris he made the flat in the Faubourg Saint-Denis his habitual resting-place, and ate his meals in their company at the cafØ round the corner.

"If there is one thing, my dear Elodie, more futile than fighting battles, it is reading about them," he declared at one of their symposia.

"_Voilà_ You hear what Horace says! An educated man who knows what he is talking about."

"It's a kind of disease, like chess or the study of the Railway Guide. And when he prefers it to the conversation of a beautiful and talented woman, it's worse than a disease, it's a crime. My dear fellow," he cried with an ironical gleam in his dark eyes, "you're blind to the treasure the gods have given you. Any ass can write a text-book, but the art of conversation is a gift bestowed by Heaven upon the very few."

Elodie, preening herself, asked:

"Is it true that I have that gift?"

"You have the flow of words. You have wit. You talk like a running brook. You talk like no book that ever was written. I would sooner, my dear, listen to the ripple of your speech than read all the manuals of military science the world has produced."

Andrew saw her flattered to fluttering point.

"Don't you know that he is the greatest _blagueur_ an existence?" he asked.

But Elodie had fallen under the spell of Bakkus. like him she loved talk, although her education allowed her only the lightest kind. She loved its give-and-take, its opportunities for the flash of wit or jest. Bakkus could talk about an old boot. She too. He could analyse sentiment in his mordant way. She could analyse it in her own unsophisticated fashion. Now Andrew, though death on facts and serious argument, remained dumb and bewildered in a passage-at-arms about apparently nothing at all; and while Bakkus and Elodie enjoyed themselves prodigiously, he gaped at them, wondering what the deuce they found to laugh at. He was for ever warning Elodie not to put a too literal interpretation on Bakkus's sayings.

The singer had gone grey, and that touch of venerability gave him an air of greater distinction, as a broken down tragedian, than he possessed when Andrew had first met him ten years or so before. Elodie could bandy jests with him, but when he spoke with authority she listened overawed.

"My dear AndrØ," she replied to his remark. "I am not a fool. I know when Horace is talking nonsense and when he means what he says."

"And I maintain," said Bakkus, "that this most adorable woman is being sacrificed on the altar of Cæsar's Commentaries and the latest French handbook on scientific slaughter."

"I think," said Andrew, who had imprudently sketched his course of reading to the cynic, "that _The Art of War_ by Colonel Foch is the most masterly thing ever written on the subject of warfare."

"But who is going to war, these days, my good fellow?"

"They're at it now," said Andrew.

"The Balkans--Turkey--Bulgaria? Barbarians. What's that got to do with civilized England and France?"

"What about Germany?"

"Germany's never going to sacrifice her commercial position by going to war. Among great powers war is a lunatic anachronism."

"Oh, _mon Dieu_," cried Elodie, "now you're talking politics."

Bakkus took her hand which held a fork on which was prodded a gherkin--they were at lunch--and raised it to his lips.

"_Pardon, chŁre madame_. It was this maniac of an AndrØ. He is mad or worse. Years ago I told him he ought to be a sergeant in a barrack square."

"Just so!" cried Elodie. "Look at him now. Here he is as soft as two pennyworth of butter. But in the theatre, if things do not go quite as he wants them--oh la la! It is Right turn--Quick march! Brr! And I who speak have to do just the same as the others."

"I know," said Bakkus. "A Prussian without bowels. Ah, my poor Elodie! My heart bleeds for you."

"Where do you keep it--that organ?" asked Andrew.

"He keeps it," retorted Elodie, "where you haven't got it. Horace understands me. You don't. Horace and I are going to talk. You smoke your cigar and think of battles and don't interfere."

It was said laughingly, so that Andrew had no cause for protest; but beneath the remark ran a streak of significance. She resented the serious tone at which Andrew had led the conversation. He and his military studies and his war of the future! They bored her to extinction. She glanced at him obliquely. A young man of thirty, he behaved himself like the senior of this youthful, flashing, elderly man who had the gift of laughter and could pluck out for her all that she had of spontaneity in life.

This conversation was typical of many which filled Elodie's head with an illusion of the brilliant genius of Horatio Bakkus. In spite of her peevishness she had a wholesome respect for Andrew--for his honesty, his singleness of purpose, his gentle masterfulness. But, all the same, their common detection of the drill-sergeant in his nature formed a sympathetic bond between Bakkus and herself. In the back of her mind, she set Andrew down as a dull dog. For all his poring over books, Bakkus could defeat him any day in argument. The agreeable villain's mastery of phrase fascinated her. And what he didn't know about the subtle delicacies of women's temperament was not worth knowing. She could tell him any thing and count on sympathy; whereas Andrew knew less about women than about his poodle dog.

There was, I say, this mid-period of their union when they grew almost estranged. Andrew, in spite of his loyalty, began to regret. He remembered the young girl who had rushed to him so tearfully as he was bending over the body of PrØpimpin--the flashing vision of the women of another world. In such a one would he find the divine companionship. She would stand with him, their souls melting together in awe before the majesty of Chartres, in worship before the dreaming spires of Rheims, in joy before the smiling beauty of Azay-le-Rideau. They would find a world of things to say of the rugged fairyland of Auvergne or the swooning loveliness of the Côte d'Azur. They would hear each other's heart beating as they viewed great pictures, their pulses would throb together as they listened to great opera. He would lie at her feet as she read the poets that she loved. She would also take an affectionate interest in military strategy. She would be different, oh, so different from Elodie. To Elodie, save for the comfort of inns, the accommodation of dressing-rooms and the appreciation of audiences, one town was exactly the same as another. She found amusement in sitting at a cafØ with a glass of syrup and water in front of her, and listening to a band; otherwise she had no æsthetic sense. She used terms regarding cathedrals and pictures for which boredom is the mildly polite euphemism. A busy street gay with shop windows attracted her far more than any grandeur of natural scenery. She loved displays of cheap millinery and underwear. Andrew could not imagine the Other One requiring his responsive ecstasy over a fifteen-franc purple hat with a green feather, or a pile of silk stockings at four francs fifty a pair ... The Other One, in a moment of delicious weakness, might stand enraptured before a dream of old lace or exquisite tissue or what not, and it would be his joy to take her by the hand, enter the shop and say "It is yours." But Elodie had no such moments. Her economical habits gave him no chance of divine extravagance. Even when he took her in to buy the fifteen-franc hat, she put him to shame by trying to bargain.

So they lost touch with each other until a bird or two brought them together again. Figuratively it is the history of most unions. In theirs, the birds were corporeal. It was at Montpellier. An old man had a turn with a set of performing birds, canaries, perroquets, love-birds, beauregards. Elodie came across him rehearsing on the stage. She watched the rehearsal fascinated. Then she approached the cages.

"Faites attention, Madame," cried the old man in alarm. "You will

scare them. They know no one but me."

"Mais non, mais non," said Elodie. _"Voyons, ça me connaît."_

She spoke from idle braggadocio. But when she put her hands on the cages, the birds came to her. They hopped about her fearlessly. She fished in her pockets for chocolate--her only extravagant vice--and bird after bird pecked at the sweet from her mouth. The old man said:

"Truly the birds know you, Madame. It is a gift. No one can tell whence it comes--and it comes to very few. There are also human beings for whom snakes have a natural affinity."

Elodie shuddered. "Snakes! I prefer birds. Ah, _le petit amour. Viens donc!_"

She had them all about her, on head and shoulders and arms, all unafraid, all content; then all fluttering with their clipped wings, about her lips, except a grey parrot who rubbed his beak against her ear.

Andrew, emerging suddenly from the wings, stood wonder-stricken.

"But you are a bird-woman," said he. "I have heard of such, but never seen one."

From that moment, the town-bred, town-compelled woman who had thought of bird-life only in terms of sparrows, set about to test her unsuspected powers. And what the old man and Andrew had said was true.... They wandered to the Peyrou, the beautiful Louis XIV terraced head of the great aqueduct, and sat in the garden--she alone, Andrew some yards apart--and once a few crumbs attracted a bird, it would hop nearer and nearer, and if she was very still it would light on her finger and eat out of the palm of her hand, and if she were very gentle, she could stroke the wild thing's head and plumage.

A new and wonderful interest came into her life. To find birds, Elodie, who by this time hated walking from hotel to music-hall, so had her indolence grown accustomed to the luxurious car, tramped for miles through the woods accompanied by Andrew almost as excited as herself at the new discovery. And he bought her books on birds, from which she could learn their names, their distinguishing colours and marks, their habits and their cries.

It must be remarked that the enthusiastic search for knowledge, involving, as it did, much physical exertion, lasted only a summer. But it sufficed to re-establish friendly relations between the drifting pair. She found an interest in life apart from the professional routine. During the autumn and winter she devoted herself to the training of birds, and Andrew gave her the benefit of his life's experience in the science. They travelled about with an aviary. And while Andrew, now unreproached, frowned, pencil in hand and notebook by his side, over the strategics of the Franco-Prussian War, Elodie, always in her slatternly wrapper, spent enraptured hours in putting her feathered troupe through their pretty tricks or in playing with them foolishly as one plays with a dog.

Thus their midway mutual grievances imperceptibly vanished. The positive was eliminated from their relations. They had been beginning to hate each other. Hatred ceased. Perhaps Elodie dreamed now and then of the Perfect Lover. Andrew had ever at the back of his soul the Far-away Princess, the Other One, the Being who would enable him to formulate a mode of nebulous existence and spiritual chaos, and then to live the wondrous life recalled by the magical formula. I must insist on this, so that you can recognize that the young and successful mountebank, although dead set on the perfection of his mountebankery, and, in serious fact, never dreaming of a work-a-day existence outside the walls of a Variety Theatre yet had the tentacles of his being spread gropingly, blindly, octopus-like, to the major potentialities of life. Even when looking back upon himself, as he does in the crude manuscript, he cannot account for these unconscious, or subconscious, feelings. He has no idea of the cause of the fascination wrought on him by military technicalities. It might have been chess, it might have been conchology, it might have been heraldry. Hobbies are more or less unaccountable. In view of his later career it seems to me that he found in the unalluring textbooks of Clausewitz and Foch and those bound in red covers for the use of the staff of the British Army, some expressions of a man's work--which was absent from the sphere into which fate had set him clad in green silk tights. The subject was instinct with the commanding brain. If his lot had been cast in the theatre proper, instead of in the music-hall, he might have become a great manager. However, all that is by the way. The important thing, for the time we are dealing with, is his relations with Elodie for the remainder half of their union before the war. These, I have said, ceased to be positive. They accepted their united life as they accepted the rain and the sunshine and the long motor journeys from town to town. Spiritually they went each their respective ways, unmolested by the other. But they each formed an integral part of the other's existence. They were bound by the indissoluble ties of habit. And as Elodie, now that she had got her birds to amuse her, made no demands on Andrew, and as Andrew, who had schooled his tidy soul to toleration of her slovenliness, made no demands on Elodie, they were about as happy as any pair in France.

When she passed thirty, her face coarsened and her uncared-for figure began to spread.

And then the war broke out.

Chapter XI

The outbreak of war knocked the Petit Patou variety combination silly, as it knocked many thousands of other combinations in France. One day it was a going concern worth a pretty sum of money; the next day it was gone.

They happened to be in Paris, putting in a fortnight's rest after an

exhausting four months on the road, and waiting for the beginning of a beautiful tour booked for Aix-les-Bains, for the race-weeks at Dieppe and Deauville, for Biarritz--the cream of August and September resorts of the wealthy.... Then, in a dazzling flash, mobilization. No more actors, no more stage hands, no more croupiers, no more punters, no more theatre-goers. No more anything but all sorts and conditions of men getting into uniform and all sorts and conditions of women trying to smile but weeping inward blood. Contracts, such as Andrew's, were blown away like thistledown.

Peremptory authorities required Andrew's papers. They had done so years before when he reached the age of military service. But now, as then, they proved Andrew indisputably to be a British subject--he had to thank Ben Flint for that--and the authorities went their growling way.

"What luck!" cried Elodie, when she heard the result of the perquisition. "Otherwise you would have been taken and sent off to this _sale guerre._"

"I'm not so sure," replied Andrew, with a grim set of his ugly jaw, "that I'm not going off to the _sale guerre,_ without being sent."

"But it is idiotic, what you say!" cried Elodie, in consternation. "What do you think, Horace?"

Bakkus threw a pair of Elodie's corsets which encumbered the other end of the sofa on which he was lounging on to the floor and put up his feet and sucked at his cigar, one of Andrew's best--the box, by the way, Elodie, who kept the key of a treasure cupboard, seldom brought out except for Bakkus--and said:

"Andrew isn't a very intellectual being. He bases his actions on formulas. Such people in times of stress even forget the process of thought that led to the establishment of the formulas. They shrink into a kind of trained animal. Andrew here is just like a little dog ready to do his tricks. Some voice which he can't resist will soon say, 'Bingo, die for your country.' And our good friend, without changing a muscle of his ugly face, will stretch himself out dead on the floor."

"Truth," said Andrew, with a hard glint in his eyes, "does sometimes issue from the lips of a fool."

Bakkus laughed, passing his hand over his silvering locks; but Elodie looked very serious. Absent-mindedly she picked up her corsets, and, the weather being sultry, she fanned herself with them.

"You are going to enlist in the Legion?"

"I am an Englishman, and my duty is towards my own country."

"Bingo is an English dog," said Bakkus.

Reaction from gladness made Elodie's heart grow cold, filled it with sudden

dread. It was hard. Most of the women of France were losing their men of vile necessity. She, one of the few privileged by law to retain her man, now saw him swept away in the stream. Protest could be of no avail. When the mild Andrew set his mug of a face like that--his long smiling lips merged into each other like two slugs, and his eyes narrowed to little pin points, she knew that neither she nor any woman nor any man nor the _bon Dieu_ Himself could move him from his purpose. She could only smile rather miserably.

"Isn't it a little bit mad, your idea?"

"Mad? Of course he is," said Bakkus. "Much reading in military text-books has made him mad. A considerably less interesting fellow than Andrew, who, after all, has a modicum of brains, one Don Quixote, achieved immortality by proceeding along the same lunatic lines."

Then Elodie flashed out. She understood nothing of the allusion, but she suspected a sneer.

"If I were a man I should fight for France. If Andre thinks it is his duty to fight for England, it may be mad, but it is fine, all the same. Yesterday, in the street, I sang the Marseillaise with the rest. _'Amour sacrØ de la Patrie.' Eh bien!_ There are other countries besides France. Do you deny that the _amour sacrØ_ exists for the Englishman?"

Andrew rose and gravely took Elodie's face in his delicate hands and kissed her.

"I never did you the wrong, my dear, of thinking you would feel otherwise."

"Neither did I, my good Elodie," said Bakkus, hurriedly opportunist. "If I have had one ambition in my life it is to sun myself in the vicarious glamour of a hero."

The corsets rolled off Elodie's lap as she turned swiftly.

"You really think AndrØ if he enlists in the English Army will be a hero?"

"Without doubt," replied Bakkus.

"I am glad," said Elodie. "You have such a habit of mocking all the world that when you are talking of serious things one doesn't know what you mean."

So peace was made. In the agitated days that followed she saw that a profound patriotism underlay Bakkus's cynicism, and she relied much on his counsel. Every man that England could put into the field was a soldier fighting for France. She glowed at the patriotic idea. Andrew, to his great gladness, noted that no hint of the cry "What is to become of me?" passed her lips. She counted on his loyalty as he had counted on hers. When he informed her of the arrangement he had made with her lawyer for her support during his absence, all she said was:

"Mon cher, it is far too much! I can live on half. And as for the will--let us not talk of it. It makes me shiver."

Here came out all that was good in Elodie. She took the war and its obligations, as she had taken her professional work. Through all her flabbiness ran the rod of steel. She suffered, looking forward with terror to the unthinkable future. Already one of her friends, Jeanne Duval, comedienne, was a widow ... What would life be without AndrØ? She trembled before the illimitable blankness. The habit of him was the habit of her life, like eating and drinking; his direction her guiding principle. Yet she dominated her fears and showed a brave face.

Often a neighbour, meeting her in the quarter, would say:

"You are fortunate, Madame. You will not lose your husband." To the quarter, as indeed to all the world, they were Monsieur and Madame Patou. "He is an Englishman and won't be called up."

She would flash with proud retort:--

"In England men are not called up. They go voluntarily. Monsieur Patou goes to join the English army."

She was not going to make her sacrifice for nothing.

To Bakkus Andrew confided the general charge of Elodie.

"My dear fellow," said the cynic, "isn't it rather overdoing your saintly simplicity? Do you remember the farce 'Occupe-toi d'AmØlie?' Do I appeal to you as a squire of deserted dames, grass-widows endowed with plenty? I--a man of such indefinite morals that so long as I have mutton cutlets I don't in the least care who pays for them? Aren't you paying for this very mouthful now?"

"You are welcome," replied Andrew with a grin, "to all the mutton that Elodie will give you."

Elodie's only proclaimed grievance against Bakkus, whom otherwise she vastly admired, was his undisguised passion for free repasts.

When it came to parting, Elodie wept and sobbed. He marvelled at her emotion.

"You love me so much, my little Elodie?"

"Mais tu es ma vie toute entiŁre. Haven't you understood it?"

In that sense--no. He had not understood. They had arranged their lives so much as business partners, friends, fate-linked humans dependent on each other for the daily amenities of a joint existence. He had never suspected; never had cause to suspect, this hidden flood of sentiment. The simple man's heart responded. For such love she must be repaid. In the packed train which sped him towards England he carried with him no small remorse

for past indifference.

Now, what next happened to Andrew, is, as I have said before, omitted from his manuscript. Nor has he vouchsafed to me, in conversation, anything but the rudest sketch. All we know is that he enlisted straight into the regular Army, the Grenadier Guards. Millions of Tommies have passed through his earlier experiences. His gymnastic training, his professional habits of accuracy and his serious yet alert mind bore him swiftly through preliminary stages to high efficiency. In November, 1914, he found himself in Flanders. Wounded, a few months afterwards, he was sent home, patched up, sent back again. Late in 1915, a sergeant, he had his first leave, which he spent in Paris.

Elodie received him with open arms. She was impressed by the martial bearing of her ramrod of a man, and she proudly fingered the three stripes on his sleeve and the D.C.M. ribbon on his breast. She took him for walks, she who, in her later supineness, hated to put one foot before the other--by the Grands Boulevards, the Rue Royale, the Place de la Concorde, the Champs ElysØes, hanging on his arm, with a recrudescence of the defiant air of the Marseilles _gamine._ She made valiant efforts to please her hero who had bled in great battles and had returned to fight in great battles again. She had a thousand things to tell him of her life in Paris, to which the man, weary of the mud and blood of war, listened as though they were revelations of Paradise. Yet, she had but existed idly day in and day out, in the eternal wrapper and slippers, with her cage of birds. The little beasts kept her alive--it was true. One was dull in Paris without men. And the women of her acquaintance, mostly professional, were in poverty. They had the same cry, "My dear, lend me ten francs." "My little Elodie, I am on the rocks, my man is killed." _"Ma bien aimØe,_ I am starving. You who are at ease, let me come and eat with you"--and so on and so on. Her heart grieved for them; but _que veux-tu?_--one was not a charitable institution. So it was all very sad and heartrending. To say nothing of her hourly anxiety. If only the _sale guerre_ would cease and they could go on tour again! Ah, those happy days!

"Were they, after all, so very happy?" asked Andrew.

"One was contented, free from care."

"But now?"

"May they not come to tell me at any minute that you are killed?"

"That’s true," said Andrew gravely.

"And besides--"

She paused.

"Besides, what?"

"I love you more now," replied Elodie.

Which gave Andrew food for thought, whenever he had time at the front to consider the appetite.

When next he had a short leave it was as a Lieutenant; but Elodie had gone to Marseilles, braving the tedious third-class journey, to attend her mother's funeral. There Madame Figasso having died intestate, she battled with authorities and lawyers and the _huissier_ Boudin who professed heartbreak at her unfilial insistence on claiming her little inheritance. With the energy which she always displayed in the serious things of life she routed them all. She sold the furniture, the dressmaking business, wrested the greasy bag of savings from the hands of a felonious and discomfited Boudin, and returned to Paris with some few thousand francs in her pocket. Horatio Bakkus, meanwhile, had moved into the Saint-Denis flat to take care of the birds. Nobody in France craving the services of a light tenor, he would have starved, had not his detested brother the Archdeacon, a rich man, made him a small allowance. It was a sad day for him when, after a couple of months' snug lying, he had to betake himself to his attic under the roof, where he shivered in the coalless city.

"I die of convention," said he. "Behold, you have a spare room centrally heated. You are virtue itself. I not only occupy the sacred position of your guardian, but am humiliatingly aware of my supreme lack of attraction. And yet--"

"Fich'-moi le camp," laughed Elodie.

And Bakkus took up his old green valise and returned to his eyrie. There should be no scandal in the Faubourg Saint-Denis if Elodie could help it. But a few days later--

"_Ah, je m'ennuie, je m'ennuie_," she cried in an accent of boredom.

Then Bakkus elaborated a Machiavellian idea. Why shouldn't she work? At what? Why, hadn't she a troupe of trained birds? Madame Patou was not the first comer in the variety world. She could get engagements in the provinces. How did she know that the war would not last longer than Andrew's savings?

"_Mon Dieu_, it is true," she said.

Forthwith she went to the agent Moignon. After a few weeks she started on the road with her aviary, and Bakkus once more left his eyrie to take charge of the flat in the Faubourg St. Denis.

It came to pass that the next time Andrew and Elodie met in their Paris house, he wore a Major's crown and the ribbons of the Distinguished Service Order, the Military Cross and the Legion of Honour. From his letters she had grasped but little of his career and growing distinction; but the sight of him drove her mad with pride. If she had loved to parade the Paris streets with him as a Sergeant, now she could scarcely bear to exist with him otherwise than in public places. Not only an officer, but almost a Colonel. And decorated--he, an English officer, with the Legion of Honour! The British decorations she scarcely understood--but they made a fine

display. The salutes from uniformed men of every nation almost turned her head. The little restaurant round the corner, where they had eaten for so many years, suddenly appeared to her an inappropriate setting for his exalted rank. She railed against its meanness.

"Let us eat then," laughed Andrew, who had not given the matter a thought, "on the Place de la Madeleine."

But if the Restaurant Mangin in the Faubourg Saint-Denis was too lowly, the Restaurant Weber frightened her by its extravagance. She hit upon the middle course of engaging a cook for the wonderful fortnight of his leave and busying herself with collaborating in the preparation of succulent meals.

"My dear child," said Andrew, sitting at his own table in the tiny and seldom-used _salle àmanger_ for the first time since their early disastrous experience of housekeeping, "why in the world haven't we had this cosiness before?"

He seemed to have entered a new world of sacred domesticity. The outward material sign of the inward grace drew him nearer to her than all protestations of affection.

"Why have you waited all these years?" he asked.

Elodie, expansive, rejoicing in the success of the well-cooked dinner, reproached herself generously. It was all her fault. Before the war she had been ignorant, idle. But the war had taught her many things. Above all it had taught her to value her _petit homme_.

"Because you now see him in his true colours," observed Bakkus, who took for granted a seat at the table as the payment for his guardianship. "The drill sergeant I always talked to you about."

"Sergeant!" Elodie flung up her head in disdain. "He is _Commandant_. And see to it that you are not wanting in respect."

"From which outburst of conjugal ferocity, my dear fellow," said Bakkus, "you can gauge the conscientiousness of my guidance of Elodie during your absence."

Andrew grinned happily. He was full of faith in both of them--loving woman, loyal friend.

"It is true," said he, "that I have found my vocation."

"What are you going to do when the war is over and Othello's occupation is gone?"

"I don't think the war will ever be over," he laughed. "It's no good looking ahead. For the present one has to regard soldiering as a permanent pursuit."

"I thought so," said Bakkus. "He'll cry when it's over and he can't move his pretty soldiers about."

"That is true?" asked Elodie, in the tone of one possessed of insight.

Andrew shrugged his shoulders, a French trick out of harmony with his British uniform.

"Perhaps," said he with a sigh.

"I too," said Elodie, "will be sorry when you become _Petit Patou_ again."

He touched her cheek caressingly with the back of his hand, and smiled. Strange how the war had brought her the gift of understanding. Never had he felt so close to her.

"All the same," added Elodie, "it is very dangerous _làbas, mon chØri_--and I don't want you to get killed."

"All the glory and none of the death," said Bakkus. "Conducted on those principles, warfare would be ideal employment for the young. But you would be going back to the Middle Ages, when, if a knight were killed, he was vastly surprised and annoyed. Personally I hate the war. It prevents me from earning a living, and insults me with the sense of my age, physical decay and incapacity. I haven't a good word to say for it."

"If you only went among the wounded in the Paris hospitals," replied Andrew, with some asperity, "and sang to them--"

"My good fool," said Bakkus, "I've been doing that for about four or five hours a day since the war began, till I've no voice left."

"Didn't you know?" cried Elodie. "Horace has never worked so hard in his life. And for nothing. In his way he is a hero like you."

"Why the devil didn't you tell me?" cried Andrew.

Bakkus flung a hand. "If you hadn't to dress the part what should I have known of your rank and orders? Would you go about saying 'I'm a dam fine fellow'?"

"I'm sorry," said Andrew, filling his guest's glass. "I ought to have taken it for granted."

"We give entertainments together," said Elodie. "He sings and I take the birds. Ah! the poilus. They are like children. When Riquiqui takes off Paulette's cap they twist themselves up with laughing. _Il faut voir ça."_

This was all news to Andrew, and it delighted him beyond measure. He could take away now to the trenches the picture of Elodie as ministering angel surrounded by her birds--an exquisite, romantic, soul-satisfying picture.

"But why," he asked again, "didn't you tell me?"

"Ah, tu sais--letters--I am not very good at letters. _Fante d'Øducation._ I want so much to tell you what I feel that I forget to tell you what I do."

Bakkus smiled sardonically as he sipped his liqueur brandy. She had given her bird performance on only two occasions. She had exaggerated it into the gracious habit of months or years. Just like a woman! Anyhow, the disillusionment of Andrew was none of his business. The dear old chap was eating lotus in his Fool's Paradise, thinking it genuine pre-war lotus and not war _ersatz._ It would be a crime to disabuse him.

For Andrew the days of leave sped quickly. Not a domestic cloud darkened his relations with Elodie. Through indolent and careless living she had grown gross and coarse, too unshapely and unseemly for her age. When the news of his speedy arrival in Paris reached her, she caught sight of herself in her mirror and with a sudden pang realized her lack of attraction. In a fever she corseted herself, creamed her face, set a coiffeur to work his will on her hair. But what retrieval of lost comeliness could be effected in a day or two? The utmost thing of practical value she could do was to buy a new, gay dressing-gown and a pair of high-heeled slippers. And Andrew, conscious of waning beauty, overlooked it in the light of her new and unsuspected coquetry. Where once the slattern lolled about the little salon, now moved an attractively garbed and tidy woman. Instead of the sloven, he found a housewife who made up in zeal for lack of experience. The patriotic soldier's mate replaced the indifferent and oft-times querulous partner of Les Petit Patou. It is true that, when, in answer to the question, "A battle--what is that like?" he tried to interest her in a scientific exposition, she would interrupt him, a love-bird on her finger and its beak at her lips, with: "Look, isn't he sweet?" thereby throwing him out of gear; it is true that she yawned and frankly confessed her boredom, as she had done for many years when the talk of Andrew and Bakkus went beyond her intellectual horizon; but--_que voulez-vous?_--even a great war cannot, in a few months, supply the deficiencies of thirty uneducated years. The heart, the generous instinct--these were the things that the war had awakened in Elodie--and these were the things that mattered and made him so gracious a homecoming. And she had grasped the inner truth of the war. She had accepted it in the grand manner, like a daughter of France.

So at least it seemed to Andrew. The depth of her feelings he did not try to gauge. Into the part in her demonstrativeness played by vanity or by momentary reaction from the dread of losing him, her means of support, it never entered his head to enquire. That she should sun herself in reflected splendour for the benefit of the quarter and of such friends as she had, and that she should punctiliously exact from them the respect due to his military rank, afforded him gentle amusement. He knew that, as soon as his back was turned, she would relapse into slipshod ways. But her efforts delighted him, proved her love and her loyalty. For the third time he parted from her to go off to the wars, more impressed than ever by the sense of his inappreciation of her virtues. He wrote her a long letter of

self-upbraiding for the past, and the contrast between the slimy dug-out where he was writing by the light of one guttering candle, and the cosy salon he had just quitted being productive of nostalgia, he expressed himself, for once in his life, in the terms of an ardent lover.

Elodie, who found his handwriting difficult to read at the best of times, and undecipherable in hard pencil on thin paper, handed the letter over to the faithful Bakkus, who read it aloud with a running commentary of ironic humour. This Andrew did not know till long afterwards.

In a few weeks he got the command of his battalion.

Bakkus wrote:--

"How you'll be able to put up with us now I know not. Elodie can scarcely put up with herself. She gives orders in writing to tradesmen now and subscribes herself 'Madame La Colonelle Patou.' She has turned down a bird engagement offered by Moignon, as beneath her present dignity. You had better come home as soon as you can."

Andrew laughed and threw the letter away. He had far more serious things to attend to than Elodie's pretty foibles. And when you are commanding a crack regiment in a famous division in the line you no more think of leave than of running away from the enemy. Months passed--of fierce fighting and incessant strain, and he covered himself with glory and completed the rainbow row of ribbons on his breast, until Petit Patou and Elodie and Bakkus and the apartment in the Faubourg Saint-Denis became things of a far-off dream.

And before he saw Elodie again, he had met Lady Auriol Dayne.

Chapter XII

That was the devil of it. He had met Lady Auriol Dayne. He had found in that frank and capable young woman--or thought he had found, which comes to the same thing--the Princesse Lointaine of his dreams. If she differed from that nebulous and characterless paragon, were less ethereal, more human nature's daily food, so much the better. She possessed that which he had yearned for--_quality._ She had style--like the prose of Theophile Gautier, the Venus of Milo, the Petit Trainon. She suggested Diana, who more than all goddesses displayed this gift of distinction; yet was she not too Diana-ish to be unapproachable. On the contrary, she blew about him as free as the wind.... That, in a muddle-headed way, was his impression of her: a subtle mingling of nature and artistry. On every side of her he beheld perfection. Physically, she was as elemental as the primitive woman superbly developed by daily conditions of hardship and danger; spiritually, as elemental as the elves and fairies; and over her mind played the wisdom of the world.

Thus, in trying to account for her to himself, did the honest Lackaday flounder from trope to metaphor. "To love her," he quotes from Steele, "is a liberal education."

The last time he met her in England, was after my departure for Paris. You will remember that just before then he had confided to me his identity as Petit Patou and had kept me up half the night. It was a dismal April afternoon, rain and mud outside, a hopeless negation of the spring. They had the drawing-room to themselves--to no one, the order had gone forth, was her ladyship at home--that drawing-room of Lady Auriol which Lackaday regarded as the most exquisite room in the world. It had comfort of soft chairs and bright fire and the smell of tea and cigarettes; but it also had the style, to him so precious, with which his fancy invested her. The note of the room was red lacquer partly inherited, partly collected, the hangings of a harmonious tone, and the only pictures on the distempered walls the colour-prints of the late eighteenth century. It had the glow of smiling austerity, the unseizable, paradoxical quality of herself. An old SŁvres tea-service rested on a Georgian silver tray, which gleamed in the firelight. Wherever he looked, he beheld perfection. And pouring out the tea stood the divinity, a splendid contrast to the shrine, yet again paradoxically harmonious; full-bosomed, warm and olive, wearing blue serge coat and skirt, her blouse open at her smooth throat, her cheeks flushed with walking through the rain, her eyes kind.

For a while, like a Knight in the Venusberg, he gave himself up to the delight of her. Then suddenly he pulled himself together, and, putting down his teacup, he said what he had come to say:--

"This is the last time that I shall ever see you."

She started.

"What on earth do you mean? Are you going off to the other end of the world?"

"I’m going back to France."

"When?"

"To-morrow morning."

She twisted round in her chair, her elbow on the arm and her chin in her hand and looked at him.

"That’s sudden, isn’t it?"

He smiled rather sadly. "When once you’ve made up your mind, it’s best to act, instead of hanging on."

"You’re sure there’s no hope in this country?"

"I know I’m as useful as a professional wine-taster will soon be in the

United States."

They laughed, resumed the discussion of many previous meetings. Had he tried this, that or the other opening? He had tried everything. No one wanted him.

"So," said he, "I'm making a clean cut and returning to France."

"I'm sorry." She sighed. "Very sorry. You know I am. I hoped you would remain in England and find some occupation worthy of you--but, after all--France isn't Central China. We shall still be next-door neighbours. The Channel can be easily crossed by one of us. You used the word 'ever,' you know," she added with an air of challenge,

"I did."

"Why?"

"That would take a lot of telling," said Andrew grimly.

"We've got hours, if you choose, in front of us."

"It's not a question of time," said he.

"Then, my good Andrew, what are you talking about?"

"Only that I must return to the place I came from, my dear friend. Let it rest at that."

She lit a cigarette. "Rather fatalistic, isn't it?"

"Four years of fighting make one so."

"You speak," said she, after a little reflection occasioning knitting of the brows, "you speak like the Mysterious Unknown of the old legends--the being sent from Hell or Heaven or any other old place to the earth to accomplish a mission. You know what I mean. He lives the life of the world into which he is thrown and finds it very much to his liking. But when the mission is fulfilled--the Powers that sent him say: 'Your time is up. Return whence you came.' And the poor Make-believe of a human has got to vanish."

"You surely aren't jesting?" he asked.

"No," she said. "God forbid! I've too deep a regard for you. Besides, I believe the parable is applicable. Otherwise how can I understand your 'for ever'?"

"I'm glad you understand without my blundering into an explanation," he replied. "It's something, as you say. Only the legendary fellow goes back to cool his heels--or the reverse--in Shadow Land, whereas I'll still continue to inhabit the comfortable earth. I'm as Earth-bound as can be."

He paused for a moment, and continued:--

"Fate or what you will dragged me from obscurity into the limelight of the war to play my little part. It's over. I've nothing more to do on the stage. Fate rings down the curtain. I must go back into obscurity. _La commedia Ł finita_."

"It's more like a tragedy," said she.

Andrew made a gesture with his delicate hands.

"A comedy's not a farce. Let us stick to the comedy."

"Less heroically--let us play the game," she suggested.

"If you like to put it that way."

She regarded him searchingly out of frank eyes; her face had grown pale.

"If you gave me the key to your material Shadow Land, it would not be playing the game?"

"You are right, my dear," said he. "It wouldn't."

"I thought as much," said Lady Auriol.

He rose, mechanically adjusted his jacket, which always went awry on his gaunt frame. "I want to say something," he declared abruptly. "You're the only lady--highly-bred woman--with whom I've been on terms of friendship in my life. It has been an experience far more wonderful than you can possibly realize. I'll keep it as an imperishable memory"--he spoke bolt upright as though he were addressing troops on parade before a battle--"it's right that you should know I'm not ungrateful for all you have done for me. I've only one ambition left--that you should remember me as a soldier--and--in my own way--a gentleman."

"A very gallant gentleman," she said with quivering lips.

He held out his hand, took hers, kissed it French fashion.

"Good-bye and God bless you," said he, and marched out of the room.

She stood for a while, with her hand on her heart--suffering a pain that was almost physical. Then she rushed to the door and cried in a loud voice over the balustrade of the landing:

"Andrew, come back."

But the slam of the front door drowned her call. She returned to the drawing-room and threw up the window. Andrew was already far away, tearing down the rainswept street.

Now, if Andrew had heard the cry, he would have heard that in it which no

man can hear unmoved. He would have leaped up the stairs and there would have been as pretty a little scene of mutual avowals as you could wish for. Auriol knew it. She has frankly told me so. Not until this last interview was she certain of his love. But then, although he said nothing, any fool of a woman could have seen it as clear as daylight. And she had been planted there like a stuck pig all the time--her _ipsissima verba_ (O Diana distinction of lover's fancy!) and when common sense came to her aid, she just missed him by the fraction of a second.... Yet, after all, my modern Diana--or Andrew's, if you prefer it--had her own modern mode of telling an elderly outsider about her love affairs--the mode of the subaltern from whom is dragged the story of his Victoria Cross. Andrew Lackaday's quaintly formulated idealizations had their foundations in fact. This is by the way. What happened next was Lady Auriol's recovery of real common sense when she withdrew her head and her rained-upon hat from the window and drew down the sash. She flew to her bedroom, stamped about with clenched fists until she had dried up at their source the un-Auriol like tears that threatened to burst forth. Her fury at her weakness spent, she felt better and strangled the temptation to write him then and there a summons to return that evening for a full explanation. My God! Hadn't they had their explanation? If he could in honour have said, "I am a free live man as you are a free live woman, and I love you as you love me"--wouldn't he have said it? He was the last man in the world to make a mystery about nothing. Into the mystery she was too proud to enquire. Enough for her to know in her heart that he was a gallant gentleman. She should have stopped at her parable....

Meanwhile she let Andrew return to France unaware of the tumult he had raised. That he had won her interest, her respect, her friendship--even her affectionate friendship--he was perfectly aware. But that his divinity was just foolishly and humanly in love with him he had no notion. He consoled himself with reflections on her impeccability, her wondrous intuition, her Far-away Princess-like delicacy. Who but she could have summed up in a parable the whole dismal situation?

Well, the poor Make-believe had to vanish.

The last time he travelled to Boulogne it was in a military train. He had a batman who looked after his luggage. He wore a baton and sword on his shoulder-straps. Only now, a civilian in a packed mass of civilians, did he recognize what a mighty personage he then was--a cock of the walk, saluted, "sired," treated with deference. None of the old-fashioned pit-of-the-theatre scrum for passport inspection, on the smoking-room deck. And there, on the quay, were staff officers and R.T.O.'s awaiting him with a great car--no worry about Customs or luggage or anything--everything done for him by eager young men without his bidding--and he had thought nothing of it. Indeed, if there had been a hitch in the machinery which conveyed him to his brigade, he would have made it hot for the defaulter. And now--with a third share in a porter he struggled through the Customs in the midst of the perspiring civilian crowd, and, emerging on to the platform, found a comfortless middle seat in an old German first-class carriage built for four. There were still many men in uniform, English, French and American, doing Heaven knows what about the busy station. But none took notice of him, and he lounged disconsolately by the carriage door waiting

for the train to start. He scarcely knew which of his experiences, then or now, was an illusion.

In spite of the civilian horde, women, young girls, mufti-clad men, the station still preserved a military aspect. A company of blue-clad poilus sat some way off, in the middle of their packs, eating a scratch meal. Here and there were bunches of British Tommies, with a sergeant and a desultory officer, obviously under discipline. It seemed impossible that the war should be ended--that he, General Lackaday, should have finished with it for ever.

At last, a young subaltern passed him by, recognized him after a second, saluted and paused undecided. A few months ago, Andrew would have returned his salute with brass-hatted majesty, but now he smiled his broad ear-to-ear smile, thrust out his long arm and gripped the young man’s hand. It was Smithson, one of his brigade staff--a youth of mediocre efficiency, on whom, as the youth remembered, he was wont most austerely to frown. But all this Andrew forgot.

"My dear boy," he cried. "How glad I am to see you."

It was as if a survivor from a real world had appeared before him in a land of dreams. He questioned him animatedly on his doings. The boy responded wonderingly. At last:--

"When are you going to be demobilized?"

The subaltern smiled. "I hope never, sir. I’m a regular."

"Lucky devil," said Andrew. "Oh, you lucky devil! I’d give anything to change places with you."

"I’m on, sir," laughed Smithson. "I’m all for being a Brigadier-General."

"Not on the retired list--out of the service," said Andrew.

The train began to move. Andrew jumped hastily into his compartment and, leaning out of the window before the stout Frenchman, waved a hand to the insignificant young man in the King’s uniform. With all his soul he envied him the privilege of wearing it. He cursed his stiff-neckedness in declining the Major’s commission offered by the War Office. A line of Tennyson reminiscent of the days when Bakkus had guided his reading came into his head. Something about a man’s own angry pride being cap and bells for a fool. He tried to find repose against the edge of the sharp double curve that divided the carriage side into two portions. The trivial discomfort irritated him. The German compartment might be a symbol of victory, but it was also a symbol of the end of the war, the end of the only intense life full of meaning which he had ever known.

As the train went on, he caught sight from the window of immense stores of war--German waggons with their military destinations still marked in chalk, painted guns of all calibres, drums of barbed wire, higgledy-piggledy truck-loads of scrap, all sorts of flotsam and jetsam of the great

conflict. All useless, done with, never to be thought of again, so the world hoped, in the millennium that was to be brought about by the League of Nations. Yet it seemed impossible. In wayside camps, at railway stations, he saw troops of the three great countries. Now and then train-loads of them passed. It was impossible that the mighty hosts they represented should soon melt away into the dull flood of civil life. The war had been such a mighty, such a gallant thing. Of course the genius of mankind must now be bent to the reconstruction of a shattered world. He knew that. He knew that regret at the ending of the universal slaughter would be the sentiment of a homicidal lunatic. Yet deep down in his heart there was some such regret, a gnawing nostalgia.

After Amiens they passed by the battle-fields. A young American officer sitting by the eastern window pointed them out to him. He explained to Andrew what places had been British gun emplacements, pointed to the white chalk lines that had been British trenches. Told him what a trench looked like. Andrew listened grimly. The youth had pointed out of window again. Did he know what those were? Those were shell-holes. German shells.... Presently the conductor came through to examine tickets. Andrew drew from his pocket his worn campaigning note-case and accidently dropped a letter. The young American politely picked it up, but the typewritten address on the War Office envelope caught his eye. "Brigadier-General Lackaday, C.B." He handed it to Andrew, flushing scarlet.

"Is that your name, sir?"

"It is," said Andrew.

"Then I reckon, sir, I've been making a fool of myself."

"Every man," said Andrew, with his disarming smile, "is bound to do that once in his life. It's best to get it over as soon as possible. That's the way one learns. Especially in the army."

But the young man's talk had rubbed in his complete civiliandom.

As the train neared Paris, his heart sank lower and lower. The old pre-war life claimed him mercilessly, and he was frozen with a dread which he had never felt on the fire-step in the cold dawn awaiting the lagging hour of zero. On the entrance to the Gare du Nord he went into the corridor and looked through the window. He saw Elodie afar off. Elodie, in a hat over her eyes, a fur round her neck, her skirt cut nearly up to her knees showing fat, white-stockinged calves. She had put on much flesh. The great train stopped and vomited forth its horde of scurrying humans.

Elodie caught sight of him and rushed and threw herself into his arms, and embraced him rapturously.

"Oh, my AndrØ, it is good to have you back. _O mon petit homme_--how I have been longing for this moment. Now the war is finished, you will not leave me again ever. _Et te voilàGØnØral_. You must be proud, eh? But your uniform? I who had made certain I should see you in uniform."

He smiled at her characteristic pounce on externals.

"I no longer belong to the Army, my little Elodie," he replied, walking with her, his porter in front, to the barrier.

"_Mais tu es toujours GØnØral?_" she asked anxiously.

"I keep the rank," said Andrew.

"And the uniform? You can wear it? You will put it on sometimes to please me?"

They drove home through twilight Paris, her arm passed through his, while she chattered gaily. Was it not good to smell Paris again after London with its fogs and ugliness and raw beefsteaks? To-night she would give him such a dinner as he had never eaten in England--and not for two years. Did he realize that it was two years since he had seen her?

"_Mon Dieu_," said he, "so it is."

"And you are pleased to have me again?"

"Can you doubt it?" he smiled.

"Ah, one never knows. What can't a man do in two years? Especially when he becomes a high personage, a great General full of honours and decorations."

"The gods of peace have arrived, my little Elodie," said he with a touch of bitterness, "and the little half-gods of war are eclipsed. If we go to a restaurant there's no reason why the waiter with his napkin under his arm shouldn't be an ex-colonel of Zouaves. All the glory of the war has ended, my dear. A breath. Phew! Out goes the candle."

But Elodie would have none of this pessimistic philosophy.

"You are a General to the end of your days."

They mounted to the flat in the Faubourg Saint-Denis. To Andrew, accustomed of late months to the greater spaciousness of English homes, it seemed small and confined and close. It smelt of birds--several cages of which occupied a side of the salon. Instinctively he threw open a window.

Instinctively also: "The _courant d'air!_" cried Elodie.

"Just for a minute," said Andrew--and added diplomatically, "I want to see what changes there are in the street."

"It's always the same," said Elodie. "I will go and see about dinner."

So till she returned he kept the window open and looked about the room. It was neat as a new pin, redded-up against his arrival. His books had been taken from their cases and dusted; the wild displacement of volumes that should have gone in series betrayed the hand of the zealous though inexpert

librarian. The old curtains had been cleaned, the antimacassars over the backs of chairs and sofa had been freshly washed, the floor polished. Not a greasy novel or a straggling garment defiled the spotlessness of the room, which, but for the row of birds and the books, looked as if it subserved no human purpose. A crazy whatnot, imitation lacquer and bamboo, the only piece of decorative furniture, was stacked with photographs of variety artists, male and female, in all kinds of stage costumes, with sprawling signatures across, the collection of years of touring,--all scrupulously dusted and accurately set out. The few cheap prints in maple frames that adorned the walls (always askew, he remembered) had been adjusted to the horizontal. On the chenille-covered table in the middle of the room stood a vase with artificial flowers. The straight-backed chairs upholstered in yellow and brown silk stood close sentry under the prints, in their antimacassar uniforms. Two yellow and brown arm-chairs guarded the white faience stove. The sofa against the wall frowned sternly at the whatnot on the opposite side. Andrew’s orderly soul felt aghast at this mathematical tidiness. Even the old slovenly chaos was better. At least it expressed something human. And then the picture of that other room, so exquisite, so impregnated with the Far-away Princess spirit of its creator, rose up before him, and he sighed and rubbed his fingers through his red stubbly hair, and made a whimsical grimace, and said, "Oh Damn!" And Elodie then bursting in, with a proud "Isn’t it pretty, _ton petit chez-toi!_"
What could he do but smile, and assure her that no soldier home from the wars could have a more beautifully regulated home?

"And you have looked enough at the street?"

Andrew shut the window.

Chapter XIII

Through one of the little ironies of fate, my mission at the Peace Conference ended a day or two after Andrew’s arrival in Paris, so that when he called at my hotel I had already returned to London. A brief note from him a day or two later informed me of his visit and his great regret at missing me. Of his plans he said nothing. He gave as his address "c/o Cox’s Bank." You will remark that this was late April, and I did not receive his famous manuscript till June. Of his private history I knew nothing, save his beginnings in the Cirque Rocambeau and his identity with a professional mountebank known as Petit Patou.

Soon afterwards I spent a week-end with the Verity-Stewarts. Before I could have a private word with Lady Auriol, whom I found as my fellow-guest, Evadne, as soon as she had finished an impatient though not unsubstantial tea, hurried me out into the garden. There were two litters of Sealyhams.

Lady Verity-Stewart protested mildly.

"Uncle Anthony doesn’t want to see puppies."

"It’s the only thing he’s interested in and the only thing he knows anything about," cried Evadne. "And he’s the only one that’s able to pick out the duds. Come on."

So I went. Crossing the lawn, she took my arm.

"We’re all as sick as dogs," she remarked confidentially.

"Indeed? Why?"

"We asked----" Note the modern child. Not "Papa" or "Mamma," as a well-conducted little girl of the Victorian epoch would have said, but "we," _ego et parentes_--"we asked," replied Evadne, "General Lackaday down. And crossing our letter came one from Paris telling us he had left England for good. Isn’t it rotten?"

"The General’s a very good fellow," said I, "but I didn’t know he was a flame of yours."

"Oh, you stupid!" cried Evadne, with a protesting tug at my arm "It’s nothing to do with me. It s Aunt Auriol."

"Oh?" said I.

She shook her fair bobbed head. "As if you didn’t know!"

"I’m not so senile," said I, "as not to grasp your insinuation, my dear. But I fail to see what business it is of ours."

"It’s a family affair--oh, I forgot, you’re not real family--only adopted." I felt humiliated. "Anyhow you’re as near as doesn’t matter." I brightened up again. "I’ve heard ’em talking it over--when they thought I wasn’t listening. Father and mother and Charles. They’re all potty over General Lackaday. And so’s Aunt Auriol. I told you they had clicked ages ago."

"Clicked?"

"Yes. Don’t you know English?"

"To my sorrow, I do. They clicked. And father and mother and Charles and Aunt Auriol are all potty."

"And so am I," she declared, "for he’s a dear. And they all say it’s time for Aunt Auriol to settle down. So they wanted to get him here and fix him. Charles says he’s a shy bird----"

"But," I interrupted, "you’re talking of the family. Your Aunt Auriol has a father, Lord Mountshire."

"He’s an old ass," said Evadne.

"He’s a peer of the realm," said I rebukingly, though I cordially agreed with her.

"He’s not fit to be General Lackaday’s ancient butler," she retorted.

"Is that your own?"

"No. It’s Charles’s. But I can repeat it if I like."

"And all this goes to prove----" said I.

"Well, don’t you see? You are dense. The news that the General had gone to France knocked them all silly. Aunt Auriol’s looking rotten. Charles says she’s off her feed. You should have seen her last night at dinner, when they were talking about him."

"Again, my dear Evadne," said I, opening the gate of the kitchen garden for her to pass through, "this is none of my business."

She took my arm again. "It doesn’t matter. But oh, darling Uncle Tony, couldn’t we fix it up?"

"Fix up what?" I asked aghast.

"The wedding," replied this amazing young person, looking up at me so that I had only a vision of earnest grey eyes, and a foreshortened snub nose and chin. "He’s only shy. You could bring him up to the scratch at once."

She went on in a whirl of words of which I preserve but a confused memory. Of course it was her own idea. She had heard her mother hint that Anthony Hylton might be a useful man to have about--but all the same she had her plan. Why shouldn’t I go off to Paris and bring him back? I gasped. I fought for air. But Evadne hurried me on, talking all the time. She was dying for a wedding. She had never seen one in her life. She would be a bridesmaid. She described her costume. And she had set her heart on a wedding present--the best of the bunch of Sealyham puppies. Why, certainly they were all hers. Tit and Tat, from whom the rather extensive kennels had originally sprung, were her own private property. They had been given to her when she was six years old. Tat had died. But Tit. I knew Tit? Did I not? No one could spend an hour in Mansfield Court without making the acquaintance of the ancient thing on the hearthrug, with the shape of a woolly lamb and the eye of a hawk and the smile of a Court jester. Besides, I had known him since he was a puppy. I, _moi qui parle_, had been the donor of Tit and Tat. I reminded her. I was a stupid. As if she didn’t know. But I was to confirm her right to dispose of the pups. I confirmed it solemnly. So we hastened to the stable yard and inspected the kennels, where the two mothers lay with their slithery tail-wagging broods. We discussed the points of each little beast and eventually decided on the one which should be Evadne’s wedding present to General Lackaday and Lady Auriol Dayne.

"Thanks ever so much, darling," said Evadne. "You are _so_ helpful."

I returned to the drawing-room fairly well primed with the family preoccupations, so that when Lady Verity-Stewart carried me off to her own little den on the pretext of showing me some new Bristol glass, and Sir Julius came smoking casually in her wake, I knew what to expect. They led up to the subject, of course, very diplomatically--not rushing at it brutally like Evadne, but nothing that the child said did they omit--with the natural exception of the bridesmaid's dress and the wedding present. And they added little more. They were greatly concerned, dear elderly folk, about Auriol. She and General Lackaday had been hand in glove for months. He evidently more than admired her. Auriol, said Sir Julius, in her don't-care-a-dam-for-anybody sort of way made no pretence of disguising her sentiments. Any fool could see she was in love with the man. And they had _affichØd_ themselves together all over the place. Other women could do it with impunity--if they didn't have an infatuated man in tow at a restaurant, they'd be stared at, people would ask whether they were qualifying for a nunnery--but Auriol was different. Aphrodite could do what she chose and no one worried; but an indiscretion of Artemis set tongues wagging. It was high time for something definite to happen. And now the only thing definite was Lackaday's final exodus from the scene, and Auriol's inclination to go off and bury herself in some savage land. Lady Verity-Stewart thought Borneo. They were puzzled. General Lackaday was the best of fellows---so simple, so sincere--such a damned fine soldier--such a gentle, kindly creature--so scurvily treated by a disgraceful War Office--just the husband for Auriol--etcetera, etcetera in strophe and antistrophe of eulogy.

All this was by way of beginning. Then came the point of the conclave. It was obvious that General Lackaday couldn't have trifled with Auriol's affections and thrown her off. I smiled at the conception of the lank and earnest Lackaday in the part of Don Juan. Besides, they added sagely, Auriol had been known to make short work of philanderers. It could only be a question of some misunderstanding that might easily be arranged by an intelligent person in the confidence of both parties. That, it appeared, was where I came in. I, as Evadne had said, was a useful man to have about.

"Now, my dear Anthony," said Sir Julius, "can't you do something?"

What the deuce was I to do? But first I asked:

"What does Auriol say about it?"

They hadn't broached the subject. They were afraid. I knew what Auriol was. As likely as not she would tell them to go to the devil for their impertinence.

"And she wouldn't be far wrong," said I.

"Of course it seems meddlesome," said Sir Julius, tugging at his white moustache, "but we're fond of Auriol. I've been much more of a father to her than that damned old ass Mountshire"--Evadne, again; though for once in her life she had exercised restraint--"and I hate to see her unhappy. She's a woman who ought to marry, hang it all, and bring fine children into the world. And her twenties won't last for ever--to put it mildly. And here she

is in love with a fine fellow who's in love with her or I'll eat my hat, and--well--don't you see what I mean?"

Oh yes. I saw perfectly. To soothe them, I promised to play the high-class Pandarus to the best of my ability. At any rate, Lady Auriol, having taken me into her confidence months ago, couldn't very well tell me to go to the devil, and, if she did, couldn't maintain the mandate with much show of outraged dignity.

I did not meet her till dinner. She came down in a sort of low cut red and bronze frock without any sleeves--I had never seen so much of her before--and what I saw was exceedingly beautiful. A magnificent creature, with muscular, shapely arms and deep bosom and back like a Greek statue become dark and warm. Her auburn hair crowned her strong pleasant face. As far as appearances went I could trace no sign of the love-lorn maiden. Only from her talk did I diagnose a more than customary unrest. The war was over. Hospitals were closed. Her occupation (like Lackaday's) was gone. England was no place for her. It was divided into two social kingdoms separated by a vast gulf--one jazzing and feasting and otherwise Sodom-and-Gomorrah-izing its life away, and the other growling, envious, sinister, with the Bolshevic devil in its heart. What could a woman with brains and energy do? The Society life of the moment made her sick. A dance to Perdition. The middle classes were dancing, too, in ape-like imitation, while the tradesman class were clinging for dear life on to their short skirts, with legs dangling in the gulf. On the other side, seething masses howling worship of the Goddess of Unreason. Cross the gulf--one would metaphorically be torn to pieces. Remain--no outlet for energy but playing the wild Cassandra. Her pessimism was Tartarean.

"General Lackaday, the last time I saw him, agreed with me that the war was a damned sight better than this."

It was the first time she had mentioned him. Lady Verity-Stewart and I exchanged glances.

She went on. Not a monologue. We all made our comments, protests and what not. But in the theatre phrase we merely fed her, instinctively feeling for the personal note. On ordinary occasions very subtly aware of such tactics, she seemed now to ignore them. She rose to every fly. Public life for women? Parliament? The next election would result in a Labour Government. Women would stand no chance. Labour counted on cajoling the woman's vote. But it would have no truck with women as legislators. If there was one social class which had the profoundest contempt for woman as an intelligent being it was the labouring population.

For Heaven's sake remember, I am only giving you Lady Auriol's views, as expressed over the dinner table. What mine are, I won't say. Anyhow they don't amount to a row of pins.

Lady Auriol continued her Jeremiad. Suppose she did stand for Parliament, and got in for a safe Conservative constituency. What would happen? She would be swept in to the muddiest and most soul-destroying game on God's earth. No, my dear friends, no. No politics for her. Well, what then? we

asked.

"Didn’t you say something about--what was it, dear--Borneo?" asked Lady Verity-Stewart.

"I don’t care where it is, Aunt Selina," cried Lady Auriol. "Anywhere out of this melting-pot of civilization. But you can’t get anywhere. There aren’t any ships to take you. And there’s nowhere worth going to. The whole of this miserable little earth has been exploited."

"Thibet has its lonely spots."

"And it’s polyandrous--so a woman ought to have a good time--" she laughed. "Thanks for the hint. But I’m not taking any. Seriously, however, as you all seem to take such an interest in me, what s a woman like me to do in this welter? Oh, give me the good old war again!"

Lady Verity-Stewart lifted horrified hands. Sir Julius rebuked her unhumorously. Lady Auriol laughed again and the Jeremiad petered out.

"She’s got it rather badly," Charles murmured to me when the ladies had left the dining-room.

But I was not going to discuss Lady Auriol with Charles. I grunted and sipped my port and told a gratified host that I recognized the ’81 Cockburn.

Sir Julius and Lady Verity-Stewart went to bed early after the sacramental game of bridge. Charles, obeying orders, followed soon afterwards. Lady Auriol and I had the field to ourselves.

"Well?" said she.

"Well?" said I.

"You don’t suppose these subtle diplomatists have left us alone to discuss Bolshevism or Infant Welfare?"

There was the ironical gleam in her eyes and twist in her lips that had attracted me since her childhood. I have always liked intelligent women.

"Have they been badgering you?"

"Good Lord, no. But a female baby in a pink sash would see what they’re driving at. Haven’t they been discussing me and Andrew Lackaday?"

"They have," said I, "and they’re perfect dears. They’ve built up a fairy-tale around you and have taken long leases in it and are terribly anxious that the estate shan’t be put into liquidation."

"That’s rather neat," she said.

"I thought so, myself," said I.

Stretched in an arm-chair she looked for some minutes into the glow of the wood fire. Then she turned her head quickly.

"You haven't given me away?"

"My good girl!" I protested, "what do you take me for?"

She laughed. "That's all right. I opened out to you last year about Andrew. You remember? You were very sympathetic. I was in an unholy sort of fog about myself then. I'm in clear weather now. I know my own mind. He's the only man in the world for me. I suppose I've made it obvious. Hence the solicitude of these pet lambs--and your appointment as Investigator. Well, my dear Tony, what do they want to know?"

"They're straining their dear simple ears to catch the strain of wedding bells and they can't do it. So they're worried."

"Well, you can tell them not to worry any longer. There aren't going to be any wedding bells. They've made sentimental idiots of themselves. General Lackaday and I aren't marrying folks. The question hasn't arisen. We're good intimate friends, nothing more. He's no more in love with me than I am with him. Savvy?"

I savvied. But--

"That's for the pet lambs," said I. "What for me?"

"I've already told you."

"And that's the end of it?"

"As far as you are concerned--yes."

"As you will," I said.

I put a log on the fire and took up a book. All this was none of my business, as I had explained to Evadne.

"I'm sorry you're not interested in my conversation," she remarked after a while.

"You gave me to understand that it was over--as far as I was concerned."

"Never mind. I want to tell you something."

I laid down my book and lit a cigar.

"Go ahead," said I.

It was then that she told me of her last interview with Lackaday. Remember I had not yet read his version.

"It’s all pretty hopeless," she concluded.

For myself I knew nothing of the reasons that bade him adopt the attitude of the Mysterious Unknown--except his sensitiveness on the point of his profession. He would rather die than appear before her imagination in the green silk tights of Petit Patou. I asked tentatively whether he had spoken much of his civilian life.

"Very little. Except of his knowledge of Europe. He has travelled a great deal. But of his occupation, family and the rest, I know nothing. Oh yes, he did once say that his father and mother died when he was a baby and that he had no kith or kin in the world. If he had thought fit to tell me more he would have done so. I, of course, asked no questions."

"But all the same," said I, "you’re dying to know the word of the enigma."

She laughed scornfully. "I know it, my friend."

"The deuce you do!" said I, thinking of Petit Patou and wondering how she had guessed. "What is it?"

"A woman of course."

"Did he tell you?" I asked, startled, for that shed a new light on the matter.

"No." She boomed the word at me. "What on earth do you suppose was the meaning of our talk about playing the game?"

"Well, my dear," said I, "if it comes to that, do you think it was playing the game for him, a married man with possibly a string of children, to come down here and make love to you?"

She flared up. "He never made love to me. You’ve no right to say such a thing. If there was any love-making, it was I that made it. Ninety per cent of the love-making in the world is the work of women. And you know it, although you pretend to be shocked. And I’m not ashamed of myself in the least. As soon as I set my eyes on him I said ’That’s the man I want,’ and I soon saw that I could give him what he never had before--and I kept him to me, so that I could give it him. And I gloried in it. I don’t care whether he has ten wives or twenty children. I’m telling you because"--she started up and looked me full in the face--"upon my word I don’t know why--except that you’re a comfortable sort of creature, and if you know everything you’ll be able to deal with the pet lambs." She rose, held out her hand. "You must be bored stiff."

"On the contrary," said I, "I’m vastly interested--and honoured, my dear Auriol. But tell me. As all this sad, mad, glad affair seems to have come to a sudden stop, what do you propose to do?"

"I don’t know," she replied with a half laugh. "What I feel like doing is to set out for Hell by the most adventurous route."

She laughed again, shook hands. "Good night, Tony." And she passed out through the door I held open for her.

I finished my cigar before the fire. It was the most unsatisfactory romance I had come across in a not inexperienced career. Was it the green silk tights or the possible woman in the background that restrained the gallant General? Suppose it was only the former? Would my Lady Auriol jib at them? She was a young woman with a majestic scorn for externals. In her unexpectedness she might cry "Motley's the only wear" and raise him ever higher in his mountebankic path.... I was sorry for both of them. They were two such out-of-the-way human beings--so vivid, so real. They seemed to have a preordained right to each other. He, dry, stern, simple stick of a man needed the flame-like quality that ran through her physical magnificence. She, piercing beneath the glamour of his soldierly achievements, found in him the primitive virility she could fear combined with the spiritual helplessness to which she could come in her full womanly and maternal aid. To her he was as a rock, but a living rock, vitalized by a myriad veins of sensitiveness. To him--well, I knew my Auriol--and could quite understand what Auriol in love could be to any man. Auriol out of love (and in her right mind) had always been good enough for me.

So I mused for a considerable time. Then, becoming conscious of the flatness, staleness and unprofitableness of it all, as far as my elderly selfishness was concerned, I threw my extinct cigar end into the fire, and thanking God that I had come to an age when all this storm and fuss over a creature of the opposite sex was a thing of the past, and yet with an unregenerate pang of regret for manifold what-might-have-beens, I put out the lights and went to bed.

The next day I succeeded by hook or by crook in guiding the pet lambs, Evadne included, in the way they should go. I reported progress to Lady Auriol.

"Good dog," she said.

I returned to London on Monday morning. When next I heard of her, she was, I am thankful to say, not on the adventurous path to the brimstone objective of her predilection, but was fooling about, all by herself, in a five-ton yacht, somewhere around the Outer Hebrides, in the foulest of weather.

In the days of my youth I was the victim of a hopeless passion and meditated suicide. A seafaring friend of mine suggested my accompanying him on his cargo steamer from the Port of London to Bordeaux. It was blazing summer. But I was appallingly sea-sick all the way, and when I set foot on land I was cleansed of all human emotion save that of utter thankfulness that I existed as an entity with an un-queasy stomach. I was cured for good and all.

But a five-ton yacht off the Outer Hebrides in bleak tempests--No, it was too heroic. Even my dear old friend Burton for all his wit and imagination had never devised such a _remedia amoris_, such a remedy for Love Melancholy.

And then came June and with it the manuscript and all the flood of information about the Agence Moignon and Bakkus and Petit Patou and PrØpimpin and Elodie and various other things that I have yet to set down.

Chapter XIV

While Lady Auriol Dayne was rocking about the Outer Hebrides, we find Andrew Lackaday in Paris confronted with the grim necessity of earning a livelihood. His pre-war savings had amounted to no fortune, and in spite of Elodie's economy and occasional earnings with her birds, they were well-nigh spent. The dearness of everything! Elodie wrung her hands. Where once you had change out of a franc, now you had none out of a five-franc note. He could still carry on comfortably for a year, but that would be the end of it.

When he propounded the financial situation, Elodie did not understand.

"I must work," said he.

"But Generals don't work," she protested incredulously.

Even the war had developed little of the Marseilles _gamine's_ conceptions of life. A General--she knew no grades--a modest Brigadier ranking second only to a Field Marshal--was a General. He commanded an army. A military demigod invested with a glamour and glory which, _ipso facto_, of its own essence, provided him with ample wealth. And once a General, always a General. The mere fact of no longer being employed in the command of armies did not matter. The rank remained and with the rank the golden stream to maintain it. According to popular legend the Oriental ascetic who concentrates his gaze on the centre of his body and his thoughts on the syllable "Om" arrives at a peculiar mental condition. So the magic word on which she had so long meditated, had its hypnotic effect on Elodie.

And when he had patiently explained--

"They give you nothing at all for being a General?" she almost screamed.

"Nothing at all," said Andrew.

"Then what's the good of being a General?"

"None that I can see," he replied with his grim smile.

Elodie's illusions fell clattering round about her ears. Not her illusions as to Generals, but her illusions as to Andrew and British military prestige. It was a strange army that no longer acknowledged its high

commanders--a strange country that could scrap them. Were British Generals real, like French Generals, Lyautey and Manoury and Foch before he became _MarØchal?_ She was bitterly disappointed. She had lived for nearly a year in Andrew's glory. Now there seemed to be no shine in it whatever. He wore no uniform. He received no pay. He was a mere civilian. He had to work for his living like any demobilized poilu who returned to his counter or his conductor's step on the tramway. And she had made such a flourish among all her acquaintance over _son mari le gØnØral_. She went off by herself and wept.

The cook whom she had engaged, coming to lay the cloth in the tiny dining-room found her sobbing with her arms on the table. What was the matter with Madame?

"_Ah, ma pauvre Ernestine, je suis bien malheureuse_."

Ernestine could think of only one cause for a lady's unhappiness. Had Monsieur le GØnØral then been making her infidelities? All allowances should be made for the war. On every side she had heard tales of the effects of such long separations. But, on the other hand, she had heard of many reconciliations. Apply a little goodwill--that was all. Monsieur le GØnØral was a man, _comme tout le monde_. She was certain that the object of his warrior fancy was not worth Madame--and he would quickly realize the fact. She only had to make much of him and give him everything he liked to eat. As soon as the stream of words ceased Elodie vehemently denounced the disgusting state of her mind. She must have a foul character to think such things. She bade her haughtily to mind her own business. Why then, asked the outraged Ernestine, did Madame declare she was miserable? To invite sympathy and then reject it did not argue a fine character on the part of Madame. Also when a woman sits down and weeps like a cow, _mon Dieu_, there must be a reason. Perhaps if Monsieur was not at fault, then--

"I order you to be silent," stormed Elodie, interrupting the intolerable suggestion. "My reasons you couldn't possibly understand. Get on with your work and set the table."

She made a dignified exit and returned to the _salon_ where Andrew was writing.

"Ah, these servants--since the war! The insolence of them!"

"What have they been doing now?" he asked sympathetically.

She would not say. Why worry him with such vulgarities? But the housekeeper's life, these days, was not an easy one. "_Tiens_," she cried, with a swift resolve, "I'll tell you all. What you said about yourself, a general only in name, rejected and cast on the world without money made me very unhappy. I didn't want you to see me cry. So I went into the _salle àmanger_--"

And then a dramatic reproduction of the scene. The insolence of the woman! Andrew rose and drew out his pocket-book.

"She shall go at once. What's her wages?"

But Elodie looked at him aghast. What? Dismiss Ernestine? He must be mad. Ernestine, a treasure dropped from Heaven? Didn't he know that servants did not grow like the leaves on the trees in the Champs ElysØes? And cooks--they were worth their weight in gold. In the army he could say to an orderly "_Fiche-moi le camp_," because there were plenty of others. But in civil life--no. She forbade him to interfere in domestic arrangements, the nice conduct of which she had proved herself perfectly capable of determining. And then, in her queer, twisted logic, she said, clutching the lapels of his coat and looking up into his face:

"And it's not true what she said? You have never made me infidelities?"

He passed his delicate hand over her forehead, and smiled somewhat wearily.

"You may be sure, my dear, I have been faithful to you."

She glanced away from him, somewhat abashed. Now and then his big simplicity frightened her. She became dimly aware that the report of the cook's chatter had offended the never comprehended delicacies of his soul. She murmured:

"_Je te demande bien pardon, AndrØ_."

"There's no reason for that, my dear," said he.

She went over to her birds. Andrew resumed his writing. But after a minute or two his pen hung idle in his hand. Yes. He had spoken truly. He had been faithful to her in that he had fled from divine temptation. For her sake he had put the other woman and the glory that she signified out of his life. All through the delicious intercourse, Elodie had hung at the bottom of his heart, a dead-weight, maybe, but one which he could not in honour or common humanity cut off. For Elodie's sake he had held himself in stern restraint, had uttered no word that might be interpreted as that of a lover. As far as Lady Auriol Dayne knew, as far as anyone on this earth knew, his feelings towards her were nothing more than those of a devoted and grateful friend. So does the well-intentioned ostrich, you may say, bury its head and imagine itself invisible. But the ostrich is desperately sincere--and so was Andrew.

Presently he turned.

"If that woman says such vulgarities again, she must go at once."

"I shall see that she has no opportunity," said Elodie.

* * * * *

For a time Andrew sought in France that which he had failed to find in England; but with even less chance of success. The gates to employment in England had been crowded with demobilized officers. Only the fortunate, the

young content with modest beginnings, those with money enough to start new avocations, had pushed through. These had been adventurers like himself. The others had returned to the office or counting-house or broad acres from which they had sprung. In France he found no employment at all; the gates round which the demobilized wistfully gathered, led no whither. As at the War Office, so at military head-quarters in Paris. Brass-hatted friends wrung him warmly by the hand, condoled with his lot, and genially gave him to understand that he stood not a dog's chance of getting in anywhere. Why hadn't he worried the people at home for a foreign billet? There were plenty going, but as to their nature they confessed vagueness. He had put in for several, said he, but had always been turned down. The friends shook their heads. In Paris nothing doing. Andrew walked away sadly. Perhaps a spirit proof against rebuffs, a thick-skinned persistence, might have eventually prevailed in London to set him on some career in the social reconstruction of the world. His record stood, and needed only unblushing flaunting before the eyes of Authority for it to be recognized. But Andrew Lackaday, proud and sensitive, was a poor seeker after favour. All his promotion and his honour had come unsought. He had hated the braggadocio of the rainbow row of ribbons on his khaki tunic, which Army discipline alone forced him to wear. It was Elodie, too, who had fixed into his buttonholes the little red rosette of the Officer of the Legion. That at least he could do for her.... Success, such as it was, before the war, he had attained he knew not how. The big drum of the showman had ever been an engine of abhorrence. Others had put him on the track of things, Elodie, Bakkus.... He had sternly suppressed vulgarity in posters. He had never intrigued like most of his craft for press advertisement. Over and over again had Bakkus said:

"Raise a thousand or two and give it to me or Moignon to play with and we'll boom you into all the capitals of the earth. There's a fortune in you."

But Andrew, to whom publicity was the essence of his calling, would have none of it. He did his work and conducted his life in his own way, earnest and efficient.

In the war, of course, he found his real vocation. But he passed out of the war as unknown to the general public as any elderly Tommy in a Labour battalion. Never a photograph of him had appeared in the illustrated papers. The head of a great Government department, to whom Lady Auriol had mentioned his name, had never heard of it. And when she suggested that the State should hasten to secure the services of such men, he had replied easily:

"Men of his distinction are as thick as blackberries. That's how we won the war."

Unknown to Lackaday she had tried to see what influence she could command. Socially, as the rather wild-headed daughter of an impoverished and obscure Earl, she could do but little. She too was a poor intriguer. She could only demand with blatant vividness. Once on a flying visit to Lord Mountshire, she tried to interest him in the man whom, to her indignation, he persisted in styling her protØgØ. He still, she urged, had friends in high places,

even in the dreadful Government at which he railed.

"Never heard of the man," he growled. "Lackaday--Lackaday--" he shook his white head. "Who was his father?"

She confessed that she didn't know. He was alone in the world. He had sprung from Nowhere. The old Earl refused to take any interest in him. Such fellows always fell on their feet. Besides, he had tried to put in a word for young Ponsonby--and had got snubbed for his pains. He wasn't going to interfere any more.

She learned that the appointment of a soldier would be made to a vacant colonial governorship. A certain general's recommendation would carry weight. She passed the information on to Andrew. This she could do without offending his pride.

"Very sorry, my dear fellow," said the General. "You're the very man for the job. But you know what these Colonial office people are. They will have an old regular."

As a matter of fact they appointed another Brigadier who had started the war with a new Yeomanry commission, a member of a well-known family with a wife who had seen to it that neither his light nor hers should be hidden under a bushel.

In the frantic scramble for place, the inexperienced in the methods of the scrum were as much left out in the cold as a timid old maid at what Americans call a bargain counter. He stood lost behind the throng and his only adviser Lady Auriol stood by his side in similar noble bewilderment.

On his appointment to a Brigade, Bakkus had written:

"I'm almost tempted to make your fortune in spite of yourself. What a sensation! What headlines! 'Famous Variety Artist becomes a General.' Companion pictures in the _Daily Mail_, Petit Patou and Brigadier-General Lackaday. Everybody who had heard of Petit Patou would be mad to hear of General Lackaday, and all who had heard of soldier Andrew would be crazy to know about Petit Patou. You'd wake up in the morning like Byron and find yourself famous. You'd be the darling hero of the British Empire. But you always were a wooden-headed idiot...."

To which Andrew had replied in raging fury, to the vast entertainment of Horatio Bakkus.

All of this to show that, notwithstanding his supreme qualities of personal courage, command and military intuition, Andrew Lackaday as a would-be soldier of fortune proved a complete failure. For him, as he presented himself, the tired world, in its nebulous schemes of reconstruction, had no place.

Every day, when he got home, Elodie would ask:

"_Eh bien?_ Have you found anything?"

And he would say, gaunt and worried, but smiling: "Not yet."

As the days passed her voice grew sharper, until it seemed to carry the reproach of the wife of the labourer out of work. But she never pressed him further. She knew his moods and his queer silences and the inadvisability of forcing his confidence. In spite of her disappointment and disillusion, some of the glamour still invested him. A man of mystery, inspiring a certain awe, he frightened her a little. A No Man's Land, unknown, terrifying, on which she dared not venture a foot, lay between them. He was the kind and courteous ghost of the Sergeant and the Major with whom she had made high festival during the war.

At last, one afternoon, he cast the bomb calmly at her feet.

"I've just been to see Moignon," said he.

"_Eh bien?_"

"He says there will be no difficulty."

She turned on him her coarse puzzled face. "No difficulty in what?"

"In going back to the stage."

She sank upon the yellow and brown striped sofa by the wall and regarded him open-mouthed.

"_Tu dis?_"

"I must do like all other demobilized men--return to my trade."

Elodie nearly fainted.

For months the prospect had hung over them like a doom; ever since the brigade which he commanded in England had dissolved through demobilization, and he, left in the air, had applied disastrously to the War Office for further employment. He had seen others, almost his equal in rank, swept relentlessly back to their old uninspiring avocations. A Bayard of a Colonel of a glorious battalion of a famous regiment, a fellow with decorations barred two or three times over, was now cooped up in his solicitor's office in Lothbury, E.C., breaking his heart over the pettifoggery of conveyances. A gallant boy, adjutant at twenty-two in the company of which he was captain, a V.C. and God knows what else besides, was back again in the close atmosphere of the junior department of a Public School. One of his old seconds in command was resuming his awful frock-coated walk down the aisles of a suburban drapery store. The flabby, soulless octopus of civil life reached out its tentacles and dragged all these heroic creatures into its maw of oblivion. Then another, a distinguished actor, and a more distinguished soldier, a man with a legendary record of fearlessness, had sloughed his armour and returned to the theatre. That, thought he, was his own case. But no. The actor took up the high place of histrionic fame which he had abandoned. He was the

exponent of a great art. The dual supremacy brought the public to his feet. His appearance was the triumph both of the artist and the soldier. No. He, Lackaday, held no such position. He recalled his first talk with Bakkus, in which he had insisted that his mountebanking was an art, and with his hard-gained knowledge of life rejected the sophistry. To hold an audience spell-bound by the interpretation of great human emotion was a different matter from making a zany of oneself and, upside down, playing a one-stringed fiddle behind one's head, and uttering degraded sounds through painted grinning lips in order to appeal to the inane sense of humour of the grocer and his wife. No. There was all the difference in the world. The comparison filled him less with consolation than with despair. The actor, mocking the octopus below, had calmly stepped from one rock pinnacle to another. He himself, Andrew Lackaday, in the depths, felt the irresistible grip of the horror twining round his middle.

Put him in the midst of a seething mass of soldiery, he could command, straighten out chaos into mechanical perfection of order, guide willing men unquestioned into the jaws of Hell; put him on the stage of a music-hall and he could keep six plates in the air at a time. Outside these two spheres he could, as far as the world would try him, do nothing. He had to live. He was young, under forty. The sap of life still ran rich in his veins. And not only must he live, but the woman bound to him by a hundred ties, the woman woven by an almost superstitious weft into his early career, the woman whose impeccable loyalty as professional partner had enabled him to make his tiny fortune, the woman whose faithful affection had persisted through the long years of the war's enforced neglect, the woman who without his support--unthinkable idea--would perish from inanition--he knew her--Elodie must live, in the comfort and freedom from anxiety to which the years of unquestioning dependence had accustomed her. Cap and bells again; there was no other way out.

After all, perhaps it was the best and most honest. Even if he had found a semi-military or administrative career abroad, what would become of Elodie? Not in a material sense, of course. The same provision would be made for her welfare as during the last five years. But the abnormal state of war had made normal their separation. In altered circumstances would she not have the right to cry out against his absence? Would she not be justified in the eyes of every right-thinking man? Yet the very conditions of such an appointment would prevent her accompanying him. The problem had appeared insoluble. Desperately he had put off the solution till the crisis should come. But he had felt unhappy, shrinking from the possibility of base action. The thought of Elodie had often paralysed his energy in seeking work. Now, however, he could face the world with a clear conscience. He had cut himself adrift from Lady Auriol and her world. Fate linked him for ever to Elodie. All that remained was to hide his honours and his name under the cloak of Petit Patou.

It took him some time to convince Elodie of the necessity of returning to the old life. She repeated her cry that Generals do not perform on the music-hall stage. The decision outraged her sense of the fitness of things. She yielded as to an irresistible and unreasoning force.

"And I then? Must I tour with you, as before?" she asked in dismay, for she

was conscious of increased coarseness of body and sluggishness of habit.

He frowned. "It is true I might find another assistant."

But she quickly interrupted the implied reproach. She could not fail him in her duty.

"No, no, I will go. But you will have to teach me all over again. I only asked for information."

"We'll begin rehearsals then as soon as possible," he replied with a smile.

A few days afterwards, Bakkus, who had been absent from Paris, entered the _salon_, with his usual unceremoniousness, and beheld an odd spectacle. The prim chairs had been piled on the couch by the wall, the table pushed into a corner, and on the vacant space, Elodie, in her old dancer's practising kit, bodice and knickerbockers, once loose but now skin tight to grotesqueness, and Andrew in under vest and old grey flannels, were perspiringly engaged with pith balls in the elementary art of the juggler. Elodie, on beholding him, clutched a bursting corsage with both hands, uttered a little squeak and bolted like an overfed rabbit. Bakkus laughed out loud.

"What the devil----? Is this the relaxation of the great or the aberrations of the asylum?"

Andrew grinned and shook hands. "My dear old chap. I'm so glad you've come back. Sit down." He shifted the table which blocked the way to the two arm-chairs by the stove. "Elodie and I are getting into training for the next campaign." He mopped his forehead, wiped his hands and, with the old acrobat instinct, jerked the handkerchief across the room. "You're looking very well," said he.

"I'm splendid," said Bakkus.

The singer indeed had a curiously prosperous and distinguished appearance, due not only to a new brown suit and clean linen and well-fitting boots, but also to a sleekness of face and person which suggested comfortable living. His hair, now quite white, brushed back over the forehead, was neatly trimmed. His sallow cheeks had lost their gaunt hollows, his dark eyes, though preserving their ironical glitter, had lost the hunger-lit gleam of wolfishness.

"Have you signed a Caruso contract for Covent Garden?" laughed Andrew.

"I've done better. At Covent Garden you've got to work like the devil for your money. I've made a contract with my family--no work at all. Agreement--just to bury the hatchet. Theophilus--that's the Archdeacon--performed the Funeral Service. He has had a stroke, poor chap. They sent for me."

"Elodie told me," said Andrew.

"He has been very good to me during the war. Otherwise I should have been reduced to picking up cigar ends with a pointed stick on the Boulevards--and a damn precarious livelihood too, considering the shortage of tobacco in this benighted country. He took it into his venerable head that he was going to die and desired to see me. Voltaire remorse on his death-bed, you know."

"I fail to follow," said the literal Andrew.

"All his life he had lived an unbeliever in ME. Now your military intelligence grasps it. My brother Ronald, the runner of the Pawnee Indian, head-flattening system of education, and his wife, especially his wife, the daughter of a lay brother of a bishop who has got a baronetcy for making an enormous fortune out of the war, wouldn't have me at any price. But Theophilus must have muttered some incantation which frightened them, so they surrendered. Poor old Theophilus and I had a touching meeting. He's about as lonely a thing as you could wish to meet. He married an American heiress, who died about eight years ago, and he's as rich as Croesus. We're bosom friends now. As for Mrs. Ronald I sang her songs of Araby including Gounod's 'Ave Maria' with lots of tremolo and convinced her that I'm a saintly personage. It's my proud boast that, on my account, Ronald and herself never spoke for three days. I spent a month in the wilds of Westmorland with them, and as soon as Theophilus got on the mend--he's already performing semi-Archidiaconal functions--I put my hands over my eyes and fled. My God, what a crowd! Give me a drink. I've got four weeks' arrears to make up."

Andrew went into the _salle àmanger_ and returned with brandy, syphon and glasses. Helping Bakkus he asked:

"And now, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, my friend, absolutely nothing. I wallow in the ill-gotten matrimonial gains of Theophilus and Ronald. I wallow modestly, it is true. The richer strata of mire I leave to hogs with whom I'm out of sympathy. You'll have observed that I'm a man of nice discrimination. I choose my hogs. It is the Art of Life."

"Well, here's to you," said Andrew, lifting up his glass.

"And to you."

Bakkus emptied his glass at a draught, breathed a sigh of infinite content and held it out to be refilled.

"And now that I've told you the story of my life, what about you? What's the meaning of this--" he waved a hand--"this reversion to type?"

"You behold Petit Patou redivivus," said Andrew.

Bakkus regarded him in astonishment.

"But, my dear fellow, Generals can't do things like that."

"That’s the cry of Elodie."

"She’s a woman with whom I’m in perfect sympathy," said Bakkus.

Elodie entered, cooler, less dishevelled, in her eternal wrapper. She rushed up to Bakkus and wrung both his hands, overjoyed to see him. He must pardon her flight, but really--she was in a costume--and not even till she took it off did she know that it was split--Oh, _mon Dieu!_ Right across. With a sweep of the hand she frankly indicated the locality of the disaster. She laughed. Well, it was good that he had arrived at last. He would be able to put some sense into AndrØ. He a General, to go back to the stage. It was crazy! He would give AndrØ advice, good counsel, that was what he needed! How AndrØ could win battles when he was so helpless in other things, she could not understand. She seized him by the shoulders and smiled into his face.

"_Mais toi qui es si intelligent, dis quelque chose_."

"To say anything, my dear Elodie, while you are speaking," remarked Bakkus, "is beyond the power of mortal man. But now that you are silent I will say this. It is time for _dØjeuner_. I am intoxicated with the sense of pecuniary plenitude, I invite you both to eat with me on the Boulevards where we can discuss these high matters."

"But it is you that are crazy," cried Elodie, gasping at the unprecedented proposal which in itself shook, like an earthquake, her intimately constructed conception of Horatio Bakkus. And on the Boulevards, too! Her soul rose up in alarm. "You are wanting in your wits. One can’t eat anywhere--even at a restaurant of the second class--under a hundred francs for three persons."

Bakkus, with an air Louis Seize, implied that one, two or three hundred francs were as dirt in his fingers. But Elodie would have none of it. She would be ashamed to put so much money in her stomach.

"I have," said she, "for us two, eggs _au beurre noir_ and a _blanquette de veau_, and what is enough for two is enough for three. And you must stay and eat with us as always."

"I wonder," said Bakkus, "whether Andrew realizes what a pearl you are."

So he stayed to lunch and repeated the story of his good fortune, to which Elodie listened enraptured as to a tale of hidden treasure of which he was the hero, but never a word could he find in criticism of Andrew’s determination. The quips and causticities that a couple of years ago would have flowed from his thin, ironical lips, were arrested unformulated at the back of his brain. He became aware, not so much of a change as of a swift development of the sterner side of Andrew’s character. Of himself he could talk sardonically enough. He could twit Elodie with her foibles in his old way. But of Andrew with his weather-beaten mug of a face marked with new, deep lines of thought and pain, sitting there courteous and simple, yet preoccupied, strangely aloof, the easy cynic felt curiously afraid. And

when Elodie taxed him with pusillanimity he glanced at Andrew.

"He has made up his mind," he replied. "Some people's minds are made up of sand and water. Others of stuff composed of builders' weird materials that harden into concrete. Others again have iron bars run through the mass--reinforced concrete. That's Andrew. It's a beast of a mind to deal with, as we have often found, my dear. But what would you have? The animal is built that way."

"You flatter me," grinned Andrew, "but I don't see what the necessity of earning bread and butter has to do with a reinforced-concrete mind."

"It's such an undignified way of earning it," protested Elodie.

"I think," said Bakkus, "it will take as much courage for our poor friend to re-become Petit Patou, as it took for him to become General Lackaday."

Andrew's face suddenly glowed and he shot out his long arm with his bony wrists many inches from his cuff and put his delicate hand on Bakkus's shoulder.

"My dear fellow, why can't you always talk like that?"

"I'm going to," replied Bakkus, pausing in the act of lighting one of Elodie's special reserve of pre-war cigars. "Don't you realize I'm just transplanted from a forcing bed of High Anglican platitude?"

But Elodie shrugged her fat shoulders in some petulance.

"You men always stick together," she said.

Chapter XV

The unventilated dressing-room of the Olympia Music-Hall in Marseilles reeked of grease paint, stale human exhalations, the acrid odour, creeping up the iron stairs, of a mangy performing lion, and all manner of unmentionable things. The month of June is not the ideal month to visit Marseilles, even if one is free to pass the evening at a cafØ table on the CannebiŁre, and there is a breeze coming in from over the sea; but in copper-skied thundery weather, the sirocco conditions of more southerly latitudes, especially when one is cooped up in a confined and airless space, Marseilles in June can be a gasping inferno. Andrew, in spite of hard physical training, was wet through. His little white-jacketed dresser, says he, perspired audibly. There was not so much air in the dressing-room as tangible swelter.

He sat by the wooden table, in front of a cracked and steaming mirror, the contents of his make-up box laid out before him, and (save for one private

dress rehearsal carried out in surroundings of greater coolness and comfort) transformed himself, for the first time, from General Lackaday into the mountebank clown, Petit Patou. The electric lights that should have illuminated the mirror were not working--he had found, to his discomfort, that manifold things in post-war France refused to work--and two candles fainting into hopeless curves took their place. Anxiously over a wet skin he painted the transfiguring lines, from lip corner to ear, from nostril to eye, from eye to brow, once the mechanical hand-twist of a few moments--now the painfully concentrated effort of all his faculties.

He finished at last. The swart and perspiring dresser dried his limbs, held out the green silk high-heeled tights which reached to his armpits. Then the grotesque short-sleeved jacket. Then the blazing crimson wig rising to the point of its extravagant foot height. He felt confined within a red-hot torture-skin, a Nessus garment specially adapted to the use of discarded Brigadier-Generals. He sat on the straight-backed chair and looked round the nine foot square flyblown room, with its peeling paper and its strained, sooty skylight, which all the efforts of himself and the dresser had failed to open. It was Mademoiselle Chose, the latter at last remembered, an imperious lady with a horror of draughts and the ear (and--who knows?--perhaps the heart of the management) who had ordered it, in the winter, to be nailed down from the outside. As proof, the broken cords.

"Tell the manager that if it is not unnailed tomorrow, I shall smash a hole in it," said Andrew.

It did not matter now. In a few moments he would be summoned from the suffocating den, and then, his turn over, he would dress quickly and emerge into the open air. Meanwhile, however, he gasped in the heat and the heavy odour of the place; his head ached with an intolerable pain round his temples and at the back of his eyeballs; and acute nervousness gripped his vitals.

Presently the call-boy put his head in the doorway. Andrew rose, descended the iron stairs to the wings. Instinctively he went to the waiting table, covered with green velvet and gold, on which lay piled the once familiar properties--the one-stringed fiddle, the pith balls, the rings, the cigar, the matches, the trick silk hat, the cards, the coins, and the rest of the juggler’s apparatus, and methodically checked them. In the visible shaft of brilliantly lit stage he could see the back of the head and the plump shoulders and tournure of a singer rendering in bravura fashion the Jewel Song from "Faust." The stillness whence arose this single flood of sound seemed almost uncanny. The superheated air thickened with hot human breath and tobacco smoke stood stagnant like a miasma in the unventilated wings and back of the stage. The wild beast smell of the lion, although his cage had been hurriedly wheeled out through the scenery door, still persisted and caught the throat, and in the dim white-washed bareness, a few figures, stagehands in shirt-sleeves, and vague pale men in hard felt hats tiptoed about like perspiring ghosts. One of the latter approached Andrew. Monsieur Patou need have no fear, he whispered. Everything was arranged--the beautiful ballroom interior--the men who were to set the stage had their orders, also the lime-light operators. Andrew nodded, already having given

explicit instructions. The singer vanished from the quivering streak of stage, in order to give her finale close to the footlights. She ceased. Rapturous applause. She appeared panting, perspiring, beaming in the wings; went on again to bow her acknowledgments, amid hoarse cries of "_bis, bis!_" She reappeared, glowing vaporously in her triumph, and spread out her arms before the pallid man in the hard felt hat.

"Well! What did I say? You made difficulties about offering me an engagement. I told you I could make these little birds eat out of my hand. You hear?"--the clamour would have been perceptible to a deaf mute--"They are mad about me. I go on again."

"_Mais non, madame_. Three songs. That is your contract. The programme is long."

So spake the assistant manager. But the lady snapped her fingers, heard like a pistol shot amid the uproar, and made a vast gesture with her arms.

"If I am not allowed to have my encore, I tear up my contract."

The assistant manager released himself from responsibility, yielded to woman’s unreason, and the lady, who had arranged the matter with the leader of the orchestra, returned in contemptuous triumph to the stage.

Elodie, meanwhile, had descended and stood by Andrew’s side. She wore a very low-cut and short-skirted red evening frock, so tight that she seemed to ooze distressingly from every aperture. A red rose drooped in her thick black hair. Like the lank green-clad Andrew, she betrayed anxiety beneath her heavy make-up. The delay to their turn, prolonging her suspense, caused her to stamp her foot with annoyance.

"The _sale grue!_ and she sings like a duck."

"She pleases the audience," whispered Andrew.

"And ruins our reception. It is the last straw."

"It can’t be helped," said Andrew.

The singer gave as her encore a song from "La Traviata." She certainly had the mechanical technique so beloved by French audiences. That of Olympia listened spell-bound to her trills and when she had finished broke once more into enthusiastic cheering, calling and recalling her two or three times. At last the curtain came finally down and she disappeared up the iron staircase.

The interior backcloth and wings provided for Les Petit Patou were let down, stage hands set the table and properties, Andrew and Elodie anxiously supervising, and when all was clear the curtain went up. Andrew went on alone and grinned familiarly, his old tradition, before the sea of faces. A few faint hand-claps instead of the old expectant laughter welcomed him. A generation had apparently risen that knew not Petit Patou. His heart sank. The heat of the footlights shimmered like a furnace and smote him with

sudden lassitude. He began his tricks. Took his tiny one-stringed broomstick handled fiddle and played it with his hands encased in grotesquely long cotton gloves. Presently, with simulated impatience, he drew off the gloves, threw them, conjurer fashion, vanishing into the air, and then resumed his violin to find himself impeded now and then by various articles cunningly fixed to his attire, one after another of which he disposed of like the gloves. Finally in his perplexity he made as if to undo his tights (a certain laugh in former days) but thinking better of it, threw fiddle and bow as in disgust across the stage into the wings, where they were caught by the waiting Elodie. The act, once arousing merriment, fell flat. Andrew's heart sank lower. In itself the performance, which he had carried through with skilful cleanness, contained nothing risible; for laughter it depended solely on a personal note of grotesquerie, of exaggerated bewilderment and impatience and of appealingly idiotic self-satisfaction when each impediment was discovered and discarded. Had he lost that personal touch, merely gone through his conjuring with the mechanical precision of a soldier on parade? Heavens, how he hated himself and his aching head and the audience and the lay out of futile properties! Elodie appeared. The performance must continue. He threw into it all his energy. Elodie gave him her old loyal support. They did their famous cigar trick, developed from the act of PrØpimpin. He had elaborated much of the comic business. The new patter, with up-to-date allusions, had resulted from serious conclave with Horatio Bakkus, whose mordant wit supplied many a line that should have convulsed the house. But the house refused to be convulsed. His look of vacant imbecility when one after another of a set of plates with which he juggled, disappeared, being fastened to an elastic contrivance to his back, and his expression of reproach when, turning Elodie round, he discovered her wearing the plates as a sort of basque, which once excited, on no matter what stage, rolling guffaws of mirth, now passed by unappreciated.

The final item in the programme was one invented and brought to mechanical perfection just before the war broke out. He insisted on playing his cigar box and broom-handle fiddle in spite of Elodie's remonstrances. There was a pretty squabble. He pulled and she pulled, with the result that both bow and handle, by a tubular device, aided by a ratchet apparatus for the strings, assumed gigantic proportions. Petit Patou prevailing, after an almost disastrous fall, perched his great height on chair superimposed on table, and, with his long lean legs and arms, looking like a monstrous and horrible spider, began to work the heavy bow across the long strings. He had rehearsed it to perfection. In performance, something happened. His artist's nerve had gone. His fingers fumbled impotently for the stops. His professional experience saved a calamitous situation. With an acrobat's stride he reached the stage, telescoped fiddle and bow to normal proportions, and after a lightning nod to the _chef d'orchestre_, played the Marseillaise. At the end there was half-hearted perfunctory applause. A light hearted section of every audience applauds anything. But mingled with it there came from another section a horrible sibilant sound, the stage death warrant of many an artist's dreams, the modern down-turned thumb of the Roman populace demanding a gladiator's doom.

The curtain fell. Blank silence now from its further side. A man swiftly bundled together the properties and drew them off. A tired looking man in

evening dress, with a hideously painted face and long waxed moustaches, stood in the wings amid performing dogs, some free, some in basket cages, and amid the waiting clutter of apparatus that at once was rushed upon the stage. Andrew and Elodie moved clear and at the bottom of the iron staircase he motioned to her to ascend first. She clutched him by the arm and gulped down a sob.

"Mon pauvre vieux!"

He tried to smile. "Want of habit. We'll get it all back soon. _Voyons_"--he took her fat chin in his hand and turned up her face, on which make-up, perspiration and tears melted into one piteous paste. "This is not the way that battles are won."

On the landing they separated. Andrew entered his sweltering dressing-room and gave himself over to the little dresser who had just turned out the dog-trainer in his shabby evening suit.

"Monsieur had a good reception?"

"Good enough," said Andrew, stretching himself out for the slipping off of his tights.

"Ah," said the intuitive little man in the white jacket. "It is the war. Audiences are no longer the same. They no longer care for subtlety. Monsieur heard the singer before his turn? Well. Before the war Olympia wouldn't have listened to her. One didn't pay to hear a bad gramophone. And, on the other hand, a performance really artistic"--the little man sighed--"it was heart-breaking."

Andrew let him talk; obviously the hisses had mounted from the wings to the dressing-room corridors; the man meant well and kindly. When he had dressed and appeared in his own Lackaday image, he put a twenty-franc note into the dresser's hand with a "Thank you, my friend," and marched out and away into the comparatively fresh air of the sulphurous night. He lit a cigarette and sat down at the corner of a little obscure cafØ, commanding a view of the stage-door and waited for Elodie. His nervousness, even his headache, had gone. He felt cold and grim and passionless, like a man measuring himself against fate.

When Elodie came out, a while later, he sat her down at the table, and insisted on her drinking a _Grog AmØricain_ to restore her balance. But iced rum and water could not medicine an overwrought soul. In her native air, nothing could check her irrepressibility of expression. She had to spend her fury with the audience. In all her life never had she encountered such imbecility--such bestial stupidity. Like the dresser, she upbraided the war. It had changed everything. It had changed the heart of France. She, Marseillaise of the Marseillais, was ashamed of being of Marseilles. Once the South was warm and generous and responsive. Now it was colder than Paris. She had never imagined that the war could press like a dead hand on the heart of the people of Provence. Now she knew it was true what Bakkus had once said--she had been very angry, but he was right--that through the sunny nature of every child of the Midi swept the

mistral.

She was not very consecutive or coherent or logical. She sought clamorously for every evil influence, postwar, racial, political, that could account for the frozen failure of the evening's performance. No thought disloyal to AndrØ hovered on the outskirts of her mind. He perceived it, greatly touched. When she paused in her vehement outburst, he leaned towards her, elbow on table, and his delicate hand at the end of his long bony wrist held up as a signal of arrest:

"The fault is not that of France, or Marseilles, my dear Elodie. Perhaps the war may have something to do with it. But the fault is mine."

She waved away so insane a suggestion. Went into details. How could it be his fault when the night's tricks were as identical with the tricks which used to command applause as two reproductions of the same cinema film? As for the breakdown of the new trick with the elongated violin and bow, she had seen where the mechanism had not worked properly. A joint had stuck; the audience had seen it too; an accident which could happen anywhere; that had nothing to do with the failure of the entertainment. The failure lay in the mental and moral condition of the degraded post-war audience. For all her championing, Andrew shook his head sadly.

"No. Your cinema analogy won't hold. The fault's in me, and I'm sorry, my dear."'

He tried to explain. She tried to understand. It was hopeless. He knew that he had lost, and had not yet recovered, that spiritual or magnetic contact with his audience which is the first element in artistic success, be the artistry never so primitive. The audience, he realized full well, had regarded him as a mechanical figure executing mechanical antics which in themselves had no particular claim on absorbing human interest. The eternal appeal, the "held me with his eye" of the Ancient Mariner, was wanting. And the man trained in the school of war saw why.

They walked to their modest hostelry. He had shrunk from the great hotels where the lounges were still full of men in khaki going or coming from overseas--among whom he would surely find acquaintances. But he no longer desired to meet them. He had cut himself clean adrift from the old associations. He told me that Bakkus and I were his only correspondents. Henceforth he would exist solely as Petit Patou, flinging General Lackaday dead among the dead things of war.... Besides, the great hotels of Marseilles cost the eyes of your head. The good old days of the comfortable car and inexpensive lodging had gone apparently for ever, and he had to fall back on the travel and accommodation of his early struggling days.

Elodie continued the discussion of the disaster. His face wore its wry grin of discomfiture; but he said little. They must go on as they had begun. Perhaps things would right themselves. He would lose his loathing of his mountebank trade and thus win back the sympathy of his audience.

Before they separated for the night she flung her arm protectingly round him and kissed him.

"They shall applaud you, _mon vieux_, I promise you."

He laughed. Again her faith touched him deeply.

"You have not changed since our first meeting in the Restaurant Garden at Avignon. You are always my mascot, Elodie!"

The menacing thunder broke in the night, and all the next day it rained pitilessly. Two or three morning hours they spent at the music-hall, rehearsing, so that no physical imperfection should mar the evening performance. The giant violin worked with the precision of a Stradivarius. All that human care could do was done. They drove back to the hotel to lunch. Elodie lounged for the rest of the afternoon in her room, with a couple of love-birds for company--the rest of the aviary in the Saint-Denis flat being under the guardianship of Bakkus; and Andrew, with his cleared dressing-table for a desk, brought up-to-date the autobiographical manuscript which for the past few months had solaced so many hours of enforced leisure. Then they dined and proceeded to the music-hall, Elodie defiant, with a flush on her cheek, Andrew with his jaw set in a sort of hopeless determination.

The preparations of the preceding evening repeated themselves. The rain had slightly cooled the air, but the smell of drains and humanity and leaky gas-pipes and the mangy lion, still caught at Andrew's throat. The little dresser, while investing him in the hated motley, pointed proudly to the open skylight. He himself had mounted, at great personal peril, to the roof. One was not a Chasseur Alpin for nothing. O yes, he had gone all through the war. He had the military medal, and four chevrons. Had Monsieur Patou seen any service? Like everybody else, said Andrew. It was good to get back to civil life and one's ordinary tasks, said the dresser whom the change in the weather perhaps had rendered more optimistic. Was not Monsieur Patou glad to return to the stage? A man's work, what? The war was for savages and wild beasts--not for human beings. Andrew let him talk on, wondering idly how he had sloughed his soldier's life without a regret. He stood up, once more, in his zany garb, and, looking in the mirror, lost sight of himself for a poignant second while the dressing-room changed into an evil-smelling dug-out, dark save for one guttering candle stuck in a bottle, and in the shadows he saw half a dozen lean, stern faces lit with the eyes of men whom he was sending forth to defy death. And every one of them hung upon his words as though they were a god's. The transient vision faded, and he became aware again of the grotesque and painted clown gibbering meaninglessly out of the glass.

He strode down the iron stairs. There was the table of properties waiting in the wings. There came Elodie to join him. There, in the fiercely lighted strip of stage, the back, cut by the wing, of the singer with the voice of the duck, ending the "Jewel Song." Then came the applause, the now undisputed encore, the weary nervous wait.... Such had been his life night after night in unconsidered, undreamed-of monotony--before the war...such would be his life henceforward--changeless, deadly, appalling.

At last, he went on. Through the mysterious psychological influence which

one audience has on another, his reception was even more frigid than before. Elodie made her entrance. The house grew restless, inattentive, Andrew flogged his soul until he seemed to sweat his heart's blood. Here and there loud talking and hoarse laughter rose above the buzz and rustle of an unappreciative audience. Elodie's breast heaved and her face grew pallid beneath its heavy paint, but her eyes were bright.

"_Allons toujours_," Andrew whispered.

But in the famous cigar act he missed, for the first time since the far off rehearsals after the death of PrØpimpin, when the fault was due to Elodie's lack of skill. But now, she threw it fair. It was he who missed. The lighted cigar smote him on the cheek. The impossibility of the occurrence staggered him for a second. But a second on the stage is an appreciable space of time, sufficient for the audience to pounce on his clumsiness, to burst into a roar of jeering laughter, to take up the cruelty of the hiss.

But before he could do anything Elodie, coarse and bulging out of her short red bodice and skirt, her features contorted with anger, was in front of the footlights, defying the house.

"_Lâches!_" she cried.

The word which no Frenchman can hear unperturbed cut the clamour like a trumpet call. There was sudden silence.

"Yes. Cowards. You make me ashamed that I am of Marseilles. To you a demobilized hero is nothing. But instead of practising his tricks during the war to amuse you, he has been fighting for his country. And he has earned this." She flashed from her bosom a white-enamelled cross depending from a red ribbon. "_Voilà_ Not _Chevalier_--but _Officier de la LØgion d'Honneur!_" With both pudgy arms outstretched she held the audience for the tense moment. "And from simple soldier to General of Brigade. And that is the Petit Patou whom you insult." She threatened them with the cross. "You insult France!"

Reaction followed swift on her lightning speech. The French audience, sensitive to the dramatic and the patriotic, burst into tumultuous acclamation. Elodie smiled at them triumphantly and turned to Andrew, who stood at the back of the stage, petrified, his chin in the air, at the full stretch of his inordinate height, his eyes gleaming, his long thin lips tightened so that they broke the painted grin, his hands on his hips.

Now if Elodie had carried out the plan developed during the night she could then and there have died happily. Exulting in her success, she tripped up the stage to Andrew, the clasp of the decoration between finger and thumb, hoping to pin it on his breast. The applause dropped, the house hovering for an instant on the verge of anti-climax. But Andrew, with a flash of rage and hatred, waved her away, and strode down to the footlights, tearing off his grotesque wig and revealing his shock of carroty hair. His soul was sick with horror. Only the swift silence made him realize that he was bound to address the audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "I thank you for your generosity to me as a soldier. But I am here to try to merit your approbation as an artist. For what has just happened I must ask you to pardon a woman’s heart."

He remaned for a while glaring at them. Then, when the applause came to an end, he bowed, half ironically and gave a quick, imperious order, at which the curtain was rung down amid an uproar of excitement. He strode into the wings followed by Elodie starry-eyed, and stood panting. The curtain rose as if automatically. The manager thrust him towards the stage.

"They want you," he cried.

"They can go to the devil," said Andrew.

Regardless of the clamour, he stalked with Elodie to the foot of the iron stairs. On their way they passed the waxed moustachioed trainer of the performing dogs.

"A good _coup de thØâre_, Madame," he remarked jealously.

Andrew glowered down on him.

"You say, Monsieur----?"

But the dog trainer meeting the eyes burning in the painttd face, thought it best to say nothing, and Andrew mounted the stairs. Elodie followed him into his dressing-room palpitating with excitement and perplexity and clutching both his arms looked wildly into his face.

"You are not pleased with me?"

For a moment or two he regarded her with stupid hostility; then, getting a grip on himself, he saw things from her point of view and realized her wit and her courage and her devotion. It was no fault of hers that she had no notion of his abhorrence of the scene.

He smiled.

"It is only you who could have dared," he said.

"I told you last night they should applaud you."

"And last night I told you you are always my mascot."

"If it only weren’t true that you love me no longer," said Elodie.

The dresser entered. Elodie slipped out. Andrew made a step, after her to the threshold.

"What the devil did she mean by that?" said he, after the manner of men.

Chapter XVI

She did not repeat the reproach, nor did Andrew put to her the question which he had asked himself. The amicable placidity unruffled by quarrel, which marked their relations, was far too precious to be disturbed by an unnecessary plumbing of emotional depths. As far as he could grapple with psychological complexities, there had been nothing between them, through all the years, of the divine passion. She had come to him disillusioned and weary. He had come to her with a queer superstitious gratitude for help in the past and a full recognition of present sympathy and service. As the French say, they had made together _un bon mØnage_. Save for a few half-hysterical days during the war--and in that incomprehensible pre-war period at the end of which the birds came to her rescue, there had been little talk of love and dreams of delight and the rest of the vaporous paradise of the mutually infatuated. He could not manifest, nor did she demand, a lover's ardour. It had all been as comfortable and satisfactory as you please. And now, at the most irrelevant moment, according to his masculine mind, came this cry of the heart.

But was it of the heart? Did it not rather proceed from childish disappointment at his lack of enthusiastic praise of her splendid exploit? As I say, he judged it prudent to leave the problem unsolved. Of the exploit itself, needless to remark, she talked interminably. Generous and kind-hearted, he agreed with her arguments. Of the humiliation she had wrought for him, he allowed her to have no notion.

He shivered all night at the degradation of his proudest honour. It had been gained, not as one of a batch of crosses handed over to the British military authorities for distribution, but on the field. He had come, with a handful of men, to the relief of a sorely pressed village held by the French; somehow he had rallied the composite force, wiped out two or three nests of machine guns and driven out the Germans; as officer in command he had consolidated the village, so that, when the French came up, he had handed it over to them as a victor. A French general had pinned the cross on his breast on a day of wind and rain and bursting shell, on a vast plain of unutterable devastation. The upholding of it before the mob of Marseilles had been a profanation. In these moments of anguished amazement he had suffered as he had never suffered in his life before. And he had been helpless. Before he realized what was being done, Elodie, in her tempestuous swiftness, had done it. It was only when she came to fix the cross on his breast that his soul sprang to irresistible revolt. He could have taken her by the throat and wrung it, and flung her away dead.

Thus, they were infinite leagues asunder. She met what amounted to wearily indulgent forgiveness when she had fully expected to reap the golden meed of heroism.

The next morning, she went about silent, perplexed, unhappy. By her stroke of genius she had secured for him a real success. If he had allowed her to crown the dramatic situation by pinning on the cross, his triumph had been

such as the stage had never seen.

"Why didn’t you let me do it?" she asked.

"To complete a work of art," said he, "is always a mistake. You must leave something to the imagination."

"But I did right. Tell me I did right."

Denial would have been a dagger thrust through a loyal heart.

"You acted, my dear," said he, "like a noble woman."

And she was aware of a shell which she could not pierce. From their first intimate days, she had always felt him aloof from her; as a soldier during the war she had found him the counterpart of the millions of men who had heroically fought; as an officer of high rank, as a General, she had stood, in her attitude towards him, in uneducated awe; as a General demobilized and a reincarnation of Petit Patou, he had inspired her with a familiarity bred not of contempt--that was absurd--but of disillusion. And now, to her primitive intelligence, he loomed again as an incomprehensible being actuated by a moral network of motives of which she had no conception.

He escaped early from the little hotel and wandered along the quays encumbered with mountains of goods awaiting transport, mighty crates of foodstuffs, bales of hay, barrels of wine from Algiers. Troops and sailors of all nations mingled with the dock employees who tried to restore order out of chaos. Calm goods trains whistled idly by the side of ships or on sidings, the engine drivers lounging high above the crowd in Olympian indifference. The broken down organization had nothing to do with them. Here, in the din and the clatter and the dust and the smell of tar and other sea-faring things reeking shorewards under the blazing sun, Andrew could hide himself from the reputable population of the town. In the confusion of a strange world he could think. His life’s unmeaningness overwhelmed him; he moved under the burden of its irony. In that she had hurled insulting defiance at a vast, rough audience, Elodie had done a valiant thing. She had done it for love of him. His failure to respond had evoked her reproach. But the very act for which she claimed due reward was a stab to the heart of any lingering love.

And yet, he must go on. There was no way out. He had faced facts ever since the days of Ben Flint--and Elodie was a fact, the principal fact in his life. Curious that she should have faded into comparative insignificance during the war--especially during the last two years of it when he had not seen her. She seemed to have undergone a vehement resurrection. The shadow of the war had developed into the insistent flesh and blood of peace.

He wandered far over the quay, where the ancient Algiers boat was on the point of departure, crammed with red-tarbooshed troops, zouaves, colonials, swarthy Turcos and Spahis, grinning blacks with faces like polished boots, all exultant in the approaching demobilization. The grey-blue mass glistened with medals. The blacks were eating--with the contented merriment of children at a Sunday School treat. Andrew smiled at many memories.

Black troops seemed always to be eating. As he stood watching, porters and pack-laden blue helmeted poilus jostled him, until he found a small oasis of quiet near the bows. Here a hand was clapped on his shoulder and a voice said:

"Surely you're Lackaday?"

He turned and beheld the clean-cut bronzed face of a man in civilian dress. As often happens, what he had sought to avoid in the streaming streets of the town, he had found in the wilderness--an acquaintance. It was one Arbuthnot, an Australian colonel of artillery who, through the chances of war, had rendered his battalion great service. A keen, sparely built man made of leather and whipcord, with the Australian's shrewd blue eyes.

They exchanged the commonplaces of greeting.

"Demobilized?" said Andrew.

"Thank Heaven."

"You seem glad."

"Good Lord! I should think so. Aren't you glad it's all over?"

"I don't quite know," said Andrew, smiling wistfully.

"Well, I am," declared Arbuthnot. "It was a beastly mess that had to be cleared up, and now it's done as far as my little responsibility is concerned. I'm delighted. I want to get back to my wife and family and lead the life of a human being. War's a dog's life. It has nothing to recommend it. It's as stupid and senseless as a typhoon." He laughed. "What are you doing here?"

Andrew waved a hand. "Putting in time."

"So am I. Till my boat sails. I thought before I left I'd look at a merrier end of France. By Gosh! They're a happy crowd"--he pointed to the packed mass on board the ancient tub of the Compagnie GØnØrale Transatlantique.

"You share their feelings," said Andrew.

Arbuthnot glanced at him keenly.

"I heard they made you a Brigadier. Yes? And you've chucked it?"

"I'm a civilian, even as you are," said Andrew.

Arbuthnot pushed back his hat and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"For goodness' sake let us get out of this and sit down somewhere and have a talk."

He moved away, Andrew following, and hailed a broken down cab, a victoria

which had just deposited a passenger by the steamer's side.

"To the CannebiŁre," said he, and they drove off. "If you have anything to do, please tell me. But I know nobody in this furnace of a town. You're a godsend."

A while afterwards they were seated beneath the awning of a crowded cafØ on the CannebiŁre. Ceaseless thousands of the globe's population passed by, from the bare-headed, impudent work girls of Marseilles, as like each other and the child Elodie as peas in a pod, to the daintily costumed maiden; from the feathered, flashing quean of the streets to the crape encumbered figure of the French war-widow; from the abject shuffler clad in flapping rags and frowsy beard to the stout merchant dressed English fashion, in grey flannels and straw hat, with two rolls of comfortable fat above his silk collar; from the stray British or American private perspiring in khaki to splendid officers, French, Italian, Roumanian, Serbian, Czecho-Slovak, be-medalled like the advertisements of patent foods; from the middle aged, leaden pipe laden Marseilles plumber, in his blue smock, to the blue-uniformed Senegalese private, staring with his childish grin, at the multitudinous hurrying sights of an unfamiliar crowd. Backwards and forwards they passed in two thick unending streams. And the roadway clashed with trams following each other, up and down, at fraction of a second intervals, and with a congestion of waggons, carts, cabs, automobiles, waiting patiently on the pleasure of these relentless, strident symbols of democracy.

In his troubled mood, Andrew found Arbuthnot also a godsend. It was good to talk once more with a man of his own calibre about the things that had once so intensely mattered. He lost his shyness and forgot for a time his anxieties. The rushing life before him had in its way a soothing charm to one resting, as it were, on the quiet bank. It was good, too, to talk English--or listen to it; for much of the talking was done by his companion. Arbuthnot was full of the big, beloved life that lay before him. Of the wife and children whom he had not seen for four years. Of his home near Sydney. Of the Solomon Islands, where he spent the few healthy months of the year growing coco-nuts for copra and developing a pearl fishery. A glorious, free existence, said he. And real men to work with. Every able-bodied white in the Solomon Islands had joined up--some hundred and sixty of them. How many would be going back, alas! he did not yet know. They had been distributed among so many units of the Australian Forces. But he was looking forward to seeing some of the old hard-bitten faces in those isles of enchantment.

"I thought," said Andrew, "that it rained all the year round on the Solomon Islands; that they were so depressing, in fact, that the natives ate each other to keep up their spirits."

Arbuthnot protested vehemently. It was the loveliest climate in the world during the time that white folk stayed there. Of course, there was a rainy season, but then everybody went back to Australia. As for cannibals--he laughed.

"If you're at a loose end," said he, "come out with me and have a look

round. It will clear the war out of your system."

Andrew held a cigarette between the tips of his fingers and looked at the curling smoke. The picture of the reefs and surfs and white sands and palm-trees of these far off islands rose, fascinating, before his eyes. And then he remembered that he had once a father and mother--and a birth-place.

"Curiously enough," said he, "I am Australian born."

He had scarcely ever realized the fact.

"All the more reason," said Arbuthnot heartily. "Come with me on the Osway. The captain's a pal of mine. He'll fix up a bunk for you somewhere."

He offered boundless hospitality. Andrew grew more wistful. He thanked Arbuthnot. But----

"I'm a poor man," said he, "and have to earn my living at my old job."

"And what's that?"

"I'm a music-hall artist," said Andrew.

"You? Good Lord! I thought you had been a soldier all your life. One of the old contemptibles."

"I enlisted as a private in the Grenadier Guards," smiled Andrew.

"And came to be a General in a brass hat--and now you're back on the stage. Somehow it doesn't fit. Do you like it?"

Andrew winched at the intimate question of the frank and direct Australian. Last night's scene swept across his vision, hateful and humiliating.

"I have no choice," said he.

As before, on the quay, Arbuthnot looked at him, keenly.

"I don't think you do like it. I've met hundreds of fellows who feel just the same as you. I'm different, as I told you. But I can understand the other point of view. Perhaps I should kick if I had to go back to a poky office, instead of a free, open-air life. After all, we're creatures of circumstance."

He paused to light a cigar. Andrew made no reply, and the conversational topic died a natural death. They talked of other things--went back to Arras, the Somme, Saint Quentin. Presently Arbuthnot, pulling out his watch, suggested lunch. Andrew rose, pleading an engagement--his daily engagement with Elodie at the stuffy little hotel table d'hôte. But the other begged him for God's sake not to desert him in this lonely multitude. It would not be the act of a Christian and a comrade. Andrew was tempted, feeling the charm and breeziness of the Australian like a breath of the free air of Flanders and Picardy. He went indoors to the telephone. Elodie,

eventually found, responded. Of course, her poor AndrØ must have his little pleasure. He deserved it, _mon Dieu!_ It was _gentil_ of him to consult her. And it had fallen out quite well, for she herself could not eat. The stopping had dislodged itself from one of her teeth which was driving her mad with pain and she was going to a dentist at one o'clock. He commiserated with her on her misadventure. Elodie went into realistic details of the wreck of the gold stopping on the praline stuffing of a chocolate. Then an anguished "_Ne me coupez pas, Mademoiselle_." But Mademoiselle of the Exchange cut ruthlessly, and Andrew returned to Arbuthnot.

"I'm at your service," said he.

Arbuthnot put himself into Lackaday's hands. The best place. The best food. It was not often he had the honour of entertaining a British General unawares. Andrew protested. The other insisted. The General was his guest. Where should they go? Somewhere characteristic. He was sick of the food at grand hotels. It was the same all the world over--Stockholm, Tokio, Scarborough, Melbourne, Marseilles.

"Marseilles has nothing to boast of in the way of cookery," said Andrew, "save its bouillabaisse."

"Now what's that?" cried Arbuthnot. "I've sort of heard of it."

"My dear fellow," said Andrew, with his ear-to-ear grin. "To live in Marseilles and be innocent of bouillabaisse is like having gone through the war without tasting bully beef."

He was for dragging him to the little restaurant up a side street in the heart of the town which is the true shrine of bouillabaisse. But Arbuthnot had heard vaguely of another place, celebrated for the dish, where one could fill one's lungs as well as one's stomach.

"The Reserve."

"That's it. Taxi!" cried Arbuthnot.

So they drove out and sat in the cool gallery of the Reserve, by a window table, and looked on the blue Mediterranean, and the wonderous dish was set before them and piously served by the maître d'hôtel. Rascasse, Loup-de-mer, mostelle, langouste ... a studied helping of each in a soup plate, then the sodden toast from the tureen and the ladles of clear, rich, yellow liquid flavoured with saffron and with an artist's inspiration of garlic, the essence of the dozen kinds of fish that had yielded up their being to the making of the bouillabaisse. The perfect serving of it is a ceremonial in the grand manner.

Arbuthnot, regarding his swimming plate, looked embarrassed.

"Knife, fork and spoon," said Andrew.

They ate for a while in silence. Then Arbuthnot said:

"Do you remember that wonderful chapter in Meredith's _Egoist_ when Sir Willoughby Patterne offers the second bottle of the Patterne Port to Doctor Middleton, Clara's father--and the old fellow says: 'I have but a girl to give?' Well, I feel like that. This is the most wonderful eating that humanity has ever devised. I'm not a glutton. If I were I should have sampled this before. I'm just an uncivilized man from the bush overwhelmed by a new sensation. I'm your debtor, General, to all eternity. And your genius in recommending this wine"--he filled Andrew's glass with Cinzano's Asti Spumante--"is worthy of the man who saw us out at Bourdon Wood. By the way," he added, after a pause, "what really happened afterwards? I knew you got through. But we poor devils of gunners--we do our job--and away we go to loose off Hell at another section and we never get a clear knowledge of the results."

"I'll tell you in a minute," said Andrew, emptying the salt cellars and running a trench-making finger through the salt, and disposing pepper pots, knives and spoons and supplementing these material objects with lead pencil lines on the table-cloth--all vestiges of the bouillabaisse had been cleared away--"You see, here were the German lines. Here were their machine-guns."

"And my little lot," said Arbuthnot, tapping a remote corner, "was somewhere over here."

They worked out the taking of Bourdon Wood. A mØdallion de veau perigourdine, a superimposition of toast, foie gras, veal and truffles, interrupted operations. They concluded them, more languidly, before the cheese. The mild mellow Asti softened their hearts, so that at the end of the exquisite meal, in the mingled aroma of coffee, a cigarette, and the haunting saltness of the sea, they spoke (with Andrew's eternal reserve) like brothers.

"My dear fellow," said Arbuthnot, "the more I talk to you the more impossible does it seem that you should settle down to your pre-war job. Why don't you chuck it and come out with me on a business footing?"

"I have no capital," said Andrew.

"You don't need much--a few thousands."

He might have said a few millions for all Andrew's power to command such a sum. The other continued his fairy-tale of the islands. They were going to boom one of these near days. Fortune lay to the hand of the man who came in first. Labour was cheap, the world was shrieking for copra, the transport difficulty would soon adjust itself---and then a dazzling reward. It was quite possible, he suggested with some delicacy, to find financial aid, and in the meantime to do management work on a salary, so as to keep himself going. The qualities which made him a General were just those which out there would command success. And, Australian born, as he was, he could claim a welcome among his own people.

"I can guarantee you a living, anyhow," said the enthusiast. "Think it

over, and let me know before the Osway sails."

It was a great temptation. If he were a free man, he would have cast off the garb of Petit Patou for ever and gone to seek fortune in a new world where he could unashamedly use his own name and military rank among men who did men's work and thought all the better of a man for doing the same. And also he became conscious of a longing to leave France for a season. France was passing through a post-war stage of disgruntlement and suspicion, drawing tight around her feet her tri-coloured skirts so that they should not be touched by the passing foreigner. France was bleeding from her wounds--weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. The Englishman in Andrew stood hurt and helpless before this morbid, convulsive nationalism. Like a woman in certain emotional states she were better left alone for awhile, till she recovered and smiled her benevolent graciousness again.

Yet if he remained Petit Patou he must stay in France, the land of his professional adoption. From appearing on the English stage he shrank, with morbid sensitiveness. There was America, where he was unknown.... Already Moignon was in touch, on his behalf, with powerful American agencies. Just before he left Paris Moignon had said: "They are nibbling for the winter." But it was all vague. France alone appeared solid--in spite of the disasters of these first two nights.

"I wish to God," he cried suddenly, after a long silence, "I wish to God I could cut everything and come with you."

"What prevents you?" asked Arbuthnot.

"I have ties," said he.

Arbuthnot met the grim look on his face which forbade further questioning.

"Ah!" said he. "Still," he added with a laugh, "I'm at the Hôtel de Noailles till Friday. That is to say----"

He explained that he was going the next day to Monte Carlo, which he had never seen, to spend a night or two, but would return in good time for the sailing of the Osway and the hearing of General Lackaday's final decision.

On their drive back to Marseilles, Arbuthnot, during a pause in their talk, said:

"What I can't understand is this. If you're on the music-hall stage, what the deuce are you doing in Marseilles?"

"I'm here on business with my partner," Andrew replied curtly. "If it weren't for that--a business engagement--I would ask you to spend the evening with me," he added. "What are you going to do?"

"I went to the theatre last night. What else is there?"

"They have an excellent Revue at the El Dorado. Go there."

"I will," said Arbuthnot.

Andrew breathed freely, relieved from the dread lest this genial and unsuspecting brother in arms should wander into Olympia and behold--what? What kind of a performance? What kind of a reception? All apart from beholding him in his green silk tights and painted face.

They parted at the Hôtel de Noailles. The Australian shook him warmly by the hand.

"This has been one of the great days of my life," said he, with his frank smile. "The day when I return and you tell me you're coming with me, will be a greater."

Andrew walked away in a glow. Here was a man of proved worth, proved in the furnace in which they had met, straight as his eyes, sincere to his soul, who had claimed him as a leader of the Great Brotherhood, who, with a generosity acceptable under the unwritten law of that 'Brotherhood's Freemasonry, had opened his way to freedom and a man's hie. Whether he could follow the way or not was another matter. The fact of the generous opening remained; a heartening thing for all time.

You may perhaps remember that, in the introductory letter which accompanied the manuscript and is quoted at the beginning of this record of the doings of Andrew Lackaday, he remarks:

"At the present moment I am between the devil and the deep sea. I am hoping that the latter will be the solution of my difficulties."

This was written in his hotel room, as soon as he returned. Elodie, unnerved by an over-driven dentist's torture, lay resting in her bedroom with closed windows and drawn shutters. He was between the Devil of Petit Patou-ism and the Deep Sea beyond which lay the Fortunate Isles where men were men and coco-nuts were gold and where the sweat could roll down your leather skin undefiled with greasepaint.

When he had finished writing, he dined with a curiously preoccupied though pain-relieved Elodie. He attributed her unusual mood either to anxiety as to their reception at Olympia, after the previous night's performance, or to realization of the significance of her indiscretion. She ate little, drank less, and scarcely spoke at all.

They reached the music-hall. Andrew changed into his tights. The little dresser retailed the gossip of the place. Elodie had undoubtedly caused a sensation. The dresser loudly acclaimed Madame's action as a _beau geste_.

"In these days of advertisement one can't afford to be so modest, _mon gØnØral_," said he. "And I, for example, who committed the stupidity of asking whether you had served in the war! To-night we are going to see something quite different."

Andrew laughed. Haunted by the great seas and the Solomon Islands and the palm trees, he found himself scarcely interested in his reception. The audience could talk and cough and hiss as much as they liked. He had practically told them to go to the devil last night. He was quite ready, if need be, to do it again. He was buoyed up by a sublime indifference.

The singer was ending her encore from "La Traviata" when he went down the iron stairs. Elodie met him punctually, for they had agreed to avoid the dreary wait. As soon as the stage was set and the curtain up, he went on and was greeted by a round of applause. Somehow the word had been passed round the populace that formed the Olympia clientŁle. Thenceforward the performance went without a hitch, to the attentive gratification of the audience. There was no uproarious demonstration; but they laughed in the right places and acclaimed satisfactorily his finale on the giant violin. They gave him a call, to which he responded, leading Elodie by the hand.

For himself, he hardly knew whether to feel relief or contempt, but Elodie, blindly stumbling through the cages of the performing dogs in the wings, almost broke down.

"Now all goes well. Confess I was right."

He turned at the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes. I confess. You did what was right to make it go well."

She scanned his face to read his meaning. Of late he had grown so remote and difficult to understand. He put his arm round her kindly and smiled--and near by his smile, painted to the upper tip of each ear, was grotesquely horrible.

"Why yes, little goose. Now everything will go on wheels."

"That is true?" she asked anxiously.

"I swear it," said he.

When they reached the hotel, she swiftly discarded the walking clothes and slipped on her wrapper in which only was she the real Elodie, and went to his room and sat on the little narrow bed.

"_Mon ami_," said she, "I have something to tell you. I would not speak this afternoon because it was necessary that nothing should disturb your performance."

Andrew lit a pipe and sat down in the straight-backed arm-chair.

"What’s the matter?"

"I had to wait an hour at the dentist’s. Why those people say one o’clock when they mean two, except to make you think they are so busy that they do you a favour to look inside your mouth, and can charge you whatever they like--thirty francs, the monster charged me--you ought to go and tell him

it was a robbery--"

"My dear," he interrupted, thus cutting out the predicate of her rhetorical sentence, "you surely couldn't have thought a dentist's fee of thirty francs would have put me off my work?"

She threw up her arms. "Mon Dieu! Men are stupid! No. Listen. I had to wait an hour. I had to distract myself--well--you know the supplement to _L'Illustration_ that has appeared every week during the war--the pages of photographs of the heroes of France. I found them all collected in a portfolio on the table. Ah! Some living, but mostly dead. It was heart-breaking. And do you know what I found? I found this. I stole it."

She drew from her pocket peignoir a crumpled page covered with vignette photographs of soldiers, a legend underneath each one, and handed it to Andrew, her thumb indicating a particular portrait.

"There! Look!"

And Andrew looked and beheld the photograph of a handsome, vast mustachioed, rake-helly officer of Zouaves, labelled as Captain Raoul Marescaux, who had died gloriously for France on the twenty-sixth of March, 1917.

For a second or two he groped for some association with a far distant past.

"But don't you see?" cried Elodie. "It is my husband. He has been dead for over two years."

Chapter XVII

The real discussion between them of the change that the death of Raoul Marescaux might bring about in their relations, did not take place till the next day. Each felt it as a sudden shock which, as in two chemicals hitherto mingling in placid fluidity, might cause crystallization. Up to this point, the errant husband, vanishing years before across the seas in company with a little modiste of the Place de la Madeleine, had been but a shadow, less a human being than a legal technicality which stood in way of their marriage.

Occasionally during the war each had contemplated the possibility of the husband being killed. A mere fleeting speculation. As Elodie had received no official news of his death--which is astonishing in view of the French Republic's accuracy in tracing the _Øtat civil_ of even her obscurest citizens--she presumed that he was still alive somewhere in the Shadow Land in which exist monks and Papuans and swell-mobsmen and other members of the human race with whom she had no concern. And Andrew had been far too busy to give the fellow whose name he had all but forgotten, more than a passing

thought. But now, there he was, dead, officially reported, with picture and description and distinction and place and date all complete. The shadow had melted into the definite Eternity of Shadows.

Andrew rose early, dressed, and, according to his athletic custom, took his swinging hour's walk through the streets still fresh with the lingering coolness of the night, and then, after breakfast, entered Elodie's room. But she was still fast asleep. She seldom rose till near midday. It was only after lunch, a preoccupied meal, that they found the opportunity for discussion, in the little stuffy courtyard of the hotel, set round with dusty tubs of aloes and screened with a trellis of discontented vine. They sat on a rustic bench by a door and then coffee was served on a blistered iron table once painted yellow. There were many flies which disturbed the slumbers of an old mongrel Newfoundland sprawling on the cobbles.

And there he put to her the proposition which he had formulated during the night.

"My dear," said he, "I have something very important to say to you. You will listen--eh? You won't interrupt?"

Coffee-cup in hand, she glanced at him swiftly before she sipped.

"As you will."

"Yesterday," said he, "I met a comrade of the war, a Colonel of Australian artillery. I lunched with him, as you know."

"_Bien_," said Elodie.

"I had a long talk with him. He made certain propositions."

He repeated his conversation with Arbuthnot, described at second hand the Solomon Islands, the beauties of reef and palm, the delights of a new, free life and laid before her the guarantee of a competence and the possibilities of a fortune. As he talked, Elodie's dark face grew sullen and her eyes hardened. When he paused, she said:

"You are master of your affairs. If you wish to go, you are free. I have no right to say anything."

"You don't allow me to finish," said he, smiling patiently. "I would not go there without you."

"_Moi?_" She shifted round on her seat with Southern excitability and pointed her finger at her bosom. "I go to the other end of the world and live among savages and Australians who don't talk French--and I who know no word of English or any other savage tongue? No, my friend. Ask anything else of me--I give it freely, as I have given it all these years. But not that."

"You would go with me as my wife, Elodie. We will get married."

"_Pouf!_" said Elodie, contemptuously.

Without any knowledge of the terminal values so precious to women, Andrew felt a vague apprehension lest he had begun at the wrong end.

"Surely," said he, by way of reparation. "The death of your husband makes a great difference. Now there is nothing to prevent our marriage."

"There is everything to prevent it," she replied. "You no longer love me."

"The same affection exists," said he, "that has always been between us."

"Then we go on leading the life that we always have led."

"I don’t think it very satisfactory," said Andrew.

"I do, if it pleases us to remain together, we remain. If we want to say ’Good-bye’ we are free to do so."

He noticed that she wrung her hands nervously together.

"You don’t wish to say ’good-bye,’ Elodie?" he asked gently.

"Oh, no. It is only not to put ourselves into the impossibility of saying it."

"While you live, my dear," he replied, "I could never say it to you."

"If you went away to the Antipodes, you would have to say good-bye, my dear AndrØ, for I could not accompany you--never in life. I have heard of these countries. They may be good for men, but for women--no. Unless one is archimillionaire, one has no servants. The woman has to keep the house and wash the floor and cook the meals. And that--you know well--I can’t do. It may be selfish and a little unworthy but _mon Dieu!_--I have always been frank--that’s how I am. And except on tour abroad where we have lived in hotels where everybody spoke French I have never lived out of France. That is what I was always saying to myself when you were seeking an occupation. ’What will happen to me if he does get a foreign appointment?’ I was afraid, oh, terribly afraid. But I said nothing to you. I loved you too much. But now it is necessary for me to tell you what I have in my heart. You are free to go to what wild island you like--that is why it would be absurd for us to marry--but it would be all finished between us."

"That couldn’t be," said Andrew. "What would become of you?"

She averted her head and said abruptly, "Don’t think of it."

"But I must think of it. During the war----"

"During the war, it was different. _A la guerre comme àla guerre._ We knew it could not last for ever. You loved me. It was natural for me to accept the support of _mon homme_, like all other women. But now, if you leave me--no. _N-i-n-i, nini, c’est fini._"

So all Andrew’s beautiful dreams faded into mist. He rose and crossed the little cobbled courtyard and looked out for a while into the shabby by-street in which the hotel was situated. That Elodie should accompany him was the only feasible way, from the pecuniary point of view, of carrying out the vague scheme.

It would be a life, at first, of some roughness and privation. Arbuthnot had laid the financial side quite clearly before him. He could not expect to land on the Solomon Islands without capital (and even a borrowed capital) and expect an income of a thousand pounds a year to drop into his mouth. If Elodie, although refusing to accompany him, would accept his allowance, that allowance, would, of arithmetical necessity, be far, far less than she had enjoyed during the war. Besides, although he was bound tentatively to suggest it, he knew the odd pride, the rod of steel through her nature, which he had come up against, to his own great advantage, time after time during their partnership, and he would have been the most astonished man in the world had she answered otherwise.

Yes, the dream of coco-nuts and pearls had melted. She was right. Even had she consented, she would have been a ghastly failure in pioneer Colonial life. Their existence would have been mildewed and moth-eaten with misery. She knew herself and her limitations. To go and leave her to starve or earn a precarious livelihood with her birds, on this post-war music-hall stage avid for novelty of sensation, were an act as dastardly as that of the late Raoul Mares-caux who planted her there on the platform of the Gare St. Lazare while he was on his ways overseas with the modiste of the Place de la Madeleine.

He turned to find her dabbing her eyes with a couple of square inches of chiffon which, in spite of its exiguity, had smeared the powder on her face. He sat down beside her, with his patient smile, and took her hand and patted it.

"Come, come, my little Elodie. I am not going to leave you. It was only an idea. If it had attracted you, well and good. But as it doesn’t, let us say no more about it."

"I don’t want to hinder you in your life, AndrØ," she said brokenly. "_ça me donne beaucoup de peine_. But you see, don’t you, that I couldn’t do it?"

He soothed her as best he could. Les Petit Patou would invent new business, of a comicality that would once more make their fortunes. That being so, why should they not be married?

She looked at him searchingly. "You desire it as much as that?"

"I desire earnestly," said he, "to do what is right."

"Are you sure that it doesn’t come from the respectability of an English General?"

"I don’t know how it comes," he replied, hiding the sting of the shrewd thrust with a laugh, "but it’s there, all the same."

"Well, I’ll think of it," said Elodie, "but give me time. _Ne m’embŒte pas._"

He promised not to worry her. "But tell me," he said, after a few moments’ perplexity, "why were you so agitated all yesterday after you had seen that photograph?"

Elodie let her hand fall on her lap and regarded him with pitying astonishment. "_Mon Dieu!_ What do you expect a woman to be when she learns that her husband, whom she thinks alive, has been killed two years ago?"

Andrew gave it up.

On the morning of the sailing of the Osway from Marseilles, he called on Arbuthnot at the Hôel de Noailles, and told him of his decision.

"I’m sorry," said Arbuthnot, "as sorry as I can be. But in case you care to change your mind, here’s my card."

"And here’s mine," said Andrew, and he handed him his card thus inscribed

MONSIEUR PATOU
(_Combinaison des Petit Patou_)
3 rue Falda
Faubourg Saint-Denis
Paris

Arbuthnot looked from the card to Andrew and from Andrew to the card, in some perplexity.

"Why," said he, "I’ve seen your bills about the town. You’re playing here! Why the deuce didn’t you let me know?"

"I gave a better performance at Bourdon Wood," said Andrew.

Now hereabouts, I ought to say, the famous manuscript ends. Indeed, this late Marseilles part of it was very hurried and sketchy. The main object which he had in view--or rather which, in the first inception of the idea, I had suggested he should have in view--namely, "to interest, perhaps encourage, at any rate to stimulate the thoughts of many of my old comrades who have been placed in the same predicament as myself" (as he says in the letter which accompanied the manuscript) he had abandoned as hopeless. He had merely jotted things down helter-skelter, diary fashion. I have had to supplement these notes from his letters and from the confidential talks which we had, not very long after he had left Marseilles.

From these letters and these talks also, it appears that the tour booked by Moignon did not prove the disastrous failure prognosticated by the first two nights at Marseilles. Nowhere did he meet a prewar enthusiasm; but, on

the other hand, nowhere did he encounter the hostility of the Marseilles audience. At Lyons, owing to certain broad effects, which he knew of old to be acceptable to that unique, hard-headed, full-bellied, tradition-bound bourgeoisie, he had an encouraging success. He felt the old power return to him--the power of playing on the audience as on a musical instrument. But at Saint-Etienne--a town of operatives--the performance went disappointingly flat. Before a dull or discontented audience he stood helpless. No, the old magnetic power had gone.

However, he had recovered the faculty of making his livelihood somehow or other as Petit Patou, which, he began desperately to feel, was all that mattered. His soul revolted, but his will prevailed. Elodie accompanied him in serene content, more flaccid and slatternly than ever in her hotel room, keenly efficient on the stage.

Now it happened that, a while later, during a visit to some friends in Shropshire who have nothing to do with this story, I broke down in health. I have told you before, that liaison work during the war had put out of action the elderly crock that is Anthony Hylton. Doctors drew undertakers' faces between the tubes of their stethoscopes as they jabbed about my heart, and raised their eyebrows over my blood pressure.

Just at this time I had a letter from Lackaday. Incidentally he mentioned that he was appearing in August at Clermont-Ferrand and that Horatio Bakkus (who, in his new prosperity, could afford to choose times and seasons) had arranged to accept a synchronous engagement at the Casino of Royat.

So while my medical advisers were wringing their hands over the practical inaccessibility and the lack of amenity of Nauheim, whither they had despatched me unwilling in dreary summers before the war, and while they were suggesting even more depressing health resorts in the British Isles, it occurred to me to ask them whether Royat-les-Bains did not contain broken-down heart repairing works of the first order. They brightened up.

"The place of all places,' said they.

"Write me a chit to a doctor there," said I, "and I'm off at once."

I did not care much about my heart. It has always been playing me tricks from the day I fell in love with my elder sister's French governess. But I did care about seeing my friend Lackaday in his reincarnation as Petit Patou, and I was most curious to make the acquaintance of Elodie and Horatio Bakkus.

Soon afterwards, therefore, behold me on my way to Clermont-Ferrand, of which manufacturing town Royat is a suburb.

Chapter XVIII

Without desiring to interfere with the sale of guide-books, I may say that Clermont-Ferrand is a great big town, the principal city of Auvergne, and devotes itself to turning out all sorts of things from its factories such as Michelin and Berguignan tyres, and all sorts of young lawyers, doctors and schoolmasters from its university. It proudly claims Blaise Pascal as its distinguished son. It has gardens and broad walks and terraces along the old ramparts, whence one can see the round-backed pride (with its little pip on the top) of the encircling mountain range, the Puy de Dôme; and it also has a wilderness of smelly, narrow little streets with fine old seventeenth-century mansions hidden in mouldering court-yards behind dilapidated portes cochŁres; it has a beautiful romanesque Church in a hollow, and, on an eminence, an uninteresting restored cathedral whose twin spires dominate the town for miles around. By way of a main entrance, it has a great open square, the Place de Jaude, the clanging ganglion of its tramway system, about which are situated the municipal theatre and the chief cafØs, and from which radiate the main arteries of the city. On the entrance side rises a vast mass of sculpture surmounted by a statue of Vercingetorix, the hero of those parts, the gentleman over whose name we have all broken our teeth when learning to construe Cæsar "_De Bello Gallico_." Passing him by for the first time, I should have liked to shake hands with him for old times' sake, to show my lack of ill feeling.

Now that you all know about Clermont-Ferrand, as the ancient writers say, I will tell you about Royat. You take a tram from Vercingetorix and after a straight mile you are landed at the foot of a cup of the aforesaid encircling mountains, and, looking around, when the tram refuses to go any further owing to lack of rails, you perceive that you are in Royat-les-Bains. It consists, on the ground floor, as it were, of a white Etablissement des Bains surrounded by a little park, which is fringed on the further side by an open-air concert platform and a theatre, of a few rows of shops, and a couple of cafØs. You could play catch with a cricket ball across it. The hotels are perched around on the slopes of the hills, so that you may enter stately portals among the shops, but shall be whirled upwards in a lift to the main floor, whence you look down on the green and tidy miniature place.

From my room in the Royat Palace Hotel I had a view across the Park, beyond which I could see the black crowds pouring out of the Clermont-Ferrand trams. The reason for this frenzied going and coming of human beings between Clermont-Ferrand and Royat, I could never understand. I believe tram-riding is a hideous vice. Just connect up by tramlines a place no one ever wants to go to with another no one ever wants to go from, and in a week you will have the inhabitants of those respective Sleepy Hollows running to and fro with the strenuous aimlessness of ants. Progressive politicians will talk to you of the wonders of transport. Well, transport or madness, what does it matter? I mean what does it matter to the course of this narrative?

I had a pleasant room, I say, with a good view blocked above the tram terminus by a vine-clad mountain. I called on a learned gentleman who knew all about hearts and blood pressures, he prescribed baths and unpleasant waters, and my cure began. All this by way of preamble to the statement

that I had comfortably settled down in Royat a week before Les Petit Patou were billed to appear in Clermont-Ferrand. Having nothing in the world to do save attend to my internal organs, I spent much time in the old town, which I had not visited for many years, match-hunting (with indifferent success) being at first my main practical pursuit. Then a natural curiosity leading me to enquire the whereabouts of the chief music-halls and vacant ignorance manifesting itself on the faces of the policemen and waiters whom I interrogated, I abandoned matches for the chase of music-halls. Eventually I became aware that I was pursuing a phantom. There were no music-halls. All had been perverted into picture palaces. I read Lackaday's letter again. There it was as clear as print.

"So we proceed on our pilgrimage; we are booked for Clermont-Ferrand for the third week in August. I hate it--because I hate it. But I'm looking forward to it because my now prosperous friend Bakkus has arranged to sing during my stay there, at the Casino of Royat."

And sure enough the next day, they stuck up bills by the park gates announcing the coming of the celebrated tenor, Monsieur Horatio Bakkus.

It was only later that the great flaming poster of a circus--The Cirque Vendramin--which had pitched its tent for a fortnight past at Clermont-Ferrand, caught my eye. There it was, amid announcements of all sorts of clowns and trapezists and Japanese acrobats:

"Special engagement of the world famed eccentrics, Les Petit Patou."

If I uttered profane words, I am sure the Recording Angel followed an immortal precedent.

In order to spy out the land, I went then and there to the afternoon performance. The circus was pitched in a disgruntled field somewhere near the dismally remote railway station. The tent was crowded with the good inhabitants of Clermont-Ferrand who, since they could not buy sugar or matches or coal for cooking, must spend their money somewhere. I scarcely had entered a circus since the good old days of the Cirque Rocambeau. And what a difference! They had a few uninspiring horses and riders for convention sake. But the _haute Øcole_ had vanished. Not even a rouged and painted ghost of Mademoiselle RenØe Saint-Maur remained. It was a ragged, old-fashioned acrobatic entertainment, with the mildewed humour of antiquated clowns. But they had a star turn--a juggler of the school of Cinquevallis--an amazing fellow. And then I remembered having seen the name on the last week's bill, printed in the great eighteen inch letters which were now devoted to Les Petit Patou.

Next week Lackaday would be the star turn. But still...

I went back to Royat feeling miserable. I was not elated by finding a letter from Lady Auriol which had been forwarded from my St. James's Street chambers. She was in Paris organising something in connection with the devastated districts. She reproached me for not having answered a letter written a month ago, written at her ancestral home where she had been summoned to her father's gouty chair side. I might, she said, have had the

politeness to send a line of condolence.... Well, I might: but whether to her or to Lord Mountshire, whose gout was famous in the early nineties, I did not know. Yes, I ought to have answered her letter. But then, you see, I am a villainous correspondent: I was running about, and doctors were worrying me: and I could not have answered without lying about Andrew Lackaday who, leaving her without news of himself, had apparently vanished from her ken. She had asked me all sorts of pointed questions about Lackaday which I, having by that time read his manuscript, found very embarrassing to answer. Of course I intended to write. One always does, in such cases. There was nothing for it now but to make immediate and honourable amends.

I explained my lack of courtesy, as best I could, bewailed her father's gout and her dreary ministrations on that afflicted nobleman, regretted incidentally her lack of news of the gallant General and spread myself over my own sufferings and my boredom in a little hole of a place, where no one was to be seen under the age of seventy-three--drew, I flattered myself, rather a smart picture of the useless and gasping ancients flocking pathetically to the futile _Fons Juventutis_ (and what business had they to be alive anyhow during this world food shortage?) and then, commending her devotion to the distressed and homeless, expressed the warm hope that I should meet her in Paris on my way back to England.

It was the letter of a friend and a man of the world. It put me into a better humour with myself. I dined well on the broad terrace of the hotel, smoked a cigar in defiance of doctor's orders, and after an instructive gastronomical discussion with a comfortable old Bordeaux merchant with whom I had picked acquaintance, went to bed in a selfishly contented frame of mind.

Two or three mornings later, going by tram into Clermont-Ferrand and passing by the great cafe on the east side of the Place de Jaude opposite the statue of Vercingetorix, I ran literally, stumbling over long legs outstretched from his chair to the public danger, into Andrew Lackaday. It was only at the instant of disentanglement and mutual apologies that we were aware of each other. He sprang to his great height and held out-both his long arms, and grinned happily.

"My dear fellow, what a delight. Fancy seeing you here! Elodie----"

If he had given me time, I should have recognized her before he spoke. There she was in the flesh--in a great deal of flesh--more even than I had pictured. She had a coarse, dark face, with the good humour written on it that loose features and kind soft eyes are able so often to express--and white teeth rather too much emphasized by carmined lips above which grew the faint black down of many women of the South. She was dressed quite tastefully: white felt hat, white skirt, and a silken knitted yellow _chandail_.

"Elodie--I present Monsieur le Capitaine Hylton, of whom you have heard me speak so much." To me--"Madame Patou," said he.

"Madame," said I. We shook hands. I professed enchantment.

"I have spoken much about you to Captain Hylton," said Lackaday quickly.

"So it seems," said I, following the good fellow's lead, "as if I were renewing an old acquaintance."

"But you speak French like a Frenchman," cried Elodie.

"It is my sole claim, Madame," said I, "to your consideration."

She laughed, obviously pleased, and invited me to sit. The waiter came up. What would I have? I murmured "Amer Picon--Curaçoa," the most delectable ante-meal beverage left in France now that absinthe is as extinct as the stuff wherewith the good Vercingetorix used to gladden his captains after a successful bout with Cæsar. Elodie laughed again and called me a true Parisian. I made the regulation reply to the compliment. I could see that we became instant friends.

"_Mais, mon cher ami_," said Lackaday, "you haven't answered my question. What are you doing here in Clermont-Ferrand?"

"Didn't I write to you?"

"No----"

I hadn't. I had meant to--just as I had meant to write to Auriol Dayne.

I wonder whether, in that Final Court from which I have not heard of any theologian suggesting the possibility of Appeal, they will bring up against me all the unanswered letters of my life? If they do, then certainly shall I be a Condemned Spirit.

I explained airily--just as I have explained to you.

"Coincidences of the heart, Madame," said I.

She turned to Andrew. "He has said that just like Horace."

I realized the compliment. I liked Elodie. Dress her at whatever Rue de la Paix rag-swindler's that you pleased, you would never metamorphose the daughter of the people that she was into the lady at ease in all company. She was a bit _mannièrØe_--on her best behaviour. But she had the Frenchwoman's instinctive knowledge of conduct. She conveyed, very charmingly, her welcome to me as a friend of Andrew's.

"Horace--that's my friend Bakkus I've told you about," said Lackaday. "He'll be here to-morrow. I should so much like you to meet him."

"I'm looking forward," said I, "to the opportunity."

We talked on indifferent subjects; and in the meanwhile I observed Lackaday closely. He seemed tired and careworn. The bush of carroty hair over his ears had gone a yellowish grey and more lines seamed his ugly and rugged

face. He was neatly enough dressed in grey flannels, but he wore on his head the latest model of a French straw hat--the French hatter, left to his own devices, has ever been the maddest of his tribe--a high, coarsely woven crown surrounded by a quarter inch brim which related him much more nearly to Petit Patou than to the British General of Brigade. His delicate fingers nervously played with cigarette or glass stem. He gave me the impression of a man holding insecurely on to intelligible life.

Mild hunger translating itself into a conception of the brain, I looked at my watch. I waved a hand to the row of waiting cabs with linen canopies on the other side of the blazing square.

"Madame," said I, "let me have the pleasure of driving you to Royat and offering you _dØjeuner_."

"My dear chap," said Andrew, "impossible. We play this afternoon. Twice a day, worse luck. We have all sorts of things to arrange."

Elodie broke in. They had arranged everything already that morning. Their turn did not arrive till three-forty. There was time for a dozen lunches; especially since she would go early and see that everything was prepared. She excused herself to me in the charmingest way possible. Another day she might perhaps, with my permission, have the pleasure. But to-day she insisted on Andre lunching with me alone. We must have a thousand things to say to each other.

"_Tenez_," she smiled, rising. "I leave you. There’s not a word to be said. Monsieur le Capitaine, see that the General eats instead of talking too much." She beamed. "_Au grand plaisir de vous revoir._"

We stood bare-headed and shook hands and watched her make a gracious exit. As soon as she crossed the tram-lines, she turned and waved her fingers at me.

"A charming woman," said I.

Lackaday smiled in his sad babyish way.

"Indeed she is," said he.

We drove into Royat in one of the cool, white canopied victorias.

"You know we are playing in a circus," he said, indicating a huge play bill on the side of a wall.

"Yes," said I. "_On revient toujours àses premiŁres amours._"

"It’s not that, God knows," he replied soberly. "But we were out for these two weeks of our tour. One can’t pick and choose nowadays. The eccentric comedian will soon be as dead as his ancestor, the Court Jester. The war has almost wiped us out. Those music-halls--of the Variety type--that have not been turned, through lack of artists, into picture palaces, are now given over to Revue. I have been here at Clermont-Ferrand many times--but

now," he shrugged his shoulders. "I had an engagement--at my ordinary music-hall terms--offered me at the Cirque Vendramin to fill in the blank weeks, and I couldn't afford to refuse. That's why, my friend, you see me now, where you first met me, in a circus."

"And Madame Patou?" said I.

"I'm afraid," he sighed, "it is rather a come down for Elodie."

We reached the hotel and lunched on the terrace, and I did my best, with the aid of the maître d'hôtel, to carry out the lady's injunctions. As a matter of fact, she need not have feared that he should miss sustenance through excessive garrulity. He seemed ill at ease during the meal and I did most of the talking. It was only after coffee and the last drop of the last bottle in the hotel--one of the last, alas! in France--of the real ancient Chartreuse of the Grand Chartreux, that he made some sort of avowal or explanation. After beating about the bush a bit, he came to the heart of the matter.

"I thought the whole war was axed out of my life--with everyone I knew in it or through it. I wrote all that stuff about myself because I couldn't help it. It enabled me to find my balance, to keep myself sane. I had to bridge over--connect somehow--the Andrew Lackaday of 1914 with the Andrew Lackaday of 1919. A couple of months ago, I thought of sending it to you. You know my beginnings and my dear old father Ben Flint and so forth. You came bang into the middle of my most intimate life. I knew in what honour and affection you were held among those whom I--to whom I--am infinitely devoted. I..." He paused a moment, and tugged hard at his cigar and regarded me with bent brows and compressed lips of his parade manner. "I am a man of few friendships. I gave you my unreserved friendship--it may not be worth much--but there it is." He glared at me as though he were defying me to mortal combat, and when I tried to get in a timid word he wiped it out of my mouth with a gesture. "I wanted you to know the whole truth about me. Once I never thought about myself. I wasn't worth thinking about. But the war came. And the war ended. And I'm so upside down that I'm bound to think about myself and clear up myself, in the eyes of the only human being that could understand--namely you--or go mad. But I never reckoned to see you again in the flesh. Our lives were apart as the poles. It was in my head to write to you something to that effect, when I should receive an answer to my last letter. I never dreamed that you should meet me now, as I am."

"It never occurred to you that I might value your friendship and take a little trouble to seek you out?"

"I must confess," said he, "that I did not suspect that anyone, even you, would have thought it worth while."

I laughed. He was such a delicious simpleton. So long as he could regard me as someone on the other side of the grave, he could reveal to me the intimacies of his emotional life; but as soon as he realized his confidant in the flesh, embarrassment and confusion overwhelmed him. And, ostrich again, thinking that, once his head was hidden in the sands of Petit

Patouism, he would be invisible to mortal eye, he had persuaded himself that his friends would concur in his supposed invisibility.

"My dear fellow," I said, "why all this apologia? As to your having ever told me or written to me about yourself I have kept the closest secrecy. Not a human soul knows through me the identity of General Lackaday with Petit Patou. No," I repeated, meeting his eyes under his bent brows, "not a human being knows even of our first meeting in the Cirque Rocambeau--and as for Madame Patou, whom you have made me think of always as Elodie--well--my discretion goes without saying. And as for putting into shape your reminiscences--I shouldn't dream of letting anyone see my manuscript before it had passed through your hands. If you like I'll tear the whole thing up and it will all be buried in that vast oblivion of human affairs of which I am only too temperamentally capable."

He threw his cigar over the balustrade of the terrace and stretched out his long legs, his hands in his pockets and grinned.

"No, don't do that. One of these days I might be amused to read it. Besides, it took me such a devil of a time to write. It was good of you to keep things to yourself although I laid down no conditions of secrecy. I might have known it." He stared at the hill-side opposite, with its zigzag path through the vines marked by the figures of zealous pedestrians, and then he said suddenly: "If I asked you not to come and see our show you would set me down as a fantastical coward."

I protested. "How could I, after all you have told me?"

"I want you to come. Not to-day. Things might be in a muddle. One never knows. But to-morrow. It will do me good."

I promised. We chatted a little longer and then he rose to go. I accompanied him to the tram, his long lean body overwhelming my somewhat fleshy insignificance. And while I walked with him I thought: "Why is it that I can't tell a man who confides to me his inmost secrets, to buy, for God's sake, another hat?"

The following afternoon, I went to the Cirque Vendramin. I sat in a front seat. I saw the performance. It was much as I have already described to you. Except perhaps for his height and ungainliness no one could have recognized Andrew Lackaday in the painted clown Petit Patou. His grotesquery of appearance was terrific. From the tip of his red pointed wig to the bottom of his high heels he must have been eight feet. I should imagine him to have been out of scale on the music-hall stage. But in the ring he was perfect. The mastery of his craft, the cleanness of his jugglery, amazed me. He divested himself of his wig and did a five minutes' act of lightning impersonation with a trick felt hat, the descendant of the _Chapeau de Tabarin:_ the ex-Kaiser, Foch, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, President Wilson--a Boche prisoner, a helmeted Tommy, a Poilu--which was marvellous, considering the painted Petit Patou face. For all assistance, Elodie held up a cheap bedroom wall-mirror. He played his one-stringed fiddle. I admired the technical perfection of the famous cigar-act. I noted the stupid bewilderment with which he received a typhoon of hoops thrown by

Elodie, and his waggish leer when, clown-wise, he had caught them all. If the audience packed within the canvas amphitheatre had gone mad in applause over this exhibition of exquisite skill interlarded with witty patter, I might have been carried away into enthusiastic appreciation of a great art. But the audience, as far as applause could be the criterion, missed the exquisiteness of it, guffawed only at the broadest clowning and applauded finally just enough to keep up the heart of the management and Les Petit Patou. I have seen many harrowing things in the course of a complicated life; but this I reckon was one of the chief among them.

I thought of the scene a year ago, at Mansfield Park. The distinguished soldier with his rainbow row of ribbons modestly confused by Evadne's summons to the household on his appointment to the Brigade; the English setting; the old red gabled Manor house; the green lawn; the bright English faces of old Sir Julian and his wife, of young Charles the hero worshipper; the light in Auriol's eyes; the funny little half-ashamed English ceremony; again the gaunt, grim, yet childishly smiling figure in khaki, the ideal of the scarred and proven English leader of men....

The scene shimmered before me and then I realized the same man in his abominable travesty of God's image, bowing before the tepid plaudits of an alien bourgeoisie in a filthy, smelly canvas circus, and I tell you I felt the agony that comes when time has dried up within one the fount of tears.

Chapter XIX

Soon afterwards I met Horatio Bakkus. With his white hair, ascetic, clean-shaved face and deep dark eyes he looked like an Italian ecclesiastic. One's glance instinctively sought the tonsure. He would come forward on to the open-air platform beneath the thick foliage of the park with the detached mien of a hierophant; and there he would sing like an angel, one of those who quire to the youngest-eyed cherubim so as not to wake them. When I made him my modest compliment he said:

"Trick, my dear sir. Trick and laziness. I might have had the _bel canto_, if I had toiled interminably; but, thank God, I've managed to carry through on self-indulgent sloth."

As he lived at Royat I saw much of him alone, Royat being such a wee place that if two sojourners venture simultaneously abroad they must of necessity meet. I found him as Lackaday had described him, a widely read scholar and an amiable and cynical companion. But in addition to these casual encounters, I was thrown daily into his society with Lackaday and Elodie. We arranged always to lunch together, Lackaday, Bakkus and myself taking it in turns to be hosts at our respective hotels. Now and then Elodie insisted on breaking the routine and acting as hostess at a restaurant in Clermont-Ferrand. It was all very pleasant. The only woman to three men, Elodie preened herself with amusing obviousness and set out to make herself

agreeable. She did it with a Frenchwoman’s natural grace. But as soon as the talk drifted into anything allusive to war or books or art or politics, she manifested an ignorance abysmal in its profundity. I was amazed that a woman should have been for years the intimate companion of two men like Lackaday and Bakkus without picking up some superficial knowledge of the matters they discussed. And I was interested, even to the pitch of my amazement, to behold the deference of both men, when her polite and vacant smile proclaimed her inability to follow the conversation. Invariably one of them would leave me to the other and turn to Elodie. It was Bakkus more often who thus broke away. He had the quick impish faculty, one of the rarest of social gifts, of suddenly arresting a woman’s attention by a phrase, apparently irrelevant, yet to her woman’s jumping mind relevant to the matter under dispute and of carrying it off into a pleasant feminine sphere. It was impish, and I believe deliberately so, for on such occasions one could catch the ironic gleam in his eyes. The man’s sincere devotion to both of them was obvious.

"Madame Patou..." I began one day, at lunch--we were talking of the tyranny of fashion, even in the idyllic lands where ladies are fully dressed in teeth necklaces and yellow ochre--"Madame Patou..."

She threw up her hands. We were lunching very well--the _petit vin_ of Auvergne is delicious--"_Mais voyons donc_--why all this ceremony among friends? Here we are, we three, and it is AndrØ, Horace, Elodie--and here we are, we four, and it is Monsieur Bakkus, and Lackaday--never will I be able to pronounce that word--and Madame Patou and Monsieur le Capitaine Hylton. Look. To my friends I am Elodie _tout court_--and you?"

It was an embarrassing moment. Andrew’s mug of a face was as expressionless as that of a sphinx. He would no more have dreamed of addressing me by my Christian name than of hailing Field-Marshal Haig as Douglas. White-haired, thin-lipped Bakkus smiled sardonically. But there was no help for it.

"My very intimate friends call me Tony," said I.

"To-ny," she echoed. "But it is charming, To-ny. A _votre santØ_, To-ny."

She held put her glass--I was sitting next to her. I clinked mine politely.

"To the health of the charming Elodie."

She was delighted. Made us all clink glasses. Bakkus said, in English:

"To the abolition of Misters, in obedience to the Lady."

"And now," cried Elodie, "what were you going to say about fashions in necklaces made of dogs’ teeth?"

We pursued our frivolous talk. Bakkus said:

"The whole of the Fall of Man arose from Eve pestering Adam for a russet-brown fig-leaf in spring time."

"It was after the fall that they made themselves aprons," said Lackaday.

"She had her eye on those fig-leaves long before," retorted Bakkus.

We laughed. There was no great provocation to mirth. But we were attuned to gaiety. My three friends were lunching with me on the terrace of the Royat Palace Hotel. It is a long, wide terrace, reaching the whole width of the façade of the building, and doors lead on to it from all the public rooms. Only half of it, directly accessible from the _salle àmanger_ is given over to restaurant tables. Ours was on the outskirts. I like to be free, to have plenty of room and air; especially on a broiling August day. We were in cool shade. A few feet below us stretched a lower terrace, with grass-plots and flowers and a fountain and gaily awned garden seats and umbrella-shaded chairs. And there over the parapet the vine-clad hill quivered in the sunshine against the blue summer sky, and around us were cheerful folk at lunch forgetful of hearts and blood-pressure in the warm beauty of the day. Perhaps now and then a stern and elderly French couple--he stolid, strongly bearded and decorated, she thin and brown, over-coiffured and over-ringed--with an elderly angular daughter, hard to marry, regarded us with eyes of disapproval. Elodie in happy mood threw off restraint, as, in more private and intimate surroundings, she would have thrown off her corset. But we cared not for the disapproval of the correct French profiteers....

"If they tried to smile," said Elodie, incidentally, "they would burst and all the gold would drop out."

Lackaday threw back his head and laughed--the first real, hearty laugh I had seen him exhibit since I had met him in France. You see the day, the food, the wine, the silly talk, the dancing wit of Bakkus, the delightful comradeship, had brought the four of us into a little atmosphere of joyousness. There was nothing very intellectual about it. In the hideous realm of pure intellectuality there could not exist even the hardiest ghost of a smile. Laughter, like love, is an expression of man’s vehement revolt against reason. So Andrew Lackaday threw himself back in his chair and laughed at Elodie’s quip.

But suddenly, as if some blasting hand had smitten him, his laughter ceased. His jaw dropped for a second and then snapped like a vice. He was sitting on my left hand, his back to the balustrade, and facing the dining-room. At the sight of him we all instinctively sobered and bent forward in questioning astonishment. He recovered himself quickly and tried to smile as if nothing had happened--but, seeing his eyes had been fixed on something behind me, I turned round.

And there, calmly walking up the long terrace towards us, was Lady Auriol Dayne.

I sprang from my chair and strode swiftly to meet her. From a grating sound behind me I knew that Lackaday had also risen. I stretched out my hand mechanically and, regardless of manners, I said:

"What the devil are you doing here?"

She withdrew the hand that she too had put forward.

"That's a nice sort of welcome."

"I'm sorry," said I. "Please consider the question put more politely."

"Well, I'm here," she replied, "because it happens to be my good pleasure."

"Then I hope you'll find lots of pleasure, my dear Auriol."

She laughed, standing as cool as you please, very grateful to the eye in tussore coat and skirt, with open-necked blouse, and some kind of rakish hat displaying her thick auburn hair in defiance of the fashion which decreed concealment even of eyebrows with flower-pot head gear. She laughed easily, mockingly, although she saw plainly the pikestaff of a Lackaday upright a few yards away from her, in a rigid attitude of parade.

"Anyhow," she said, "I must go and say how d'ye do to the General."

I gave way to her. We walked side by side to the table. She advanced to him in the most unconcerned manner. Bakkus rose politely.

"My dear General, fancy seeing you here! How delightful."

I have never seen a man's eyes devour a woman with such idiotic obviousness.

"Lady Auriol," said he, "you are the last person I ever thought of meeting." He paused for a second. Then, "May I have the pleasure of introducing--Madame Patou--Lady Auriol Dayne--Mr. Bakkus--"

"Do sit down, please, everybody," said Auriol, after the introductions. "I feel like a common nuisance. But I came by the night train and went to sleep and only woke up to find myself just in time for the fag-end of lunch."

"I am host," said I. "Won't you join us?"

What else was there to do? She glanced at me with smiling inscrutability.

"You're awfully kind, Tony. But I'm disturbing you."

The maitre d'hôtel and waiter with a twist of legerdemain set her place between myself and Lackaday.

"This is a charming spot, isn't it, Madame Patou?" she remarked.

Elodie, who had regarded her wonderingly as though she had bean a creature of another world, bowed and smiled.

"We all talk French, my dear Auriol," said I, "because Madame Patou knows

no English."

"Ah!" said Lady Auriol. "I never thought of it." She translated her remark. "I'm afraid my French is that of the British Army, where I learned most of it. But if people are kind and patient I can make myself understood."

"Mademoiselle speaks French very well," replied Elodie politely.

"You are very good to say so, Madame."

I caught questioning, challenging glances flashing across the table, each woman hostilely striving to place the other. You see, we originally sat: Elodie on my right hand, then Bakkus facing straight down the terrace, then Lackaday, then myself. It occurred to me at once that, with her knowledge of my convention-trained habits, she would argue that, at a luncheon party, either I would not have placed the lady next the man to whom she belonged, or that she was a perfectly independent guest, belonging, so to speak, to nobody. But on the latter hypothesis, what was she doing in this galley? I swear I saw the wrinkle on Lady Auriol's brow betokening the dilemma. She had known me from childhood's days of lapsed memory. I had always been. Romantically she knew Lackaday. Horatio Bakkus, with his sacerdotal air and well-bred speech and manner, evidently belonged to our own social class. But Madame Patou, who mopped up the sauce on her plate with a bit of bread, and made broad use of a toothpick, and leaned back and fanned herself with her napkin and breathed a "_Mon Dieu, qu'ilfait chaud_" and contributed nothing intelligent to the conversation, she could not accept as the detached lady invited by me to charm my two male guests. She was then driven to the former hypothesis. Madame Patou belonged in some way to the man by whose side she was not seated.

Of course, there was another alternative. I might have been responsible for the poor lady. But she was as artless as a poor lady could be. Addressing my two friends it was always AndrØ and Horace, and instinctively she used the familiar "_tu_." Addressing me she had affrightedly forgotten the pact of Christian names, and it was "Monsieur le Capitaine" and, of course, the "_vous_" which she had never dreamed of changing. Even so poor a French scholar as Lady Auriol could not be misled into such absurd paths of conjecture.

She belonged therefore, in some sort of fashion, to General Lackaday. An elderly man of the world, with his nerves on edge, has no need of wizardry to divine the psychology of such a situation.

Mistress of social forms, Lady Auriol, after sweeping Elodie into her net, caught Horatio Bakkus and through reference to her own hospital experiences during the war, wrung from him the avowal of his concerts for the wounded in Paris.

"How splendid of you! By the way, how do you spell your name? It's an uncommon one."

"With two k's."

"I wonder if you have anything to do with an old friend of my fattier, Archdeacon Bakkus?"

"My eldest brother."

"No, really? One of my earliest recollections is his buying a prize boar from my father."

"Just like the dear fellow's prodigality," said Bakkus. "He had a whole Archdeaconry to his hand for nothing. I've lately spent a couple of months with him in Westmorland, so I know."

"How small the world is," said Lady Auriol to Lackaday.

"Too small," said he.

"Oh," said Auriol blankly.

"Have you seen our good friends, the Verity-Stewarts lately?"

She had. They were in perfect health. They were wondering what had become of him.

"And indeed, General," she flashed, "what _has_ become of you?"

"It is not good," said Elodie, in quick anticipation, "that the General should neglect his English friends."

There sounded the note of proprietorship, audible to anybody. Auriol's eyes dwelt for a second on Elodie; then she turned to Lackaday.

"Madame Patou is quite right."

Said he, with one of his rare flights into imagery, "I was but a shooting star across the English firmament."

"Encore une Øtoile qui file,
File, file et disparait!"

"Oh no, my dear friend," laughed Bakkus. "He can't persuade us, Lady Auriol, that he is afflicted with the morbidezza of 1830."

"_Qu'est-ce que c'est que cela?_" asked Elodie, sharply.

"It was a fashion long ago, my dear, for poets to assume the gaiety of a funeral. Even BØranger who wrote _Le Roi d'Yvetot_--you know it--"

"Naturally, '_Il Øtait un roi d'Yvetot!_'"--cried Elodie, who had learned it at school.

"Well--of course. Even BØranger could not escape the malady of his generation. Do you remember"--his swift glance embraced us all--"Longfellow's criticism of European poets of that epoch, in his prose

masterpiece, _Hyperion?_ He refers to Salis and Matthisson, but Lamartine and people of his kidney come in--'Melancholy gentlemen' pardon, my dear Elodie, if I quote it in English--'Melancholy gentlemen to whom life was only a dismal swamp, upon whose margin they walked with cambric handkerchiefs in their hands, sobbing and sighing and making signals to Death to come and ferry them over the lake.' _Cela veut dire_," he made a marvellous French paraphrase for Elodie's benefit.

"_Comprends pas_," she shrugged at the boredom of literary allusion. "I don't see what all that has to do with AndrØ. I shall see, Mademoiselle, that he writes to his friends."

"You will be doing them a great service, Madame," replied Auriol.

There was a stiff silence. If Bakkus had stuck to his intention of driving the conversation away from embarrassing personal questions, instead of being polite to Elodie, we should have been spared this freezing moment of self-consciousness. I asked Auriol whether she had had a pleasant journey, and we discussed the discomfort of trains. From then to the end of the meal the conversation halted. It was a relief to rise and fall into groups as we strolled down the terrace to coffee. I manoeuvred Elodie and Bakkus to the front leaving Auriol and Lackaday to follow. I sought a table at the far end, for coffee; but when I turned round, I discovered that the pair had descended by the mid-way flight of three or four steps to the grass-plotted and fountained terrace below.

We sat down. Elodie asked:

"Who is that lady?"

I explained as best I could. "She is the daughter of an English nobleman, whence her title. The way to address her is 'Lady Auriol.' She did lots of work during the war, work of hospital organization in France, and now she is still working for France. I have known her since she was three years old; so she is a very great friend of mine."

Her eyes wandered to the bit of red thatched head and the gleam of the crown of a white hat just visible over the balustrade.

"She appears also to be a great friend of AndrØ."

"The General met many charming ladies during his stay in England," I lied cheerfully.

"Which means," she said with a toss of her head and an ironical smile, "that the General behaved like a real--who was it, Horace, who loved women so much? _Ah oui_--like a real Don Juan." She wagged her plump forefinger. "Oh no, I know my AndrØ."

"I could tell you stories--" said I.

"Which would not be true."

She laughed in a forced way--and her eyes again sought the tops of the couple promenading in the sunshine. She resumed her catechism.

"How old is she?"

"I don’t know exactly."

"But since you have known her since she was three years old?"

"If I began to count years at my time of life," said I, "I should die of fright."

"She looks about thirty. Wouldn’t you say so, Horace? It is droll that she has not married. Why?"

"Before the war she was a great traveller. She has been by herself all over the world in all sorts of places among wild tribes and savages. She has been far too busy to think of marriage."

Elodie looked incredulous. "One has always one’s _moments perdus._"

"One doesn’t marry in odd moments," said I.

"You and Horace are old bachelors who know nothing at all about it. Tell me. Is she very rich?"

"None of our old families are very rich nowadays," I replied, rather at a loss to account, save on the score of feminine curiosity, for this examination. If it had not been for her mother who left her a small fortune of a thousand or so a year, Auriol would have been as penniless as her two married sisters. Her brother, Lord Vintrey, once a wastrel subaltern of Household Cavalry, and, after a dashing, redeeming war record, now an expensive Lieutenant-Colonel, ate up all the ready money that Lord Mountshire could screw out of his estates. With Elodie I could not enter into these explanations.

"All the same she is passably rich," Elodie persisted. "One does not buy a costume like that under five hundred francs."

The crimson vested and sashed and tarbooshed Algerian negro brought the coffee, and poured out the five cups. We sipped. I noticed Elodie’s hand shake.

"If their coffee gets cold, so much the worse."

Bakkus, who had maintained a discreet silence hitherto, remarked:--

"Unless Andrew’s head is particularly thick, he’ll get a sunstroke in this blazing sun."

"That’s true," cried Elodie and, rising with a great scraping of chair, she rushed to the balustrade and addressed him shrilly.

"_Mais dis donc AndrØ, tu veux attraper un coup de soleil?_"

We heard his voice in reply: "_Nous rentrons_."

A few moments afterwards they mounted from the lower terrace and came towards us. Lackaday's face was set in one of its tight-lipped expressionless moods. Lady Auriol's cheek was flushed, and though she smiled conventional greeting, her eyes were very serious.

"I am sorry to have put into danger the General's health, madame," said she in her clear and British French. "But when two comrades of the Great War meet for the first time, one is forgetful."

She gave me a little sign rejecting the offered coffee. Lackaday took his cup and drank it off at one gulp. He looked at his wrist watch, the only remaining insignia of the British soldier.

"Time for our tram, Elodie."

"_C'est vrai?_" He held his wrist towards her. "_Oui, mon Dieu! Miladi--_" She funked the difficult "Lady Auriol."

"_Au revoir, Madame,_" said Auriol shaking hands.

"_Trop honorØe,_" said Elodie, somewhat defiantly. "_Au revoir, Miladi._" She made an awkward little bow. "_Et toi,_" she extended a careless left hand to Bakkus.

"I will see you to the lift," said I.

We walked down the terrace in silence to the _salon_ door just inside which was the lift which took one down some four stories to the street. Two things were obvious: the perturbation of the simple Lackaday and the jealousy of Elodie.

"_Au revoir, monsieur, et merci,_" she said, with over emphasized politeness, as we stood at the lift gates.

"Good-bye, old chap," said Lackaday and gripped my hand hard.

As soon as I returned to the end of the terrace, Bakkus rose and took his leave. Auriol and I were alone. Of course other humans were clustering round tables all the length of the terrace. But we had our little end corner to ourselves. I sat down next to her.

"Well?" said I.

She bent forward, and her face was that of the woman whom I had met in the rain and mud and stark reality of the war.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Chapter XX

If a glance could destroy, if Lady Auriol had been a Gorgon or a basilisk or a cockatrice, then had I been a slain Anthony Hylton.

"Why didn’t you tell me?"

The far-flung gesture of her arm ending in outspread fingers might have been that of Elodie.

"Tell you what, my dear?" said I.

"The whole wretched tragedy. I came to you a year ago with my heart in my hand--the only human creature living who I thought could help me. And you’ve let me down like this. It’s damnable!"

"An honourable man," said I, nettled, "doesn’t betray confidences."

"An honourable man! I like that! I gave you my confidences. Haven’t you betrayed them?"

"Not a bit," said I. "Not the faintest hint of what you have said to me have I whispered into the ear of man or woman."

She fumed. "If you had, you would be--unmentionable."

"Precisely. And I should have been equally undeserving of mention, if I had told you of the secret, or double, or ex-war--however you like to describe it--life of our friend."

"The thing is not on all fours," she said with a snap of her fingers. "You could have given me the key to the mystery--such as it is. You could have prevented me from making a fool of myself. You could, Tony. From the very start."

"At the very start, I knew little more than you did. Nothing save that he was bred in a circus, where I met him thirty years ago. I knew nothing more of his history till this April, when he told me he was Petit Patpu of the music-halls. His confidence has been given me bit by bit. The last time I saw you I had never heard of Madame Patou. It was you that guessed the woman in his life. I had no idea whether you were right or wrong."

"Yet you could have given me a hint--the merest hint--without betraying confidences--as you call it," she mouthed my phrase ironically. "It was not playing the game."

"I gathered," said I, "that playing the game was what both of you had decided to do, in view of the obviously implied lady in the background."

"Well?" she challenged.

"If it's a question of playing the game"--I had carried the war into the enemy's quarters--"may I repeat my original rude question this morning? What the devil are you doing here?"

She turned on me in a fury. "How dare you insinuate such a thing?"

"You've not come to Royat for the sake of my beautiful eyes."

"I'm under no obligation to tell you why I've come to Royat. Let us say my liver's out of order."

"Then my dear," said I, "you have come to the wrong place to cure it."

She glanced at me wrathfully, took out a cigarette, waved away with an unfriendly gesture the briquette I had drawn from my pocket, and struck one of her own matches. There fell a silence, during which I sat back in my chair, my arms on the elbow and my fingers' tips joined together, and assumed an air of philosophic meditation.

Presently she said: "There are times, Tony, when I should like to kill you."

"I am glad," said I, "to note the resumption of human relations."

"You are always so pragmatically and priggishly correct," she said.

"My dear," said I, "if you want me to sympathize with you in this impossible situation, I'll do it with all my heart. But don't round on me for either bringing it about or not preventing it."

"I was anxious to know something about Andrew Lackaday--I don't care whether you think me a fool or not"--she was still angry and defiant--"I wrote you pointedly. You did not answer my letter. I wrote again reminding you of your lack of courtesy. You replied like a pretty fellow in a morning coat at the Foreign Office and urbanely ignored my point."

She puffed indignantly. The terrace began to be deserted. There was a gap of half a dozen tables between us and the next group. The flamboyant Algerian removed the coffee cups. When we were alone again, I reiterated my explanation. At every stage of my knowledge I was held in the bond of secrecy. Lackaday's sensitive soul dreaded, more than all the concentrated high-explosive bombardment of the whole of the late German Army, the possibility of Lady Auriol knowing him as the second-rate music-hall artist.

"You are the woman of his dreams," said I. "You're an unapproachable star in mid ether, or whatever fanciful lover's image you like to credit him with. The only thing for his salvation was to make a clean cut. Don't you see?"

"That's all very pretty," said Auriol. "But what about me? A clean cut you

call it? A man cuts a woman in half and goes off to his own life and thinks he has committed an act of heroic self-sacrifice!"

I put my hand on hers. "My dear child," said I, "if Andrew Lackaday thought you were eating out your heart for him he would be the most flabbergasted creature in the world."

She bent her capable eyes on me. "That's a bit dogmatic, isn't it? May I ask if you have any warrant for what you're saying?"

"In his own handwriting."

I gave a brief account of the manuscript.

"Where is it?" she asked eagerly.

"In my safe in London--I'm sorry----"

In indignation she flashed: "I wouldn't read a word of it."

"Of course not," said I. "Nor would I put it into your hands without Lackaday's consent. Anyhow, that's my authority and warrant."

She threw the stub of her cigarette across the terrace and went back to the original cry:

"Oh Tony, if you had only given me some kind of notion!"

"I've tried to prove to you that I couldn't."

"I suppose not," she admitted wearily.

"Men have their standards. Forgive me if I've been unreasonable."

When a woman employs her last weapon, her confession of unreason, and demands forgiveness, what can a man do but proclaim himself the worm that he is? We went through a pretty scene of reconciliation.

"And now," said I, "what did Lackaday, in terms of plain fact, tell you down there?"

She told me. Apparently he had given her a prØcis of his life's history amazingly on the lines of a concentrated military despatch.

"Lady Auriol," said he, as soon as they were out of earshot, "you are here by some extraordinary coincidence. In a few hours you will be bound to hear all about me which I desired you never to know. It is best that I should tell you myself, at once."

It was extraordinary what she had learned from him in those few minutes. He had gone on remorselessly, in his staccato manner, as if addressing a parade, which I knew so well, putting before her the dry yet vital facts of his existence.

"I knew there was a woman--wife and children--what does it matter? I told you," she said. "But--oh God!" She smote her hands together hopelessly, fist into palm. "I never dreamed of anything like this."

"I am in a position to give you chapter and verse for it all," said I.

"Oh I know," she said, dejectedly, and the vivid flower that was Auriol, in a mood of dejection, suggested nothing more in the world than a drought-withered hybiscus--her colour had faded, the sweeping fulness of her drooped, her twenties caught the threatening facial lines of her forties--what can I say more? The wilting of a tropical bloom--that was her attitude--the sap and the life all gone.

"Oh I know. There's nothing vulgar about it. It goes back into the years. But still ..."

"Yes, yes, my dear," said I, quickly. "I understand."

We were alone now on the terrace. Far away, a waiter hung over the balustrade, listening to the band playing in the Park below. But for the noise of the music, all was still on the breathless August air. Presently she drew her palms over her face.

"I'm dog-tired."

"That abominable night journey," said I, sympathetically.

"I sat on a _strapontin_ in the corridor, all night," she said.

"But, my dear, what madness!" I cried horrified, although in the war she had performed journeys compared with which this would be the luxury of travel. "Why didn't you book a _coupØ-lit_, even a seat, beforehand?"

She smiled dismally. "I only made up my mind yesterday morning. I got it into my head that you knew everything there was to be known about Andrew Lackaday."

"But how did you get it?"

My question was one of amazement. No man had more out-rivalled an oyster in incommunicativeness.

It appeared that I suffered from the defects of my qualities. I had been over-diplomatic. My innocence had been too bland for my worldly years. My evasions had proclaimed me suspect. My criticism of Royat made my fear of a chance visit from her so obvious. My polite hope that I should see her in Paris on my way back, rubbed in it. If there had been no bogies about, and Royat had been the Golgotha of my picture, would not my well-known selfishness, when I heard she was at a loose end in August Paris, have summoned her with a "Do for Heaven's sake come and save me from these selected candidates for burial?" I had done it before, in analogous circumstances, I at Nauheim, she at Nuremberg. No. It was, on the contrary:

"For Heaven’s sake don’t come near me. I’ll see you in Paris if by misfortune you happen to be there."

"My dear," said I, "didn’t it occur to you that your astuteness might be overreaching itself and that you might find me here--well--in the not infrequent position of a bachelor man who desires to withdraw himself from the scrutiny of his acquaintance?"

She broke into disconcerting laughter.

"You? Tony?"

"Hang it all!" I cried angrily, "I’m not eighty yet!"

However virtuous a man may be, he resents the contemptuous denial to his claim to be a potential libertine.

She laughed again; then sobered down and spoke soothingly to me. Perhaps she did me injustice, but such a thing had never entered her mind engaged as it was with puzzlement over Lackaday. When people are afflicted with fixed ideas, they grow perhaps telepathic. Otherwise she could not account for her certainty that I could give her some information. She knew that I would not write. What was a flying visit--a night’s journey to Royat? In her wander years, she had travelled twelve hours to a place and twelve back in order to buy a cabbage. Her raid on me was nothing so wonderful.

"So certain was I," she said, "that you were hiding things from me, that when I saw him this morning at your table, I was scarcely surprised."

"My dear Auriol," said I, when she had finished the psychological sketch of her flight from Paris, "I think the man who unlearned most about women as the years went on, was Methuselah."

"A woman only puts two and two together and makes it five. It’s as simple as that."

"No," said I, "the damnable complex mystery of it, to a man’s mind, is that five should be the right answer."

She dismissed the general proposition with a shrug.

"Well, there it is. I was miserable--I’ve been miserable for months--I was hung up in Paris. I had this impulse, intuition--call it what you like. I came--I saw--and I wish to goodness I hadn’t!"

"I wasn’t so wrong after all, then," I suggested mildly.

She laughed, this time mirthlessly. "I should have taken it for a warning. Blue Beard’s chamber...."

We were silent for a while. The waiters came scurrying down with trays and cloths and cups to set the little tables for tea. The western sun had burst below the awning and flooded half the length of the terrace with light

leaving us by the wall just a strip of shade.

I said as gently as I could: "When you two parted in April, I thought you recognized it as final."

"It would have been, if only I had known," she said.

"Known what?"

She answered me with weary impatience.

"Anything definite. If he had gone to his death I could have borne it. If he had gone to any existence to which I had a clue, I could have borne it. But don't you see?" she cried, with a swift return of vitality. "Here was a man whom any woman would be proud to love--a strong thing of flesh and blood--disappearing into the mist. I said something heroical to him about the creatures of the old legends. One talks high-falutin' nonsense at times. But I didn't realize the truth of it till afterwards. A woman, even though it hurts her like the devil, prefers to keep a mental grip of a man. He's there--in Paris, Bombay, Omaha, with his wife and family, doing this, that and the other. He's still alive. He's still in some kind of human relation with you. You grind your teeth and say that it's all in the day's work. You know where you are. But when a man fades out of your life like a wraith--well--you don't know where you are. It has been maddening--the ghastly seriousness of it. I've done my best to keep sane. I'm a woman with a lot of physical energy--I've run it for all it's worth. But this uncanny business got on my nerves. If the man had not cared for me, I would have kicked myself into sense. But--oh, it's no use talking about that--it goes without saying. Besides you know as well as I do. You've already told me. Well then, you have it. The man I loved, the man who loved me, goes and disappears, like the shooting star he talked about, into space. I've done all sorts of fool things to get on his track, just to know. At last I came to you. But I had no notion of running him down in the flesh. You're sure of that, Tony, aren't you?"

The Diana in her flashed from candid eyes.

"Naturally," I answered. How could she know that Lackaday was here? I asked, in order to get to the bottom of this complicated emotional condition:

"But didn't you ever think of writing--oh, as a friend of course--to Lackaday, care of War Office, Cox's...?"

She retorted: "I'm not a sloppy school-girl, my friend."

"Quite so," said I. I paused, while the waiter brought tea. "And now that there's no longer any mystery?"

Her bosom rose with a sigh.

"I mourn my mystery, Tony."

She poured out tea. I passed the uninspiring food that accompanied it. We conversed in a lower key of tension. At last she said:

"If I don't walk, I'll break something."

A few moments afterwards we were in the street. She drew the breath of one suffering from exhausted air.

"Let us go up a hill."

Why the ordinary human being should ever desire to walk up hill I have never been able to discover. For me, the comfortable places. But with Lady Auriol the craving was symbolical of character. I agreed.

"Choose the least inaccessible," I pleaded.

We mounted the paths through the vines. At the top, we sat down. I wiped a perspiring brow. She filled her lungs with the air stirred by a faint breeze.

"Whereabouts is this circus?" she asked suddenly.

I told her, waving a hand in the direction of Clermont-Ferrand.

"How far?"

"About two or three miles."

"I'll go there this evening," she announced calmly.

"What?"

I nearly jumped off the wooden bench.

"My dear Auriol," said I, "my heart's dicky. You oughtn't to spring things like that on me."

"I don't see where the shock comes in. Why shouldn't I go to a circus if I want to?"

"It's your wanting to go that astonishes me."

"You're very easily surprised," she remarked. "You ought to take something for it."

"Possibly," said I. "But why on earth do you want to see the wretched Lackaday make a fool of himself?"

"If you take it that way," she said icily, "I'm sorry I mentioned it. I could have gone without your being a whit the wiser."

I lifted my shoulders. "After all, it's entirely your affair. You talked a while ago about mourning your mystery--which suggested a not altogether

unpoetical frame of mind."

"There s no poetry at all about it," she declared. "That's all gone. We've come to facts. I'm going to get all the facts. Crucify myself with facts, if you like. That's the only way to get at Truth."

When a woman of Auriol's worth talks like this, one feels ashamed to counter her with platitudes of worldly wisdom. She was going to the Cirque Vendramin. Nothing short of an Act of God could prevent her. I sat helpless for a few moments. At last, taking advantage of a gleam of common sense, I said:

"It's all very well for you to try to get to the bedrock of things. But what about Lackaday?"

"He's not to know."

"He'll have to know," I insisted warmly. "The circus tent is but a small affair. You'll be there under his nose." I followed the swift change on her face. "Of course--if you don't care if he sees you..."

She flashed: "You don't suppose I'm capable of such cruelty!"

"Of course not," said I.

She looked over at the twin spires of the cathedral beneath which the town slumbered in the blue mist of the late afternoon.

"Thanks, Tony," she said presently. "I didn't think of it. I should naturally have gone to the best seats, which would have been fatal. But I've been in many circuses. There's always the top row at the back, next the canvas...."

"My dear good child," I cried, "you couldn't go up there among the lowest rabble of Clermont-Ferrand!"

She glanced at me in pity and sighed indulgently.

"You talk as if you had been born a hundred years ago, and had never heard of--still less gone through--the late war. What the----" she paused, then thrust her face into mine, so that when she spoke I felt her breath on my cheek, "What the _Hell_ do you think I care about the rabble of Clermont-Ferrand?"

That she would walk undismayed into a den of hyenas or Bolsheviks or Temperance Reformers or any other benighted savages I was perfectly aware. That she would be perfectly able to fend for herself I have no doubt. But still, among the uneducated dregs of the sugar-less, match-less, tobacco-less populace of a French provincial town who attributed most of their misfortunes to the grasping astuteness of England, we were not peculiarly beloved.

This I explained to her, while she continued to smile pityingly. It was all

the more incentive to adventure. If I had assured her that she would be torn limb from limb, like an inconvincible aristocrat flaunting abroad during the early days of the French Revolution, she would have grown enthusiastic. Finally, in desperation because, in my own way, I was fond of Auriol, I put down a masculine and protecting foot.

"You're not going there without me, anyhow," said I.

"I've been waiting for that polite offer for the last half hour," she replied.

What I said, I said to myself--to the midmost self of my inmost being. I am not going to tell you what it was. This isn't the secret history of my life.

A cloud came up over the shoulder of the hills. We descended to the miniature valley of Royat.

"It's going to rain," I said.

"Let it," said Auriol unconcerned.

Then began as dreary an evening as I ever have spent.

We dined, long before anybody else, in a tempest of rain which sent down the thermometer Heaven knows how many degrees. Half-way through dinner we were washed from the terrace into the empty dining-room. There was thunder and lightning _ad libitum._

"A night like this--it's absurd," said I.

"The absurder the better," she replied. "You stay at home, Tony dear. You're a valetudinarian. I'll look after myself."

But this could not be done. I have my obstinacies as mulish as other people's.

"If you go, I go."

"As you have, according to your pampered habit, bought a car from now till midnight, I don't see how we can fail to keep dry and warm."

I had no argument left. Of course, I hate to swallow an early and rapid dinner. One did such things in the war, gladly dislocating an elderly digestion in the service of one's country. In peace time one demands a compensating leisure. But this would be comprehensible only to a well-trained married woman. My misery would have been outside Auriol's ken. I meekly said nothing. The world of young women knows nothing of its greatest martyrs.

When it starts thundering and lightening in Royat, it goes on for hours. The surrounding mountains play an interminable game of which the thunderbolt is the football. They make an infernal noise about it, and the

denser the deluge the more they exult.

Amid the futile flashes and silly thunderings--no man who has been under an intensive bombardment can have any respect left for the pitiful foolery of a thunderstorm--and a drenching downpour of rain (which is solid business on the part of Nature) we scuttled from the hired car to the pay-desk of the circus. We were disguised in caps and burberrys, and Lady Auriol had procured a black veil from some shop in Royat. We paid our fifty centimes and entered the vast emptiness of the tent. We were far too early, finding only half a dozen predecessors. We climbed to the remotest Alpine height of benches. The wet, cold canvas radiated rheumatism into our backs. A steady drip from the super-saturated tent above us descended on our heads and down our necks. Auriol buttoned the collar of her burberry and smiled through her veil.

"It’s like old times."

"Old times be anythinged," said I, vainly trying to find comfort on six inches of rough boarding.

"It’s awfully good of you to come, Tony," she said after a while. "You can’t think what a help it is to have you with me."

"If you think to mollify me with honeyed words," said I, "you have struck the wrong animal."

It is well to show a woman, now and then, that you are not entirely her dupe.

She laid her hand on mine. "I mean it, dear. Really. Do you suppose I’m having an evening out?"

We continued the intimate sparring bout for a while longer. Then we lapsed into silence and watched the place gradually fill with the populace of Clermont-Ferrand. The three top tiers soon became crowded. The rest were but thinly peopled. But there was a sufficient multitude of garlic-eating, unwashed humanity, to say nothing of the natural circus smell, to fill unaccustomed nostrils with violent sensations. A private soldier is a gallant fellow, and ordinarily you feel a comfortable sense of security in his neighbourhood; but when he is wet through and steaming, the fastidious would prefer the chance of perils. And there were many steaming warriors around us.

There we sat, at any rate, wedged in a mass as vague and cohesive as chocolate creams running into one another. I had beside me a fat, damp lady whose wet umbrella dripped into my shoes. Lady Auriol was flanked by a lean, collarless man in a cloth-cap who made sarcastic remarks to soldier friends on the tier below on the capitalist occupiers of the three-franc seats. The dreadful circus band began to blare. The sudden and otherwise unheralded entrance of a lady on a white horse followed by the ring master made us realize that the performance had begun. The show ran its course. The clowns went through their antiquated antics to the delight of the simple folk by whom we were surrounded. A child did a slack wire act,

waving a Japanese umbrella over her head. Some acrobats played about on horizontal bars. We both sat forward on our narrow bench, elbows on knees and face in hands, saying nothing, practically seeing nothing, aware only of a far off, deep down, infernal pit in which was being played the Orcagnesque prelude to a bizarre tragedy. I, who had gone through the programme before, yet suffered the spell of Auriol's suspense. Long before she had thrown aside the useless veil. In these dim altitudes no one could be recognized from the ring. Her knuckles were bent into her cheeks and her eyes were staring down into that pit of despair. We had no programme; I had not retained in my head the sequence of turns. Now it was all confused. The pervasive clowns alone seemed to give what was happening below a grotesque coherence.

Suddenly the ring was empty for a second. Then with exaggerated strides marched in a lean high-heeled monster in green silk tights reaching to his armpits, topped with a scarlet wig ending in a foot high point. He wore white cotton gloves dropping an inch from the finger tips, and he carried a fiddle apparently made out of a cigar box and a broom handle. His face painted red and white was made up into an idiot grin. He opened his mouth at the audience, who applauded mildly.

Lady Auriol still sat in her bemused attitude of suspense. I watched her perplexedly for a second or two, and then I saw she had not recognized him. I said:

"That's Lackaday."

She gasped. Sat bolt upright, and uttered an "Oh-h!" a horrible little moan, not quite human, almost that of a wounded animal, and her face was stricken into tense ugliness. Her hand, stretched out instinctively, found mine and held it in an iron grip. She said in a quavering voice:

"I wish I hadn't come."

"I wish I could get you out," said I.

She shook her head.

"No, no. It would be giving myself away. I must see it through."

She drew a deep breath, relinquished my hand, turned to me with an attempt at a smile.

"I'm all right now. Don't worry."

She sat like a statue during the performance. It was quite a different performance from the one I had seen a few days before. It seemed to fail not only in the magnetic contact between artist and audience, but in technical perfection. And Elodie, whom I had admired as a vital element in this combination, so alive, so smiling, so reponsive, appeared a merely mechanical figure, an exactly regulated automaton.

My heart sank into my shoes, already chilled with the drippings of my fat

neighbour’s umbrella. If Lackaday had burst out on Lady Auriol as the triumphant, exquisite artist, there might, in spite of the unheroic travesty of a man in which he was invested, have been some cause for pride in extraordinary, crowd-compelling achievement. The touch of genius is a miraculous solvent. But here was something second-rate, third-rate, half-hearted--though I, who knew, saw that the man was sweating blood to exceed his limitations. Here was merely an undistinguished turn in a travelling circus which folk like Lady Auriol Dayne only visited in idle moods of good-humoured derision.

He went through it not quite to the bitter end, for I noted that he cut out the finale of the elongated violin. There was perfunctory applause, a perfunctory call. After he had made his bow, hand in hand with Elodie, he retired in careless silence and was nearly knocked down by the reappearing lady on the broad white horse.

"Let us go," said Auriol.

We threaded our way down the break-neck tiers of seats and eventually emerged into the open air. Our hired car was waiting. The full moon shone down in a clear sky in the amiable way that the moon has--as though she said with an intimate smile--"My dear fellow--clouds? Rain? I never heard of such a thing. You must be suffering from some delusion. I’ve been shining on you like this for centuries." I made a casual reference to the beauty of the night.

"It ought to be still raining," said Lady Auriol.

We drove back to Royat in silence. I racked my brains for something to say, but everything that occurred to me seemed the flattest of uncomforting commonplaces.

Well, it was her affair entirely. If she had given me some opening I might have responded sympathetically. But there she sat by my side in the car, rigid and dank. For all that I could gather from her attitude, some iron had entered into her soul. She was a dead woman.

The car stopped at the hotel door. We entered. A few yards down the hall the lift waited. We went up together. I shall never forget the look on her face. I shall always associate it with the picture of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse. The lift stopped at my floor. Her room was higher.

I bade her good night.

She wrung my hand. "Good night, Tony, and my very grateful thanks."

I slipped out and watched her whisked, an inscrutable mystery, upwards.

Chapter XXI

The first sign of commotion in the morning was a note from Bakkus, whose turn it was to act as luncheon host. Our friends at Clermont-Ferrand, said he, had cried off. They had also asked him to go over and see them. Would I be so kind as to regard this as a _dies non_ in the rota of our pleasant gatherings?

I dressed and bought some flowers, which I sent up to Lady Auriol with a polite message. The chasseur returned saying that Miladi had gone out about half an hour before.

"You don't mean that she has left the hotel with her luggage?"

The boy smiled reassurance. She had only gone for a walk. I breathed freely. It would have been just like her to go off by the first train.

I suffered my treatment, drank my glasses of horrible water and again enquired at the hotel for Lady Auriol. She had not yet returned. Having nothing to do, I took my _Moniteur du Puy de Dôme_, which I had not read, to the cafØ which commands a view of the park gates and the general going and coming of Royat. Presently, from the tram terminus I saw advancing the familiar gaunt figure of Lackaday. I was glad, I scarcely knew why, to note that he wore a grey soft felt instead of the awful straw hat. I rose to greet him, and invited him to my table.

"I would join you with pleasure," said he, "but I am thinking of paying my respects to Lady Auriol."

When I told him that he would not find her, he sat down. We could keep an eye on the hotel entrance, I remarked.

"Our lunch with Bakkus is off," said I.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I rang him up early this morning. Elodie isn't quite herself to-day."

"The thunder last night, perhaps."

He nodded. "Women have nerves."

That something had happened was obvious. I remembered last night's half-hearted performance.

"By the way," said I, "Bakkus mentioned in his note that he was going over to Clermont-Ferrand to see you."

"Yes," said Lackaday, "I left him there. He has marvellous tact and influence when he chooses to exert them. A man thrown away on the trivialities of life. He was born to be a Cardinal. I'm so glad you have taken to him."

I murmured mild eulogy of Bakkus. We spoke idly of his beautiful voice.

Conversation languished, Lackaday's eyes being turned to the entrance of the hotel some fifty yards away up the sloping street.

"I'm anxious not to miss Lady Auriol," he said at last. "It will be my only chance of seeing her. We're off to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"

"Our engagement ends to-night. We're due at Vichy next week."

I had not realized the flight of the pleasant days. But yet--I was puzzled. Yesterday there had been no talk of departure. I mentioned my surprise.

"I have ended the engagement of my own accord," said he. "The management had engaged another star turn for to-day--overlapping mine. A breach of contract which gave me the excuse for terminating it. I don't often stand on the vain dignity of the so-called artist, but this time I've been glad to do so."

"The atmosphere of the circus is scarcely congenial," said I.

"That's it. I'm too big for my boots, or my head's too big for my hat. And the management are not sorry to save a few days' salary."

"But during these few days----?"

"We wait at Vichy."

He spoke woodenly, his lined face set hard.

"I shall miss you tremendously, my dear fellow," said I.

"I shall miss your company even more," said he.

"We won't, at any rate, say good-bye to-day," I ventured. "There are cars to be hired, and Vichy from the car point of view is close by."

"You, my dear Hylton, I shall be delighted to see."

The emphasis on the pronoun would have rendered his meaning clear to even a more obtuse man than myself. No Lady Auriols flaunting over to Vichy.

"May I ask when you came to this decision?" I enquired. "Bakkus's note suggested only a postponement of our meeting."

"Last night," said he. "That's one reason why I sent for Bakkus."

"I see," said I. But I did not tell him what I saw. It looked as though the gallant fellow were simply running away.

Soon afterwards, to my great relief, there came Lady Auriol swinging along on the other side of the pavement. The cafØ, you must know, forms a corner. To the left, the park and the tram terminus; to the right, the street

leading to the post office and then dwindling away vaguely up the hill. It was along this street that Lady Auriol came, short-skirted, flushed with exercise, rather dusty and dishevelled. I stood and waved an arresting hand. She hesitated for a second and then crossed the road and met us outside the cafØ. I offered a seat at our table within. She declined with a gesture. We all stood for a while and then went diagonally over to the park entrance.

"I've been such a walk," she declared. "Miles and miles--through beautiful country and picturesque villages. You ought to explore. It's worth it."

"I know the district of old," said Lackaday.

"I'm tremendously struck with the beauty of the women of Auvergne."

"They're the pure type of old Gaul," said Lackaday.

She put up a hand to straying hair. "I'm falling to pieces. I have but two desires in the world--a cold bath and food. Perhaps I shall see you later."

He stood unflinching, like a soldier condemned for crime. I wondered at her indifference. He said:

"Unfortunately I can't have that pleasure. My engagements take up the rest of the day, and tomorrow I leave Clermont-Ferrand. I shan't have another opportunity of seeing you."

Their eyes met and his, calm yet full of pain, dominated. She thrust her hand through my arm.

"Very well then, let us get into the shade."

We entered the park, found an empty bench beneath the trees and sat down, Auriol between us. She said:

"Do you mean at Royat or in the world in general?"

"Perhaps the latter."

She laughed queerly. "As chance has thrown us together here, it will possibly do the same somewhere else."

"My sphere isn't yours," said he. "If it hadn't been for the accident of Hylton being here, we should not have met now."

"Captain Hylton had nothing to do with it," she said warmly. "I had no notion that you were at Clermont-Ferrand."

"I'm quite aware of that, Lady Auriol."

She flushed, vexed at having said a foolish thing.

"And Captain Hylton had no notion that I was coming."

"Perfectly," said Lackaday.

"Well?" she said after a pause.

"I came over to Royat, this morning," said Lackaday, "to call on you and bid you good-bye."

"Why?" she asked in a low voice.

"It appeared to be ordinary courtesy."

"Was there anything particular you wanted to say to me?"

"Perhaps to supplement just the little I could tell you yesterday afternoon."

"Captain Hylton supplemented it after you left. Oh, he was very discreet. But there were a few odds and ends that needed straightening out. If you had been frank with me from the beginning, there would have been no need of it. As it was, I had to clear everything up. If I had known exactly. I should not have gone to the circus last night."

His eyelids fluttered like those of a man who has received a bullet through him, and his mouth set grimly.

"You might have spared me that," said he. He bent forward. "Hylton, why did you let her do it?"

"I might just as well have tried to stop the thunder," said I, seeing no reason why this young woman should not bear the blame for her folly.

"A circus is a comfortless place of entertainment," he said, in the familiar, even voice. "I wish it had been a proper theatre. What did you think of the performance?"

She straightened herself upright, turned and looked at him; then looked away in front of her: a sharp breath or two caused a little convulsive heave of her bosom; to my astonishment I saw great tears run down her cheeks on to her hands tightly clasped on her lap. As soon as she realized it, she dashed her hands roughly over her eyes. Lackaday ventured the tip of his finger on her sleeve.

"It’s a sorry show, isn’t it? I’m not very proud of myself. But perhaps you understand now why I left you in ignorance."

"Yet you told Anthony. Why not me?"

I was about to rise, this being surely a matter for them to battle out between themselves, but I at once felt her powerful grip on my arm. Whether she was afraid of herself or of Lackaday, I did not know. Anyway, I seemed to represent to her some kind of human dummy which could be used, at need, as a sentimental buffer.

"I presume," she continued, "I was quite as intimate a friend as Anthony?"

"Quite," said he. "But Hylton's a man and you're a woman. There can be no comparison. You are on different planes of sentiment. For instance, Hylton, loyal friend as he is, has not to my knowledge done me the honour of shedding tears over Petit Patou."

I felt horribly out of place on the bench in this public leafy park, beside these two warring lovers. But it was most humanly interesting. Lackaday seemed to be reinvested with the dignity of the man as I had first met him, a year ago.

"Anthony--" I could not help feeling that her repeated change of her term of reference to me, from the formal Captain Hylton to my Christian name, sprang from an instinctive desire to put herself on more intimate terms with Lackaday--"Anthony," she said in her defiant way, "would have cried, if he could."

Lackaday's features relaxed into his childlike smile.

"Ah," said he, "'The little more and how much it is. The little less and how far away.'"

She was silent. Although the situation was painful, I could not help feeling the ironical satisfaction that she was getting the worst of the encounter. I was glad, because I thought she had treated him cruelly. The unprecedented tears, however, were signs of grace. Yet the devil in her suggested a _riposte_.

"I hope Madame Patou is quite well."

Lackaday's smile faded into the mask.

"Last night's thunderstorm upset her a little--but otherwise--yes--she is quite well."

He rose. Lady Auriol cried:

"You're not going already?"

His ear caught a new tone, for he smiled again.

"I must get back to Clermont-Ferrand. Goodbye, Hylton."

We shook hands.

"Good-bye, old chap," said I. "We'll meet soon."

Auriol rose and turned on me an ignoring back. As I did not seem to exist any longer, I faded shadow-like away to the park gate, where I hung about until Auriol should join me.

As to what happened between them then, I must rely on her own report, which, as you shall learn, she gave me later.

They stood for a while after I had gone. Then he held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Lady Auriol," said he.

"No," she said. "There are things which we really ought to say to each other. You do believe I wish I had never come?"

"I can quite understand," said he, stiffly.

"It hurts," she said.

"Why should it matter so much?" he asked.

"I don't know--but it does."

He drew himself up and his face grew stern.

"I don't cease to be an honourable man because of my profession; or to be worthy of respect because I am loyal to sacred obligations."

"You put me in the wrong," she said. "And I deserve it. But it all hurts. It hurts dreadfully. Can't you see? The awful pity of it? You of all men to be condemned to a fife like this. And you suffer too. It all hurts."

"Remember," said he, "it was the life to which I was bred."

She felt hopeless. "It's my own fault for coming," she said. "I should have left things as they were when we parted in April. There was beauty--you made it quite clear that our parting was final. You couldn't have acted otherwise. Forgive me for all I've said. I pride myself on being a practical woman; but--for that reason perhaps--I'm unused to grappling with emotional situations. If I've been unkind, it's because I've been stabbing myself and forgetting I'm stabbing you at the same time."

He walked a pace or two further with her. For the first time he seemed to recognize what he, Andrew Lackaday, had meant to her.

"I'm sorry," he said gravely. "I never dreamed that it was a matter of such concern to you. If I had, I shouldn't have left you in any doubt. To me you were the everything that man can conceive in woman. I wanted to remain in your memory as the man the war had made me. Vanity or pride, I don't know. We all have our failings. I worshipped you as the _Princesse Loinlaine_. I never told you that I am a man who has learned to keep himself under control. Perhaps under too much control. I shouldn't tell you now, if----"

"You don't suppose I'm a fool," she interrupted. "I knew. And the Verity-Stewarts knew. And even my little cousin Evadne knew."

They still strolled along the path under the trees. He said after a while:

"I’m afraid I have made things very difficult for you."

She was pierced with remorse. "Oh, how like you! Any other man would have put it the other way round and accused me of making things difficult for him. And he would have been right. For I did come here to get news of you from Anthony Hylton. He was so discreet that I felt that he could tell me something. And I came and found you and have made things difficult for you."

He said in his sober way: "Perhaps it is for the best that we have met and had this talk. We ought to have had it months ago, but--" he turned his face wistfully on her--"we couldn’t, because I didn’t know. Anyhow, it’s all over."

"Yes," she sighed. "It’s all over. We’re up against the stone wall of practical life."

"Quite so," said he. "I am Petit Patou, the mountebank; my partner is Madame Patou, whom I have known since I was a boy of twenty, to whom I am bound by indissoluble ties of mutual fidelity, loyalty and gratitude; and you are the Lady Auriol Dayne. We live, as I said before, in different spheres."

"That’s quite true," she said. "We have had our queer romance. It won’t hurt us. It will sweeten our lives. But, as you say, it’s over. It has to be over."

"There’s no way out," said he. "It’s doubly locked. Good-bye."

He bent and kissed her hand. To the casual French valetudinarians sitting and strolling in the park, it was nothing but a social formality. But to Auriol the touch of his lips meant the final parting of their lives, the consecrated burial of their love.

She lingered for a few moments watching his long, straight back disappear round the corner of the path, and then turned and joined me by the park gate. On our way to the hotel the only thing she said was:

"I don’t seem to have much chance, do I, Tony?"

It was after lunch, while we sat, as the day before, at the end of the terrace, that she told me of what had taken place between Lackaday and herself, while I had been hanging about the gate. I must confess to pressing her confidence. Since I was lugged, even as a sort of _raisonneur_, into their little drama, I may be pardoned for some curiosity as to development. I did not seem, however, to get much further. They had parted for ever, last April, in a not unpoetic atmosphere. They had parted for ever now in circumstances devoid of poetry. The only bit of dramatic progress was the mutual avowal, apparently dragged out of them. It was almost an anticlimax. And then dead stop. I put these points before her. She agreed dismally. Bitterly reproached herself for giving way in Paris to womanish folly; also for deliberately bringing about the morning’s

explanation.

"You were cruel--which is utterly unlike you," I said, judicially.

"That horrible green, white and red thing haunted me all night--and that fat woman bursting out of her clothes. I felt shrivelled up. If only I had left things as they were!" She harped always on that note. "I thought I could walk myself out of my morbid frame of mind. Oh yes--you're quite right--morbid--unlike me. I walked miles and miles. I made up my mind to return to Paris by the night train. I should never see him again. The whole thing was dead. Killed. Washed out. I had got back some sense when I ran into the two of you. It seemed so ghastly to go on talking in that cold, dry way. I longed to goad him into some sort of expression of himself--to find the man again. That's why I told him about going to the circus last night."

She went on in this strain. Presently she said: "I could shed tears of blood over him. Don't think I'm filled merely with selfish disgust. As I told him--the pity of it--all that he must have suffered--for he has suffered, hasn't he?"

"He has gone through Hell," said I.

She was silent for a few moments. Then she said: "What's the good of going round and round in a circle? You either understand or you don't."

By way of consolation I mendaciously assured her that I understood. I don't think I understand now. I doubt whether she understood herself. Her emotions were literally going round and round in a circle, a hideous merry-go-round with fixed staring features, to be passed and repassed in the eternal gyration. Horror of Petit Patou. Her love for Lackaday. Madame Patou. Hatred of Lacka-day. Scorching self-contempt for seeking him out. Petit Patou and Madame Patou. Lackaday crucified. Infinite pity for Lackaday. General Lackaday. Old dreams. The lost illusion. The tomb of love. Horror of Petit Patou--and so _da capo_, endlessly round and round.

At least, this figure gave me the only clue to her frame of mind. If she went on gyrating in this way indefinitely, she must go mad. No human consciousness could stand it. For sanity she must stop at some point. The only rational halting-place was at the Tomb. If I knew my Auriol, she would drop a flower and a tear on it, and then would start on a bee-line for Central Tartary, or whatever expanse of the world's surface offered a satisfactory field for her energies.

She swallowed the stone-cold, half-remaining coffee in her cup and rose and stretched herself, arms and back and bust, like a magnificent animal, the dark green, silken knitted jumper that she wore revealing all her great and careless curves, and drew a long breath and smiled at me.

"I've not slept for two nights and I've walked twelve miles this morning. I'll turn in till dinner." She yawned. "Poor old Tony," she laughed. "You can have it at a Christian hour this evening."

"The one bright gleam in a hopeless day," said I.

She laughed again, blew me a kiss and went her way to necessary repose.

I remained on the terrace a while longer, in order to finish a long corona-corona, forbidden by my doctors. But I reflected that as the showman makes up on the swings what he loses on the roundabouts, so I made up on the filthy water what I lost on the cigars. How I provided myself with excellent corona-coronas in Royat, under the Paris price, I presume, of ten francs apiece, wild reporters will never drag out of me. I mused, therefore, over the last smokable half-inch, and at last, discarding it reluctantly, I sought well-earned slumber in my room. But I could not sleep. All this imbroglio kept me awake. Also the infernal band began to play. I had not thought--indeed, I had had no time to think of the note from Bakkus which I had received the first thing in the morning, and of Lackaday's confirmation of the summons to the ailing Elodie. Women, said he, had nerves. The thunder, of course. But, thought I, with elderly sagacity, was it all thunder?

As far as I could gather, from Lackaday's confessions he had never given Elodie cause for jealousy from the time they had become Les Petit Patou. Her rout of the suggestive Ernestine proved her belief in his insensibility to woman's attractions during the war. She had never heard of Lady Auriol. Lady Auriol, therefore, must have bounded like a tiger into the placid compound of her life. Reason enough for a _crise des nerfs_. Even I, who had nothing to do with it, found my equilibrium disturbed.

Lady Auriol and I dined together. She declared herself rested and in her right and prosaic mind.

"I have no desire to lose your company," said I, "so I hope there's no more talk of an unbooked _strapontin_ on the midnight train."

"No need," she replied. "He's leaving Clermont-Ferrand tomorrow. I'll keep to my original programme and enjoy fresh air until a wire summons me back to Paris. That's to say if you can do with me."

"If you keep on looking as alluring as you are this evening," said I, "perhaps I mayn't be able to do without you."

"I wonder why I've never been able to fall in love with a man of your type, Tony," she remarked in her frank, detached way. "You--by which I mean hundreds of men like you, much younger, of course--you are of my world, you understand the half-said thing, your conduct during the war has been irreproachable, you've got a heart beneath a cynical exterior, you've got brains, you're as clean as a new pin, you're an agreeable companion, you can turn a compliment in a way that even a savage like me can appreciate, and yet----"

"And yet," I interrupted, "when you're presented with a whole paper, row on row, of new pins, you're left cold because choice is impossible." I smiled sadly and sipped my wine. "Now I know what I am, one of a row of nice,

clean, English-made pins."

"It's you that are being rude to yourself, not I," she laughed. "But you are of a type typical, and in your heart you're very proud of it. You wouldn't be different from what you are for anything in the world."

"I would give a good deal," said I, "to be different from what I am--but--from the ideal of myself--no."

She was quite right. Although I may not have sound convictions, thank Heaven I've sacred prejudices. They have kept me more or less straight in my unimaginative British fashion during a respectable lifetime. So far am I from being a Pharisee, that I exclaim: "Thank God I am as other decent fellows are."

We circled pleasantly round the point until she returned to her original proposition--her wonder that she had never been able to fall in love with a man of my type.

"It's very simple," said I. "You distrust us. You know that if you suddenly said to one of us, 'Let us go to Greenland and wear bearskins and eat blubber'; or, 'Let us fit up the drawing-room with incubators for East-end babies doomed otherwise to die,' he would vehemently object. And there would be rows and the married life of cat and dog."

She said: "Am I really as bad as that, Tony?"

"You are," said I.

She shook her head. "No," she replied, after a pause. "In the depths of myself I'm as conventional as you are. That's why I said I was puzzled to know why I had never fallen in love with any one of you. I had my deep reasons, my dear Tony, for saying it. I'm bound to my type and my order. God knows I've seen enough and know enough to be free. But I'm not. Last night showed me that I'm not."

"And that's final, my dear?" said I.

She helped herself to salad with an air of bravura. She helped herself, to my surprise, to a prodigious amount of salad.

"As final as death," she replied.

* * * * *

There had been billed about the place a Grand Concert du Soir in the Casino de Royat. The celebrated tenor, M. Horatio Bakkus. The Casino having been burned down in 1918, the concerts took place under the bandstand in the park.

After dinner we found places, among the multitude, on the Casino Cafe Terrace overlooking the bandstand, and listened to Bakkus sing. I explained Bakkus, more or less, to Auriol. Although she could not accept Lackaday

as Petit Patou, she seemed to accept Bakkus, without question, as a professional singer. The concert over, he joined us at our little japanned iron table, and acknowledged her well-merited compliments--I tell you, he sang like a minor Canon in an angelic choir--with, well, with the well-bred air of a minor Canon in an angelic choir. With easy grace he dismissed himself and talked knowledgeably and informatively of the antiquities and the beauties of Auvergne. To most English folk it was an undiscovered country. We must steal a car and visit Orcival. Hadn't I heard of it? France's gem of Romanesque churches? And the Château--ages old---with its _charmille_--the towering maze-like walks of trees kept clipped in scrupulous formality by an old gardener during the war--the _charmille_ designed by no less a genius than Le Nôtre, who planned the wonders of Versailles and the exquisite miniature of the garden of Nîmes? To-morrow must we go.

This white-haired, luminous-eyed ascetic--he drank but an orangeade through post-war straws--had kept us spellbound with his talk. I glanced at Auriol and read compliance in her eye.

"Will you accompany us ignorant people and act as cicerone?"

"With all the pleasure in life," said Bakkus.

"What time shall we start?"

"Would ten be too early?"

"Lady Auriol and I are old campaigners."

"I call for you at ten. It is agreed?"

We made the compact. I lifted my glass. He sputtered response through the post-war straws resting in the remains of his orangeade. He rose to go, pleading much correspondence before going to bed. We rose too. He accompanied us to the entrance to our hotel. At the lift, he said:

"Can you give me a minute?"

"As many as you like," said I, for it was still early.

We sped Lady Auriol upwards to her repose, and walked out through the hall into the soft August moonlight.

"May I tread," said he, "on the most delicate of grounds?"

"It all depends," said I, "on how delicately you do it."

He made a courteous movement of his hand and smiled. "I'll do my best. I take it that you're very fully admitted into Andrew Lackaday's confidence."

"To a great extent," I admitted.

"And--forgive me if I am impertinent--you have also that of the lady whom

we have just left?"

"Really, my dear Bakkus----" I began.

"It is indeed a matter of some importance," he interposed quickly. "It concerns Madame Patou--Elodie. Rightly or wrongly, she received a certain impression from your charming luncheon party of yesterday. Andrew, as you are aware, is not the man with whom a woman can easily make a scene. There was no scene. A hint. With that rat-trap air of finality with which I am, for my many failings, much more familiar than yourself, he said: 'We will cancel our engagement and go to Vichy.' This morning, as I wrote, I was called to Clermont-Ferrand. Madame Patou, you understand, has the temperament of the South. Its generosity is apt to step across the boundaries of exaggeration. In my capacity of friend of the family, I had a long interview with her. You have doubtless seen many such on the stage. I must say that Andrew, to whom the whole affair appeared exceedingly distasteful, had announced his intention of obeying the rules of common good manners and leaving his farewell card on Lady Auriol. Towards the end of our talk it entered the head of Madame Patou that she would do the same. I pointed out the anomaly of the interval between the two visits. But the head of a Marseillaise is an obstinate one. She dressed, put on her best hat--there is much that is symbolical in a woman's best hat, as doubtless a man of the world like yourself has observed--and took the tram with me to Royat. We alighted at the further entrance to the park, and came plump upon a leave-taking between Lackaday and Lady Auriol. You know there is a turn--some masking shrubs--we couldn't help seeing through them. She was for rushing forward. I restrained her. A second afterwards, Andrew ran into us. For me, at any rate, it was a most unhappy situation. If he had fallen into a rage, like ninety-nine men out of a hundred, and accused us of spying, I should have known how to reply. But that's where you can never get hold of Andrew Lackaday. He scorns such things. He said in his ramrod fashion: 'It's good of you to come to meet me, Elodie. I was kept longer than I anticipated.' He stopped the Clermont-Ferrand tram, nodded to me, and, with his hand under Elodie's elbow, helped her in."

"May I ask why you tell me all this?" I asked.

"Certainly," said he, and his dark eyes glittered in the moonlight. "I give the information for what it may be worth to you as a friend, perhaps as adviser, of both parties."

"You are assuming, Mr. Bakkus," I answered rather stiffly, "that Madame Patou's unfortunate impressions are in some way justified."

It was a most unpleasant conversation. I very much resented discussing Lady Auriol with Horatio Bakkus.

"Not at all," said he. "But Fate has thrown you and me into analogous positions--we are both elderly men--me as between Lackaday and Madame Patou, you as between Lady Auriol and Lackaday."

"But, damn it all, man," I cried angrily, "what have I just been saying? How dare you assume there's anything between them save the ordinary

friendship of a distinguished soldier and an English lady?"

"If you can only assure me that there is nothing but that ordinary friendship, you will take a weight off my mind and relieve me of a great responsibility."

"I can absolutely assure you," I cried hotly, "that by no remote possibility can there be anything else between Lady Auriol Dayne and Petit Patou."

He thrust out both his hands and fervently grasped the one I instinctively put forward.

"Thank you, thank you, my dear Hylton. That's exactly what I wanted to know. _Au revoir_. I think we said ten o'clock."

He marched away briskly. With his white hair gleaming between his little black felt hat cocked at an angle and the collar of his flapping old-fashioned opera-cloak, he looked like some weird bird of the night.

I entered the hotel feeling the hot and cold of the man who has said a damnable thing. Through the action of what kinky cell of the brain I had called the dear gallant fellow "Petit Patou," instead of "Lackaday," I was unable to conjecture.

I hated myself. I could have kicked myself. I wallowed in the unreason of a man vainly seeking to justify himself. The last thing in the world I wanted to do was to see Horatio Bakkus again. I went to bed loathing the idea of our appointment.

Chapter XXII

Lady Auriol, myself and the car met punctually at the hotel door at ten o'clock. There was also a _chasseur_ with Lady Auriol's dust-coat and binoculars, and a _concierge_ with advice. We waited for Bakkus. Auriol, suddenly bethinking herself of plain chocolate, to the consumption of which she was addicted on the grounds of its hunger-satisfying qualities, although I guaranteed her a hearty midday meal on the occasion of the present adventure, we went down the street to the _Marquise de SØvignØ_ shop and bought some. This took time, because she lingered over several varieties devastating to the appetite. I paid gladly. If we all had the same ideas as to the employment of a happy day, it would be a dull world. We went back to the car. Still no Bakkus. We waited again. I railed at the artistic temperament. Pure, sheer bone idleness, said I.

"But what can he be doing?" asked Auriol.

I, who had received through Lackaday many lights on Bakkus's character, was

at no loss to reply.

"Doing? Why, snoring. He'll awake at midday, stroll round here and expect to find us smiling on the pavement. We give him five more minutes."

At the end of the five minutes I sent the _concierge_ off for a guide-book; much more accurate, I declared, than Bakkus was likely to be, and at half-past ten by my watch we started. Although I railed at the sloth of Bakkus, I rejoiced in his absence. My over-night impression had not been dissipated by slumber.

"I'm not sorry," said I, as we drove along. "Our friend is rather too much of a professed conversationalist."

"You also have a comfortable seat which possibly you would have had to give up to your guest," said Auriol.

"How you know me, my dear," said I, and we rolled along very happily.

I think it was one of the pleasantest days I have ever passed in the course of a carefully spent life. Auriol was at her best. She had thrown off the harried woman of affairs. She had put a nice little tombstone over the grave of her romance, thus apparently reducing to beautiful simplicity her previous complicated frame of mind. For aught I could have guessed, not a cloud had ever dimmed the Diana serenity of her soul. If I said that she laid herself out to be the most charming of companions, I should be accusing her of self-consciousness. Rather, let me declare her to have been so instinctively. Vanity apart, I stood for something tangible in her life. She could not remember the time when I had not been her firm friend. Between my first offering of chocolates and my last over a quarter of a century had lapsed. As far as a young woman can know a middle-aged man, she knew me outside in. If she came to me for my sympathy, she knew that she had the right. If she twitted me on my foibles, she knew that I granted her the privilege, with affectionate indulgence.

Now, perhaps you may wonder why I, not yet decrepit, did not glide ever so imperceptibly in love with Lady Auriol, who was no longer a dew-besprinkled bud of a girl and therefore beyond the pale of my sentimental inclinations. Well, just as she had avowed that she could not fall in love with a man of my type, so was it impossible for me to fall in love with a woman of hers. Perhaps some dark-eyed devil may yet lure me to destruction, or some mild, fair-haired, comfortable widow may entice me to domesticity. But the joy and delight of my attitude towards Auriol was its placid and benignant avuncularity. We were the best and frankest friends in the world.

And the day was an August hazy dream of a day. We wound along the mountain roads, first under overhanging greenery and then, almost suddenly, remote, in blue ether. We hung on precipices overlooking the rock-filled valleys of old volcanic desolation. Basaltic cliffs rose up from their bed of yellow cornfields, bare and stark, yet, in the noontide shimmer, hesitating in their eternal defiance of God and man. We ascended to vast tablelands of infinite scrub and yellow broom, and the stern peaks of the Puy de Dôme mountains, a while ago seen like giants, appeared like rolling hillocks;

but here and there a little white streak showed that the snow still lingered and would linger on until the frosts of autumn bound it in chains to await the universal winding-sheet of winter. Climate varied with the varying altitude of the route. Here, on a last patch of mountain ground, were a man or two and a woman or two and odd children, reaping and binding; there, after a few minutes' ascent, on another sloping patch, a solitary peasant ploughed with his team of oxen. Everywhere on the declivitous waysides, tow-haired, blue-eyed children guarded herds of goats, as their forbears had done in the days of Vercingetorix, the Gaul. Nowhere, save in the dimly seen remotenesses of the valleys, where vestiges of red-roofed villages emerged through the fertile summer green, was there sign of habitation. Whence came they, these patient humans, wresting their life from these lonely spots of volcanic wildernesses?

Now and then, on a lower hump of mountain, appeared the ruined tower of a stronghold fierce and dominating long ago. There the lord had all the rights of the _seigneur_, as far as his eye could reach. He had men-at-arms in plenty, and could ride down to the valley and could provision himself with what corn and meat he chose, and could return and hold high revel. But when the winter came, how cold must he have been, for all the wood with its stifling smoke that he burned in his crude stone hall. And Madame the Countess, his wife, and her train of highborn young women--imagine the cracking chilblains on the hands of the whole fair community.

"Does the guide-book say that?" asked Auriol, on my development of this pleasant thesis.

"Is a guide-book human?"

"It doesn't unweave rainbows. As a _cicerone_ you're impossible. I regret Horatio Bakkus."

Still, in spite of my prosaic vision, we progressed on an enjoyable pilgrimage. I am not giving you an itinerary. I merely mention features of a day's whirl which memory has recaptured. We lunched in that little oasis of expensive civilization, Mont Dore. Incidentally we visited Orcival, with its Romanesque church and château, the objective of our expedition, and found it much as Bakkus's glowing eloquence had described. From elderly ladies at stalls under the lee of the church we bought picture post cards. We wandered through the deeply shaded walks of the _charmille_, as trimly kept as the maze of Hampton Court and three times the height. We did all sorts of other things. We stopped at wild mountain gorges alive with the rustle of water and aglow with wild-flowers. We went on foot through one-streeted, tumble-down villages and passed the time of day with the kindly inhabitants. And the August sun shone all the time.

We reached Royat at about six o'clock and went straight up to our rooms. On my table some letters awaited me; but instead of finding among them the apology from Bakkus which I had expected, I came across a telephone memorandum asking me to ring up Monsieur Patou at the Hôtel Moderne, Vichy, as soon as I returned.

After glancing through my correspondence, I descended to the bureau and there found Auriol in talk with the _concierge_. She broke off and waved a telegram at me.

"The end of my lotus-eating. The arrangements are put through and I'm no longer hung up. So"--she made a little grimace--"it's the midnight train to Paris."

"Surely to-morrow will do," I protested.

"To-morrow never does," she retorted.

"As you will," said I, knowing argument was hopeless.

Meanwhile the _concierge_ was 'allo'-ing lustily into the telephone.

"I ought to have stuck to head-quarters," she said, moving away into the lounge. "It's the first time I've ever mixed up business and--other things. Anyhow," she smiled, "I've had an adorable day. I'll remember it in Arras."

"Arras?"

"Roundabout." She waved vaguely. "I'll know my exact address to-morrow."

"Please let me have it."

"What's the good unless you promise to write to me?"

"I swear," said I.

"Pardon, Miladi," called the _concierge_, receiver in hand. "The _gare de Clermont-Ferrand_ says there is no _place salon-lit_ or _coupØ-lit_ free in the train to-night. But there is _one place de milieu_, _premiere_, not yet taken."

"Reserve it then and tell them you're sending a _chasseur_ at once with the money." She turned to me. "My luck's in."

"Luck!" I cried. "To get a middle seat in a crowded carriage, for an all-night journey, with the windows shut?"

She laughed. "Why is it, my dear Tony, you always seem to pretend there has never been anything like a war?"

She went upstairs to cleanse herself and pack. I remained master of the telephone. In the course of time I got on to the Hôtel Moderne, Vichy. Eventually I recognized Lackaday's voice. The preliminaries of fence over, he said:

"I wonder whether it would be trespassing too far on your friendship to ask you to pay your promised visit to Vichy to-morrow?"

The formality of his English, which one forgot when talking to him face to

face, was oddly accentuated by the impersonal tones of the telephone.

"I'll motor over with pleasure," said I. The prospect pleased me. It was only sixty kilometres. I was wondering what the deuce I should do with myself all alone.

"You're sure it wouldn't be inconvenient? You have no other engagement?"

I informed him that, my early morning treatment over, I was free as air.

"Besides," said I, "I shall be at a loose end. Lady Auriol's taking the midnight train to Paris."

"Oh!" said he.

There was a pause.

"'Allo!" said I.

His voice responded: "In that case, I'll come to Clermont-Ferrand by the first train and see you."

"Nonsense," said I.

But he would have it his own way. Evidently the absence of Lady Auriol made all the difference. I yielded.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"I'll tell you when I see you," said he. "I don't know the trains, but I'll come by the first. Your _concierge_ will look it up for you. Thanks very much. Good-bye."'

"But, my dear fellow----" I began.

But I spoke into nothingness. He had rung off.

Auriol and I spent a comfortable evening together. There was no question of Lackaday. For her part, she raised none. For mine--why should I disturb her superbly regained balance with idle chatter about our morrow's meeting? We talked of the past glories of the day; of an almost forgotten day of disastrous picnic in the mountains of North Wales, when her twelve-year-old sense of humour detected the artificial politeness with which I sought to cloak my sodden misery; of all sorts of pleasant far-off things; of the war; of what may be called the war-continuation-work in the devastated districts in which she was at present engaged. I reminded her of our fortuitous meetings, when she trudged by my side through the welter of rain and liquid mud, smoking the fag-end of my last pipe of tobacco.

"One lived in those days," she said with a full-bosomed sigh.

"By the dispensation of a merciful Providence," I said, "one hung on to a strand of existence."

"It was fine!" she declared.

"It was--for the appropriate adjective," said I, "consult any humble member of the British Army."

We had a whole, long evening's talk, which did not end until I left her in the train at Clermont-Ferrand.

On our midnight way thither, she said:

"Now I know you love me, Tony."

"Why now?" I asked.

"How many people are there in the world whom you would see off by a midnight train, three or four miles from your comfortable bed?"

"Not many," I admitted.

"That's why I want you to feel I'm grateful." She sought my hand and patted it. "I've been a dreadful worry to you. I've been through a hard time." This was her first and only reference during the day to the romance. "I had to cut something out of my living self, and I couldn't help groaning a bit. But the operation's over--and I'll never worry you again."

At the station I packed her into the dark and already suffocating compartment. She announced her intention to sleep all night like a dog. She went off, in the best of spirits, to the work in front of her, which after all was a more reasonable cure than tossing about the Outer Hebrides in a five-ton yacht.

I drove home to bed and slept the sleep of the perfect altruist.

I was reading the _Moniteur du Puy de Dôme_ on the hotel terrace next morning, when Lackaday was announced. He looked grimmer and more careworn than ever, and did not even smile as he greeted me. He only said gravely that it was good of me to let him come over. I offered him refreshment, which he declined.

"You may be wondering," said he, "why I have asked for this interview. But after all I have told you about myself, it did not seem right to leave you in ignorance of certain things. Besides, you've so often given me your kind sympathy, that, as a lonely man, I've ventured to trespass on it once more."

"My dear Lackaday, you know that I value your friendship," said I, not wishing to be outdone in courteous phrase, "and that my services are entirely at your disposal."

"I had better tell you in a few words what has happened," said he.

He told me.

Elodie had gone, disappeared, vanished into space, like the pearl necklaces which Petit Patou used to throw at her across the stage.

"But how? When?" I asked, in bewilderment; for Lackaday and Elodie, as Les Petit Patou, seemed as indissoluble as William and Mary or Pommery and Greno.

He had gone to her room at ten o'clock the previous morning, her breakfast hour, and found it wide open and empty save for the _femme de chambre_ making great clatter of sweeping. He stood open-mouthed on the threshold. To be abroad at such an hour was not in Elodie's habits. Their train did not start till the afternoon. His eye quickly caught the uninhabited bareness of the apartment. Not a garment straggled about the room. The toilet table, usually strewn with a myriad promiscuously ill-assorted articles, stared nakedly. There were no boxes. The cage of love-birds, Elodie's inseparable companions, had gone.

"Madame----?"

He questioned the _femme de chambre_.

"But Madame has departed. Did not Monsieur know?"

Monsieur obviously did not know. The girl gave him the information of which she was possessed. Madame had gone in an automobile at six o'clock. She had rung the bell. The _femme de chambre_ had answered it. The staff were up early on account of the seven o'clock train for Paris.

"Then Madame has gone to Paris," cried Lackaday.

But the girl demurred at the proposition. One does not hire an automobile from a garage, _a voiture de luxe, quoi?_ to go to the railway station, when the hotel omnibus would take one there for a franc or two. As she was saying, Madame rang her bell and gave orders for her luggage to be taken down. It was not much, said Lackaday; they travelled light, their professional paraphernalia having to be considered. Well, the luggage was taken down to the automobile that was waiting at the door, and Madame had driven off. That is all she knew.

Lackaday strode over to the bureau and assailed the manager. Why had he not been informed of the departure of Madame? It apparently never entered the manager's polite head that Monsieur Patou was ignorant of Madame Patou's movements. Monsieur had given notice that they were leaving. Artists like Monsieur and Madame Patou were bound to make special arrangements for their tours, particularly nowadays when railway travelling was difficult. So Madame's departure had occasioned no surprise.

"Who took her luggage down?" he demanded.

The dingy waistcoated, alpaca-sleeved porter, wearing the ribbon of the MØdaille Militaire on his breast, came forward. At six o'clock, while he was sweeping the hall, an automobile drew up outside. He said: "Whom are

you come to fetch? The Queen of Spain?" And the chauffeur told him to mind his own business. At that moment the bell rang. He went up to the _Øtage_ indicated. The _femme de chambre_ beckoned him to the room and he took the luggage and Madame took the bird-cage, and he put Madame and the luggage and the birdcage into the auto, and Madame gave him two francs, and the car drove off, whither the porter knew not.

Although he put it to me very delicately, as he had always conveyed his criticism of Elodie, the fact that struck a clear and astounding note through his general bewilderment, was the unprecedented reckless extravagance of the economical Elodie. There was the omnibus. There was the train. Why the car at the fantastic rate of one franc fifty per kilometre, to say nothing of the one franc fifty per kilometre for the empty car's return journey?

"And Madame was all alone in the automobile," said the porter, by way of reassurance. "Pardon, Monsieur," he added, fading away under Lackaday's glare.

"I cut the indignity of it all as short as I could," said Lackaday, "and went up to my room to size things up. It was a knock-down blow to me in many ways, as you no doubt can understand. And then came the _femme de chambre_ with a letter addressed to me. It had fallen between the looking-glass and the wall."

He drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to me.

"You had better read it."

I fitted my glasses on my nose and read. In the sprawling, strong, illiterate hand I saw and felt Elodie.

Mon petit AndrØ----

But I must translate inadequately, for the grammar and phrasing were Elodesque.

As you no longer love me, if ever you have loved me, which I doubt, for we have made _un drôle de mØnage_ ever since we joined ourselves together, and as our life in common is giving you unhappiness, which it does me also, for since you have returned from England as a General you have not been the same, and indeed I have never understood how a General [and then followed a couple of lines vehemently erased]. And as I do not wish to be a burden to you, but desire that you should feel yourself free to lead whatever life you like, I have taken the decision to leave you for ever--_pour tout jamais_. It is the best means to regain happiness.

For the things that are still at the Cirque Vendramin, do with them what you will. I shall write to Ernestine to send me my clothes and all the little birds I love so much. Your noble heart will not grudge them to me, _mon petit AndrØ_.

Praying God for your happiness, I am always

Your devoted

ELODIE

I handed him back the letter without a word. What could one say?

"The first thing I did," he said, putting the letter back in his pocket, "was to ring up Bakkus, to see whether he could throw any light on the matter."

"Bakkus--why, he cut his engagement with us yesterday."

"The damned scoundrel," said Lackaday, "was running away with Elodie."

Chapter XXIII

He banged his hand on the little iron table in front of us and started to his feet, exploding at last with his suppressed fury.

"The infernal villain!"

I gasped for a few seconds. Then I accomplished my life's effort in self-control. My whole being clamoured for an explosion equally violent of compressed mirth. I ached to lie back in my chair and shriek with laughter. The _dØnouement_ of the little drama was so amazingly unexpected, so unexpectedly ludicrous. A glimmer of responsive humour in his eyes would have sent me off. But there he stood, with his grimmest battle-field face, denouncing his betrayer. Even a smile on my part would have been insulting.

Worked up, he told me the whole of the astonishing business, as far as he knew it. They had eloped at dawn, like any pair of young lovers. Of that there was no doubt. The car had picked up Bakkus at his hotel in Royat--Lackaday had the landlord's word for it--and had carried the pair away, Heaven knew whither. The proprietor of the Royat garage deposed that Mr. Bakkus had hired the car for the day, mentioning no objective. The runaways had the whole of France before them. Pursuit was hopeless. As Lackaday had planned to go to Vichy, he went to Vichy. There seemed nothing else to do.

"But why elope at dawn?" I cried. "Why all the fellow's unnecessary duplicity? Why, in the name of Macchiavelli, did he seize upon my ten o'clock invitation with such enthusiasm? Why his private conversation with me? Why throw dust into my sleepy eyes? What did he gain by it?"

Lackaday shrugged his shoulders. That part of the matter scarcely interested him. He was concerned mainly with the sting of the viper Bakkus, whom he had nourished in his bosom.

"But, my dear fellow," said I at last, after a tiring march up and down the hot terrace, "you don't seem to realize that Bakkus has solved all your difficulties, _ambulando_, by walking off, or motoring off, with your great responsibility."

"You mean," said he, coming to a halt, "that this has removed the reason for my remaining on the stage?"

"It seems so," said I.

He frowned. "I wish it could have happened differently. No man can bear to be tricked and fooled and made a mock of."

"But it does give you your freedom," said I.

He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets. "I suppose it does," he admitted savagely. "But there's a price for everything. Even freedom can be purchased too highly."

He strode on. I had to accompany him, perspiringly. It was a very hot day. We talked and talked; came back to the startling event. We had to believe it, because it was incredible, as Tertullian cheerily remarked of ecclesiastical dogma. But short of the Archbishop of Canterbury eloping with the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour nothing could seem less possible. If Bakkus had nurtured nefarious designs, Good Heavens! he could have executed them years before. Well, perhaps not. When one hasn't a penny in one's pocket even the most cynical pauses ere he proposes romantic flight with a lady equally penniless. But since April, Bakkus had been battening on the good Archdeacon, his brother's substantial allowance. Why had he tarried?

"His diabolical cunning lay in wait for a weak moment," growled Lackaday.

All through this discussion, I came up against a paradox of human nature. Although it was obvious that the unprincipled Bakkus had rendered my good friend the service of ridding him of the responsibility of a woman whom he had ceased to love, if ever he had loved her at all, a woman, who, for all her loyal devotion through loveless years, had stood implacably between him and the realization of his dreams, yet he rampaged against his benefactor, as though he had struck a fatal blow at the roots of his honour and his happiness.

"But after all, man, can't you see," he cried in protest at my worldly and sophistical arguments, "that I've lost one of the most precious things in the world? My implicit faith in a fellow-man. I gave Bakkus a brother's trust. He has betrayed it. Where am I? His thousand faults have been familiar to me for years. I discounted them for the good in him. I thought I had grasped it." He clenched his delicate hand in a passionate gesture. "But now"--he opened it--"nothing. I'm at sea. How can I know that you, whom I have trusted more than any other man with my heart's secrets------?"

The _concierge_ with a dusty chauffeur in tow providentially cut short

this embarrassing apostrophe.

"Monsieur le Capitaine Hylton?" asked the chauffeur.

"_C'est moi_."

He handed me a letter. I glanced at the writing on the envelope.

"From Bakkus!" I said. "Tell me"--to the chauffeur--"how did you come by it?"

"Monsieur charged me to deliver it into the hands of Monsieur le Capitaine. I have this moment returned to Royat."

"Ah," said I. "You drove the automobile? Where is Monsieur Bakkus?"

"That," said he, "I have pledged my honour not to divulge."

I fished in my pocket for some greasy rags of paper money which I pressed into his honourable hand. He bowed and departed. I tore open the envelope.

"You will excuse me?"

"Oh, of course," said Lackaday curtly. He lit a cigarette and stalked to the end of the terrace.

The letter bore neither date nor address. I read:

MY DEAR HYLTON,

You have heard of Touchstone. You have heard of Audrey. Shakespeare has doubtless convinced you of the inevitability of their mating. I have always prided myself of a certain Touchstone element in my nature. There is much that is Audrey-esque in the lady whose disappearance from Clermont-Ferrand may be causing perturbation. As my Shakespearian preincarnation scorned dishonourable designs, so do even I. The marriage of Veuve Elodie Marescaux and Horatio Bakkus will take place at the earliest opportunity allowed by French law. If that delays too long, we shall fly to England where an Archbishop's special licence will induce a family Archdeacon to marry us straight away.

My flippancy, my dear Hylton, is but a motley coat.

If there is one being in this world whom I love and honour, it is Andrew Lackaday. From the first day I met him, I, a cynical disillusioned wastrel, he a raw yet uncompromising lad, I felt that here, somehow, was a sheet anchor in my life. He has fed me when I have been hungry, he has lashed me when I have been craven-hearted, he has raised me when I have fallen. There can be only three beings in the Cosmos who know how I have been saved times out of number from the nethermost abyss--I and Andrew Lackaday and God.

I passed my hand over my eyes when I read this remarkable outburst of devoted affection on the part of the seducer and betrayer for the man he

had wronged. I thought of the old couplet about the dissembling of love and the kicking downstairs. I read on, however, and found the mystery explained.

> The time has come for me to pay him, in part, my infinite debt of gratitude.
>
> You may have been surprised when I wrung your hand warmly before parting. Your words removed every hesitating scruple. Had you said, "there is nothing between a certain lady and Andrew Lackaday," I should have been to some extent nonplussed. I should have doubted my judgment. I should have pressed you further. If you had convinced me that the whole basis of my projected action was illusory, I should have found means to cancel the arrangements. But remember what you said. "There can't by any possibility be anything between Lady Auriol Dayne and Petit Patou."

"Damn the fellow," I muttered. "Now he's calmly shifting the responsibility on to me."

And I swore a deep oath that nevermore would I interfere in anybody else's affairs, not even if Bolshevist butchers were playing with him before my very eyes.

> There, my dear Hylton (the letter went on), you gave away the key of the situation. My judgment had been unerring. As Petit Patou, our friend stood beyond the pale. As General Lackaday, he stepped into all the privileges of the Enclosure. Bound by such ties to Madame Patou as an honourable and upright gentleman like our friend could not d of severing, he was likewise bound to his vain and heart-breaking existence as Petit Patou. A free man, he could cast off his mountebank trappings and go forth into the world, once more as General Lackaday, the social equal of the gracious lady whom he loved and whose feelings towards him, as eyes far less careless than ours could see at a glance, were not those of placid indifference.
>
> The solution of the problem dawned on me like an inspiration. Why not sacrifice my not over-valued celibacy on the altar of friendship? For years Elodie and I have been, _en lout bien et tout honneur_, the most intimate of comrades. I don't say that, for all the gold in the Indies, I would not marry a woman out of my brother's Archdeaco If she asked me, I probably should. But I should most certainly, such being my unregenerate nature, run away with the gold and leave the lady. For respectability to have attraction you must be bred in You must regard the dog collar and chain as the great and God-given blessing of your life. The old fable of the dog and the wolf. But I've lived my life, till past fifty, as the disreputable wolf--and so, please God, will I remain till I die. But, after all, being human, I'm quite a kind sort of wolf. Thanks to my brother--no longer will hunger drive the wolf abroad. You remember Villon's lines:
>
> "NecessitØ fait gens mesprendre
> Et faim sortir le loup des boys."

I shall live in plethoric ease my elderly vulpine life. But the elderly wolf needs a mate for his old age, who is at one with him in his (entirely unsinful) habits of disrepute. Where in this universe, then, could I find a fitter mate than Elodie?

Which brings me back, although I'm aware of glaring psychological flaws, to my Touchstone and Audrey prelude.

Writing, as I am doing, in a devil of a hurry, I don't pretend to Meredithean analysis.

Elodie's refusal to marry Andrew Lackaday had something to do a woman's illusions. She is going to marry me because there's no possibility of any kind of illusion whatsoever. My good brother whom, I grieve to say, is in the very worst of health, informs me that he has made a will in my favour. Heaven knows, I am contented enough as I am. But, the fact remains, which no doubt will ease our dear frie mind, that Elodie's future is assured. In the meanwhile we will devote ourselves to the cultivation of that peculiarly disreputable sloth which is conducive to longevity, _relevØ_ (according to the gastronomic idiom) on my part, with the study of French Heraldry which in the present world upheaval, is the most futile pursuit conceivable by a Diogenic philosopher.

I can't write this to Lackaday, who no doubt is saying all the dreadful things that he learned with our armies in Flanders. He would not understand. He would not understand the magic of romance, the secrecy, the thrill of the dawn elopement, the romance of the _coup de thØâre_ by which alone I was able to induce Elodie to co-operate in the part payment of my infinite debt of gratitude.

I therefore write to you, confident that, as an urbane citizen of the world you will be able to convey to the man I love most on earth, the real essence of this, the apologia of Elodie and myself. What more can a man do than lay down his bachelor life for a friend?

Yours sincerely,

Horatio Bakkus

P.S.--If you had convinced me that I was staring hypnotically at a mare's nest, I should have had much pleasure in joining you on your excursion. I hope you went and enjoyed it and found Orcival exceeding my poor dithyrambic.

I had to read over this preposterous epistle again before I fully grasped its significance. On the first reading it seemed incredible that the man could be sincere in his professions; on the second, his perfect good faith manifested itself in every line. Had I read it a third time, I, no doubt, should have regarded him as an heroic figure, with a halo already beginning to shimmer about his head.

I walked up to Lackaday at the end of the terrace and handed him the letter. It was the simplest thing to do. He also read it twice, the first time with scowling brow, the second with a milder expression of incredulity. He looked down on me--I don't stand when a handy chair invites me to sit.

"This is the most amazing thing I've ever heard of."

I nodded. He walked a few yards away and attacked the letter for the third time. Then he gave it back to me with a smile.

"I don't believe he's such an infernal scoundrel after all."

"Ah!" said I.

He leaned over the balustrade and plunged into deep reflection.

"If it's genuine, it's an unheard of piece of Quixotism."

"I'm sure it's genuine."

"By Gum!" said he. He gazed at the vine-clad hill in the silence of wondering admiration.

At last I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Let us lunch," said I.

We strolled to the upper terrace.

"It is wonderful," he remarked on the way thither, "how much sheer goodness there is in humanity."

"Pure selfishness on my part. I hate lunching alone," said I.

He turned on me a pained look.

"I wasn't referring to you."

Then meeting something quizzical in my eye, he grinned his broad ear-to-ear grin of a child of six.

We lunched. We smoked and talked. At every moment a line seemed to fade from his care-worn face. At any rate, everything was not for the worst in the worst possible of worlds. I think he felt his sense of freedom steal over him in his gradual glow. At last I had him laughing and mimicking, in his inimitable way--a thing which he had not done for my benefit since the first night of our acquaintance--the elderly and outraged Moignon whom he proposed to visit in Paris, for the purpose of cancelling his contracts. As for Vichy--Vichy could go hang. There were ravening multitudes of demobilized variety artists besieging every stage-door in France. He was letting down nobody; neither the managements nor the public. Moignon would find means of consolation.

"My dear Hylton," said he, "now that my faith in Bakkus is not only restored but infinitely strengthened, and my mind is at rest concerning Elodie, I feel as though ten years were lifted from my life. I'm no longer Petit Patou. The blessed relief of it! Perhaps," he added, after a pause, "the discipline has been good for my soul."

"In what way?"

"Well, you see," he replied thoughtfully, "in my profession I always was a second-rater. I was aware of it; but I was content, because I did my best. In the Army my vanity leads me to believe I was a first-rater. Then I had to go back, not only to second-rate, but to third-rate, having lost a lot in five years. It was humiliating. But all the same I've no doubt it has been the best thing in the world for me. The old hats will still fit."

"If I had a quarter of your vicious modesty," said I, "I would see that I turned it into a dazzling virtue. What are your plans?"

"You remember my telling you of a man I met in Marseilles called Arbuthnot?"

"Yes," said I, "the fellow who shies at coco-nuts in the Solomon Islands."

He grinned, and with singular aptness he replied:

"I'll cable him this afternoon and see whether I can still have three shies for a penny."

We discussed the proposal. Presently he rose. He must go to Vichy, where he had to wind up certain affairs of Les Petit Patou. To-morrow he would start for Paris and await Arbuthnot's reply.

"And possibly you'll see Lady Auriol," I hazarded, this being the first time her name was mentioned.

His brow clouded and he shook his head sadly.

"I think not," said he. And, as I was about to protest, he checked me with a gesture. "That's all done with."

"My dear, distinguished idiot," said I.

"It can never be," he declared with an air of finality.

"You'll break Bakkus's heart."

"Sorry," said he.

"You'll break mine."

"Sorrier still. No, no, my dear friend," he said gently, "don't let us talk about that any more."

After he had gone I experienced a severe attack of anticlimax, and feeling lonely I wrote to Lady Auriol. In the coarse phraseology of the day, I spread myself out over that letter. It was a piece of high-class descriptive writing. I gave her a beautiful account of the elopement and, as an interesting human document, I enclosed a copy of Bakkus's letter. As I had to wait a day or two for her promised address--her letter conveying it gave me no particular news of herself--I did not receive her answer until I reached London.

It was characteristic:

> My Dear Tony,
>
> Thanks for your interesting letter. I've adopted a mongrel Irish Terrier--the most fascinating skinful of sin the world has ever produced. I'll show him to you some day.
>
> Yours,
>
> Auriol

I wrote back in a fury: something about never wanting to see her or her infernal dog as long as I lived. I was angry and depressed. I don't know why. It was none of my business. But I felt that I had been scandalously treated by this young woman. I felt that I had subscribed to their futile romance an enormous fund of interest and sympathy. This chilly end of it left me with a sense of bleak disappointment. I was not rendered merrier a short while afterwards by an airy letter from Horatio Bakkus enclosing a flourishing announcement in French of his marriage with the Veuve Elodie Marescaux, nØe Figasso. "Behold me," said the fellow, "cooing with content in the plenitude of perfect connubiality." I did not desire to behold him at all. His cooing left me cold. I bore on my shoulders the burden of the tragio-comedy of Auriol and Lackaday.

If she had never seen him as Petit Patou, all might have been well, in spite of Elodie who had been somewhat destructive of romantic glamour. But the visit to the circus, I concluded, finished the business. Beneath the painted monster in green silk tights the dignified soldier whom she loved was eclipsed for ever. And then a thousand commonplace social realities arose and stood stonily in her path. And Lackaday--well! I suppose he was faced with the same unscalable stone wall of convention.

Lackaday's letters were brief, and, such as they were, full of Arbuthnot. He was sailing as soon as he could find a berth. I gave the pair up, and went to an elder brother's place in Inverness-shire for rest and shooting and rain and family criticism and such-like amenities. Among my fellow-guests I found young Charles Verity-Stewart and Evadne nominally under governess tutelage. The child kept me sane during a dreadful month. Having been sick of the sound of guns going off during the war, I found, to my dismay, scant pleasure in explosions followed by the death of little birds. And then--I suppose I am growing old--the sport, in which I once rejoiced, involved such hours of wet and weary walking that I renounced

it without too many sighs. But I had nothing to do. My pre-war dilettante excursions into the literary world had long since come to an end. I was obsessed by the story of Lackaday; and so, out of sheer _taedium vitæ_, and at the risk of a family quarrel, I shut myself up with the famous manuscript and my own reminiscences, and began to reduce things to such coherence as you now have had an opportunity of judging.

It was at breakfast, one morning in November, that the butler handed me a telegram. I opened the orange envelope. The missive, reply paid, ran:

> Will you swear that there are real live cannibals in the Solomon Islands? If not, it will be the final disillusion of my life.--AURIOL

I passed the paper to my neighbour Evadne, healthily deep in porridge. She glanced at it, glass of milk in one hand, poised spoon in the other. With the diabolical intuition of eternal woman and the ironical imperturbability of the modern maiden, she raised her candid eyes to mine and declared:

"She’s quite mad. But I told you all about it years ago."

This lofty calmness I could not share. I suddenly found myself unable to stand another minute of Scotland. Righteous indignation sped me to London.

I found the pair together in Lady Auriol’s drawing-room. Without formal greeting I apostrophized them.

"You two have behaved disgracefully. Here have I been utterly miserable about you, and all the time you’ve left me in the dark."

"Where we were ourselves, my dear Hylton, I assure you," said Lackaday.

"I shed light as soon as I could," said Auriol. "We bumped into each other last Monday evening in Bond Street and found it was us."

"I told her I was going to the Solomon Islands."

"And I thought I wanted to go there too."

"From which I gather," said I, "that you are going to get married."

Lady Auriol smiled and shook her head.

"Oh dear no."

I was really angry. "Then what on earth made you drag me all the way from the North of Scotland?"

"To congratulate us, my dear friend," said Lackaday. "We were married this morning."

"I think you’re a pair of fools," said I later, not yet quite mollified.

"Why--for getting married?" asked Auriol.

"No," said I. "For putting it off to a fortuitous bump in Bond Street."

The End

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