



## X

*MISS MOIRA WALKER* was not included in the syrens of Totsuka, though she claimed to have damaged many hearts in her day; yet, at other times she would assert no less positively that she had invariably held aloof from any traffic whatsoever with the male sex, which she regarded as a degenerate aberration on Nature's part from a parthenogenetic and ideal female prototype. She lived with her brother, Moses Walker, a torpid, hepatic sort of person with a beard. She sported a beard, too, but it was more local, clustering round the circumference of a large mole on the left side of her second chin. She had just celebrated her fiftieth summer by the purchase of a green wig of curls that would have astonished a negro, but it failed to bring into line her bulging acromegalous skull, with its two wild grey eyes staring in different directions, like a horse's. 'Who's the lunatic?' was the invariable question of newcomers to the colony; and they were not far wrong. She was possessed by two demons, the one serious, the other festive. The former incited her to take an active part in other people's affairs, the latter, liberated by a single glass of champagne—and she never took less than two—seduced her into making a fool of herself in company. Both were really 'allotropic modifications' of the same impulse, to be the central figure everywhere where there was the slightest chance of publicity. If ever there appeared an open space in some room after dinner, say, when the floor was just clear for an 'in-

formal dance', she could be reckoned upon to dart into the centre, the whole gaunt five-foot eight of her, and either recite some of her own painfully nonsensical verses, with quavering, nerve-wracking howls to represent pathos, or to do her famous series of 'Japanese types', which meant reeling round in a circle with an imbecile expression of vacancy, her mouth wide open, while her antique set of false teeth, supposed to be a family heirloom, performed motions quite independent of her rigid jaw, reminding one of the ghostly depression of organ keys on an untouched manual linked up by the coupler. So far, no one had ducked her or flung her out for this outrageous conduct, largely because she was the close friend of the Gores, who rolled in money, gave the most sumptuous and liquid entertainments in Totsuka, and were balefully influential. But once Major Matthewson, while he was Military Attaché to Atlantis, and but freshly landed, saw this creature staggering about, fancying she was a 'special' newsvendor. He didn't care for sumptuous entertainments or for anything else. 'Dam, dam!' he cried in his staccata fashion, 'woman's drunk. Take her away, take her away!' As editress of the modes and fashionable news page in the *Argus*, she had some small revenge in omitting his name from all the reports of social gatherings at which he was present; but it failed to annoy the Major. In her more serious vein she devoted herself to wrecking homes, or separating lovers by discovering and making known affairs which were past and done with, but which in their day had not been very creditable. 'Not necessaree', Mr. Takamatsu would, very rightly, have commented. But Miss Walker was enthralled by the denuding complex, which carried her so unfailingly into the limelight. M. Fabre alone professed to like her, among those who were not her allies. He said she was the typical English Miss,

and added that when she was ten years younger she used to play tennis before breakfast in orange silk pyjamas in the hope of getting a proposal or two ; but that there had been no takers—in a livery place like Japan one does not feel like proposing at eight in the morning.

One of the weaker spots in her otherwise admirable defensive system was an ambition to be considered a second Orinda, an authority on art and letters, and the 'keeper' of a Salon. The chief objection to this was her abysmal ignorance ; even though she would hurriedly prime herself with Stopford Brooke's *Short Outline of English Literature*, or manuals for the million by Lanson, Monro, Stanford, or Lanzi, she succeeded in deceiving no one except the group of pseudo-intellectuals who regarded her as their chief. If, to anyone else, she observed in the tone of anyone delivering an original aphorism, 'The two most excellent of the Mazzuoli could not, any more than their contemporaries, have been considered artists upon a great scale', someone would be sure to make awkward enquiries about the number, habitat, etc., of the Mazzuoli, thrusts which she was far less dexterous in parrying than Professor and Captain Moss. Others, feigning ignorance, would come to her for information on such matters as the difference between a chaconne and a toccata, or—the depth of turpitude—quote from fictitious authors with whom she was invariably discovered to be familiar. Mr. McGonigle had invented, solely on her account, the esoteric Nigel Ambrøden, a friend of Wilde, Lionel Johnston, Le Gallienne, and other celebrities of the decadence. Nigel, after a lurid youth of 'à rebours', had turned for solace to the Roman Church at the age of thirty, but had almost immediately—leaving just time for the production of a manuscript book of mystical verse—poisoned himself at No. 33, Rue du Bac, Paris, in

1899. He was just being re-discovered, and McGonigle was gratified to learn that Miss Walker had already been struck by the marked difference between his earlier Bohemian manner, as for example, in the poignant café-lyric, 'Am I to Blame?':

'A girasol, the evening turns  
To absinthe-shadows, pied with shame;  
My wine-faint soul, and lonely, burns  
The table with its purple flame,  
And farded, she  
White as a morbid taper, mourns  
The wraith of her virginity—  
Am I to blame?'

Emancipated Moira Walker had winced at but swallowed these *fin-de-siècle* sentiments: the difference, then, between them and 'the last precious diadem of the poet-mystic's coronation':

'From Syon, turretted Hierysolem  
With Alleluya and the flashing Grail,  
Pass those wing'd thurifers, the seraphim,  
Afire with rapture through their crystal mail  
By Astolat, all gold, by Sarras cool with jade,  
To the last hosting-Rood, the long, the last Crusadel'

'Ah, when I was a girl I remember how those lines would thrill me; they wrote *poetry* in those days', she would assure the treacherous Scotchman. 'But now I'm getting more intellectual they seem—I hope you'll forgive me if I say—a trifle *volupsbious* for religious poetry. Milton suits now rather my mood. "Him obvious . . ." you remember the line?'

Mr. McGonigle did. This also he had invented; an addition to *Paradise Lost* which ran, 'Him obvious the Arch-Seraph then replied'.

The first alarm of Undine Vocadlo while she was in the act of kissing Mr. Sheepshanks was not a false one. There chanced to be a mute witness to the whole proceeding. Miss Walker, in possession of a free press-ticket (she signed herself 'Fi-fi' in the *Argus*), had glided in by the side door used by the performers in order to interview Undine. She had considered herself discharged of her promise to boom this young woman as soon as she had, several days previously, completed to all intents and purposes, the interview and account of the performance ('I parted the curtains. There was the exotic beauty, wilting, flower-like, before her toilette-table, where I noticed a *flacon* of Herculean Epidermic Sweetener. All the daintiest debutantes are using this fragrant skin-revitaliser this year. She greeted me with a disarming smile . . .'); but there remained a touch or two of actuality to be added to give the thing 'body'. Arriving at a significant moment, she comprehended at a glance all the actuality she required. Grim-lipped and ominous, Fi-fi sought the outer night with just so much noise as might and did arouse a transient anxiety. Late on Monday morning she watched Tristram enter the Hotel lounge and greet Mr. Fargo, with whom he had business. She clattered upstairs, put on a solar topee, and set out at a rapid pace for the Sheepshanks's house.

Alba, in a frail wrap, was breakfasting. Miss Walker burst into the room before she was announced, so that Alba, whose mouth was full, had to get up, still chewing, to murmur a crumby welcome. She was furiously annoyed with Miss Walker for her banging-barging manner in other people's houses. But Fi-fi, aching with zeal, saw nothing but the path of duty which was the way to glory. Giving one or two low preliminary howls she went straight to business.

'Uuuuh! Mmmmm! Things aren't what they seem and we must all expect disillusionments before we've come to be as old as I am, dear Alba. Yes, I thank heaven I realised early what men are; and so I'm not surprised that Tristram should be leading—mmmm! uuuuh!—a double life'.

Alba lifted her eyebrows; really Tristram was contracting a habit of gallantry; rather a late season for wild oats.

'May I have a cup of tea?' She took a mental note of the decanter on the table. 'Yes, thank you *so* much. As I was saying, Tristram is the very last person I should have dreamt of as tampering with the marriage bond! But—how shall I put it?—he has outraged me. . . .'

Alba started violently.

'Outraged me in the most sensitive part of my soul—my sense of What Is Right. And I'm no prude, I hope; I'm a woman of the world, rather Bohemian if anything. But mmmmm! after what I saw—and Miss Voadlo too—though of course there's nothing she wouldn't do'.

She closed her eyes with a sad, sour smile.

'I see. They were together then?'

'Embracing, uuuuh, in the hotel auditorium; last night at nine o'clock. I witnessed the Kiss of Sin myself, when I entered the auditorium expecting to find the dance in progress; but what I saw—mmmmmm! May I ask what clothes Tristram wore when he came back last night?'

'Good gracious, why his white evening things, of course; at least, as far as I remember. Surely you're not suggesting. . . .'

'No, Alba dear; I admit it wasn't quite so bad. I never exaggerate—but it was terrible enough. The clothes he came back in were *not* his own, which, I'm

shocked to say were *simply ruined* by the orange paint with which that young creature had smeared herself for her performance—a rather disgusting, not to say *obscene* idea in itself. I'm staying at the hotel, and in the interests of decency I interrogated the servant who looks after his very coarse American friend, Mr. Fargo. She assures me that this Mr. Fargo gave a white evening suit which was exceedingly dirty with paint to the laundry this very morning. Really, whatever are people coming to nowadays? It's all this psycho-analysis that's doing it, suggesting improper things to them. Just an excuse for nastiness, with all its sexes and complexes. Nowadays no one has any self-control—like that book I found Malvina Bugbird reading, Ulysses or something it was—just so much *dull filth*, my dear. Why, when I was twenty there were no less than three married men praying me to be kind to them; three married men, just fancy. There was Mr. Sodd the organist, who had black mutton-chop whiskers, one seldom sees them nowadays, and Dr. Bertie Holes—I met him at Bognor, cycling; and then there was Friedrich Kalk——'

Alba finished her toast and marmalade and lit, quite calmly, a cigarette. She had heard all about the three married men several times; all Totsuka knew the story by the name of 'Moir's Man-hunt, or what a young Person ought to Know'.

'Then you have absolute proof that this thing happened?'

'Didn't I tell you, I saw them *ong flagrong day-lee*? And what will you do? I hope you won't be rash; of course I know you must be so *dreadfully* upset'. When she once got an idea into her head, Miss Walker became stone-blind to actuality; otherwise she might have seen that Alba, so far from seeming to do anything rash, was frankly bored with the whole affair.

‘ Reason with him first, my dear, rather than reproach. We’re all weak. If I could only help you ’.

Alba felt moved to shout, ‘ For the Lord’s sake take your great horse-face and your blasted rigmarole out of this ! ’ but, restraining herself, said merely, ‘ Perhaps you’d better leave him to me ’.

‘ Yes, perhaps you’re right. But you know I take quite a motherly interest in you young people. I hope you’re not offended ’.

This appeared to be a recognised formula when one wanted to ‘ sneak ’ ; only yesterday Podler had expressed the same hope.

‘ Not at all ; on the contrary, thanks very much for telling me. I like to know these things. But please keep it dark ’.

‘ Of course ; I’m discreet, you know I’m discreet. Aow ! da litt-ul poossums-woossums ; diddee want a litt-ul teeny drop of milk then ? Yes ? a Poossums-woossums ! ’

The blue cat had made its stately introit, and sniffed at Miss Walker’s ankles. Having delivered her broadside, she rose and extended a hand with rugose knuckles, rheumatically bulged and faintly blue, which Alba compared with her own, rose-manicured, the nails curved, spotless.

Miss Walker viciously kicked off her shoe-covers, and clattered out into the street, placing her feet firmly in front of each other, the toes turned out at a wide angle. Her skirt was longer behind than in front, and dated back to the fashions of 1900, which strike as outlandish the reader of old volumes of *Punch*.

Her next activity that morning was to effect, in concert with Mrs. Ditchling, the reduction of Professor McGonigle, since she had heard from Mr. Ditchling that Nigel Ambrosden was even shorter-lived than ‘ history ’



would admit. Because she flattered herself on her astuteness and erudition, nothing was more repugnant to her than a pull at the leg ; so this Glaswegian Jack-Pudding must be ostracised, if not something worse. As she remembered her own intelligent appreciation of Mr. Ambrosden, delivered before a throng that included McGonigle, Kurrie-Lewer, who was fond of a farce, and Egbert Binder, the eminent poet and critic who was passing through Japan at the time, and whose eye had gleamed, she now recollected with something that might have been mirth, she clenched her parasol and accelerated, giving an equine toss of the head, her masculine stride through blanched dust and glaring heat. A coolie obligingly spat in the grit before her ; a plump priest issuing from a tunnel of cryptomerias, his Homburg hat throwing into strorg relief the gauzy blackish robes that undulated upon his figure, reflected that although every foreigner was mad, it was only the women who were wholly frantic.

The Ditchlings had for the first time decided that summer that their social position was now sufficiently consolidated to permit of their hiring a villa. Hitherto they had taken full advantage of the opportunities that an hotel affords for scraping acquaintance with distinguished persons. To this end they had discovered and availed themselves of the important aid furnished by Clarence Eugene, their sole offspring, an egocentric child of five, who was precociously versed in all the arts of rapprochement. Where the assembly was thickest he would launch a model biplane on the air, pursuing it with raucous cries till it landed on the stomach of some diplomatic celebrity, quiescent after lunch ; and Clarence Eugene, knowing himself to be a passably pretty little boy, anticipated and often obtained a harvest of chocolates as a result of this manoeuvre. His parents,

seated near by, would view his sporting with complacency, awaiting the critical moment for that protest and apology which in nine cases out of ten led to the sealing of a cordial friendship. It was through the waywardness of this toy that they had 'bagged' Mr. Pappadopoulos, Spartan First Secretary, Rahab Mendoza, wife of the Chargé from Jerusalem, Mr. Ninakakwa, the Aztec Vice-Consul, the Contessa Gyraldoza di Pomponazzi, and 'Jumbo' Nakanishi, the Worcester sauce king; while the odium that these childish aeronautics had inspired in Mu Tan, the misanthropic Attaché of the Celestial Soviet, was quite negligible. The machine had landed, it is true, in a succulent mess of shark's fin stewed with oil and sugar, but in any case, Mu Tan, a recluse of bilious habit, counted for little in the social world of the colony. Clarence Eugene was the thin end of the wedge of advancement, and realised in a manner beyond his years the high importance of his duties. There was no situation by which he could not profit; thus, when one afternoon in the hotel lounge, Mr. McGonigle had set his foot with destructive intent on the biplane that disturbed his rest, surreptitiously, yet not sufficiently so to elude the searching gaze of its owner, Clarence had cried loudly, 'I forgive you, Mr. McGonigle; Daddy says, "Pray for them that despitefully use you".' This remark, in spite of the fact that it contained a quotation from an apostatising canon, so affected Madame Mendoza, that she immediately caught the little Christian (or Goy) to her colossal bosom, and promised him a larger and heavier aeroplane—a vow which he took care should be fulfilled. He had not yet, however, succeeded in disarming Dr. Harada, whom his parents were as particularly anxious to meet as 'Captain' Moss had been to avoid, or Sir Birinus Shortt-Widgeon, Counsellor of the Atlantean

Embassy, whose ferocious aspect something daunted him.

Sir Birinus was six feet high, hard-mouthed and badger-whiskered. His forehead, which, as far back as the time when he had successfully passed his examination for the Foreign Office, was remarkable for its height, had, since then, gradually extended itself, till it was by this time terminated by a narrow ridge of brindled hair at the back of his neck. After trying every known restorer and vainly shaving the crown of his head whenever a vacation presented itself, he had resorted at length to growing the hair upon the left side monstrously long, and brushing it in jejune grey wisps across the naked dome above, so that his parting was to some extent obscured by the tip of his ear. This was the only symptom he displayed of sensitiveness about his appearance ; the whole of the rest of the man was so correct as to be unnoticeable in detail, and to give the impression that his clothing and whiskers had developed naturally like a geological process. One received, upon meeting him, a general notion of bad temper and extreme efficiency. Far happier among the mahogany desks of a Government office than when caught into the torrent of the numerous social engagements which, as right-hand man of an ailing Ambassador, it was incumbent upon him to fulfil, he resented bitterly his compulsory exile in an hemisphere where machine-like regularity in the office was impossible owing to the eccentric notions of time current among the Japanese, and where, outside official business, the little world of the European metics was governed by women, a sex that he violently abhorred. At the same time hospitality was a duty, which he therefore performed as zealously as he would find the solution of a knotty professional problem. His routine work was faultless, his minutes couched in vigorous and trenchant

language; and while he never spared himself in the public service, he took care to make the lives of his juniors a perfect hell, unless, as seldom happened, their ardour was comparable to his own. No action was more characteristic of him than to storm lankily down a corridor, with coat-tails flying, in pursuit of some culpable defect in the administrative machinery. In society he was consistently rude, regarding all such functions as opportunities for snubbing every sex impartially; and he had no use for that indolent kindness which, as he would snarl, was so common to savages, animals and women. This last category, he believed, was destructive, subversive of intellectual culture and hostile to man. The function of the female in many insects being to attract and then devour its mate, before the species could be reproduced, he professed to trace the same principle, but slightly modified, in the phenomenon of marriage. The majority of men, he would often urge, degenerated steadily from the moment at which they faced the altar or the registry office.

But though he was so uncompromising and anti-feminist, he was by no means ready to bestow unstinted praise on his own sex. The vast bulk of the human race were, in his opinion, nearer to the condition of animals than to that of humanity, in that they were incapable of thinking and talking really intelligently. In nearly every case that had come to his notice, opinions, however closely reasoned, had proved on examination to be tainted with the emotional bias in which they originated; humanity could only be attained through the rectification of this grave error. To Mr. Miles, on remarking that 'Sheepshanks is a thoroughly sound fellow, one of your real philosophers', he replied, 'I find that a person who comes to me and airs his private grievances in a philosophic disguise is apt to be rather a bore'. (His dry,

mincing pronunciation which seemed to turn the English vowels sour, to convert their generous, beer-like quality to vinegar, made him say 'parson' for person and 'bar' for bore.)

Romantic love he pronounced to be a glandular disturbance that is invariably cured by maturity, and when asked by Galahad Stopham, vegetarian secretary of the Sex Emancipation League, his opinion of the physical aspect, he snapped, 'Ungainly!' and would vouchsafe no further utterance. Art of every kind was in his estimation no less of a vice than the more obvious orgies—it was worse, in fact, as it rotted more insidiously the mental fibre.

Despite his admittedly unlovable character, he carried great weight in local society, it being no secret that the invalidish Atlantean Ambassador permitted to devolve on him the onus of entertaining, as far as was feasible, and always of selecting guests for those functions which were a crown of achievement for the ambitious.

The Ditchlings had prudently withheld the usual aeroplane attack; subtler artifice was necessary, but they had not yet succeeded in hitting upon an appropriate formula.

They desired acquaintance with Dr. Harada for other, though equally practical reasons; but the president of the richest University in Japan, and the most urbane member of the native school of Herbert Spencerians, was unaccountably elusive. As a member of the Diet, a candidate for a portfolio sooner or later, and an orator of acknowledged merit, he had seldom any time that he could call his own; and, it being rumoured that he would shortly relinquish the governance of Taisho in order to devote himself wholly to politics, and that he was likely to be succeeded by a person of anti-foreign views, every effort on the part of the Ditchlings to enrol

him in the list of their friends must be made with the greatest promptitude.

Miss Walker was worth cultivating for two reasons. Firstly, her brother, in the eyes of most people a snuffing nonentity, was just the type of pawky, conscientious pedant that Sir Birinus could tolerate. Walker's Japanese-English Dictionary was a classic, his monograph on *The Malay Element in the Origins of the People of Japan*, a scholarly piece of work, even if the main argument were at moments obscured by excessive detail. Moreover, he was an active member of the Phonetic Association; and the abdication of spelling, with all its romantic glamour of antiquity, in favour of precise phonetic symbols, was a possibility to which the mechanic heart of Sir Birinus might actually be said to warm. To be able to write 'wot' for 'what', or 'kɔ:l' for 'call'; this indeed were spiritual satisfaction. Mr. Ditchling was feverishly studying the phonetic theory of Messrs. Jones and Ripman; even Clarence Eugene was bribed to copy out the new characters. Here at least was one possible mode of approach to the deeply entrenched Counsellor.

Secondly, the Ditchlings hoped for the dislodgment of Professor McGonigle, not because they hated him so much as because his salary amounted to nearly nine hundred yen a month; the yen at par being worth a fraction over two shillings. Mr. Ditchling, as a schoolmaster, received but five hundred, which he supplemented by publishing free verse of a passionate nature in the local press; this brought him in as much, sometimes, as fifty yen, generally in the months of April and May, when his emotions were most fully evoked by rise of temperature and the appearance of numerous flowers. But even this sum was insufficient to meet the requirements of the hospitality they proposed to extend; for

diplomats and merchant princes demand a rich diet lubricated with genuine liquors ; they could not hope to set before these connoisseurs ' Rabbit Brand Whiskey, Product of the Scotland, as supplied to Noble Family ', ' Bordo, real French wine ', or ' Portowine ', manufactured from inferior Australian Burgundy at the Hattori Chemical Works.

Mr. McGonigle did not entertain ; he gave drunken orgies to a set of debauchees like Takamatsu, Kurrie-Lewer, Fabre, Mrs. Sheepshanks, and those two wicked young blades, Messrs. Kondo and Yanagita, who had no doubt introduced him to houses of dubious fame and tactful wooden window-screens, at which he squandered a handsome salary that could be far better employed in nourishing those who were smart, reputable and good.

It was therefore expedient to be ' in ' with Miss Walker, who cherished a permanent grievance against this grinning, rubicund toper of a Scot. The gravest difficulty was his knowledge of English literature and language which, despite his nationality, exceeded that of Mr. Ditchling. At Basingstoke 'umlaut', 'ablaut' and Verner's Law were not included in the curriculum, while his views on Milton's debt to the *Zobar* were entirely nebulous. Yet in the Far East bluff and intrigue might take one, in the experience of the Ditchlings, a good deal further than scholarship or any other of the dull and solid virtues.

Clarence Eugene, who stood upon one leg in the garden, a finger—the nasty little fellow—in his nose, at the moment of Miss Walker's arrival, fled into the house crying, ' Mummy, dear Auntie Moira's come, I'm so glad '. Personally he loathed the woman for her silliness, the bristles on her chin, and her incurable habit of kissing him—how different was her version from the exotic, adipose embraces of Madame Mendoza, or the scented

endearments of the Contessa, whose neck was invariably so white and fragrant.

Placing themselves upon chairs upon her either side, the Ditchlings heartily agreed with Miss Walker that Mr. McGonigle's conduct was simply outrageous; it was unthinkable that the peace of Totsuka should be jeopardised by an intemperate practical joker with no reverence for the divine female principle; perfectly monstrous! Something must be done about it at once.

'I should think', said Miss Walker meditatively, 'that the man must be immoral'.

'You mean that he . . . ?'

'All bachelors in the Far East are immoral. And a bachelor who insults women as well. . . .' The major premise as enunciated was helpful and suggestive.

'I'm afraid he's got too many sympathisers to make it worth while pushing the practical joke story much', Mrs. Ditchling said rather too naïvely, 'but I daresay we can get up something else—I mean', she hastened to add as her husband scowled, 'I shouldn't be surprised if some really shocking revelation about him were made quite soon'.

'Really? And do you *know* of any such, may I ask?'

'Well, not exactly *know*; I hardly feel it'd be right to tell you my suspicions at this early stage. But I have a sort of feeling that things will develop. We'll keep in close touch with you'.

Here the session was interrupted by Clarence Eugene, whom, grown very red of a sudden and beginning to whimper, his exasperated mother hurried to the door. The last words that Miss Walker heard were, 'O Geny! why is it *always* when I'm busy that you. . ..'

Before her glass Alba prepared herself for tennis, binding a strip of magenta silk, more for ornament than for necessity, round her short curls, and applying with



a nice diligence various cosmetics to her face. She smiled at the reflection, looking rested and youthful, in the long Japanese mirror ; so far was she from experiencing any consternation at the news she had received at breakfast. She stood, absorbed at in the smoothness of her neck and shoulders mounting from a wide-cut, striped dress, and of the glabrous, white silk stockings, of which her short skirt in floating folds afforded a copious view.

