



## XI

THE laboured tolling of the surf drifted over sand-hills and through a discreetly dense pine wood, in a clearing of which rose the high wire-netting fence of the hotel tennis courts. Mrs. Sheepshanks, Kurrie-Lewer, McGonigle and Podler lingered after the others, seated on a bench refreshing themselves with beer.

‘Beeru, glorious beeru!’ shouted McGonigle as he pledged the company. ‘Why hasn’t “the drowsiest juice of bearded grain”, as Philip James Bailey, the pompous old ass, calls it in spite of Wordsworth on Augustan diction, been used for the liquid part of the theophagic practices of the church?—Fine rounded period, that. Podler, you’re a renegade Catholic; expound the mystery, O Podlerious one’.

‘Don’t ask me; read the *Golden Bough*’.

‘I say, you people, what about starting an Antitheist mission? I don’t see why the other party should have it all their own way. Podler, hurry up and get excommunicated—it won’t hurt much, and I understand they do these things nowadays with an anesthetic—and join the old firm. Services on Fridays; sign a pledge to break one of the Ten Commandments every day. But seriously, something ought to be done to counteract the spreading of worn-out and barbarous superstitions in the East. Thank heaven, the Chinks are beating up the missionaries; shows their sense’.

‘But’, objected Kurrie-Lewer, ‘the Japanese don’t.

On the contrary, they treat them much better than I would if I had the ordering of things'.

'Ah yes, that's just it, you see; the Japanese hasn't got so much conscience as his more philosophical neighbour; he looks at things from a business point of view and finds that Christianity's a good spec; it's a cheap way of learning English, and a knowledge of English is part of their economic creed. Then, of course, some of the Americanised Japanese have some sort of idea that it's rather smart to be a Christian and to sing those awful revival hymns. I suppose they get a sort of kudos in some parts of America by going about and saying, "Say, brother, I'm a Seventh Day Adventist", or words to that effect. Helps to sell their stuff'.

'Oh, Mr. McGonigle, why will you be so cynical? Live and let live's my motto, and always will be'.

McGonigle felt some irritation at Alba's failure to partake of the frivolous tone of the conversation. She always came butting in with her heavy platitudes, and wiped, so to speak, the bloom off the plum. A short and not very comfortable silence ensued, till Mr. Kurrie-Lewer came to the rescue.

'He's a terrible fellow, the McGonigle of McGonigle'.

Alba watched the dip and lift of a huge black butterfly that reminded her of a flirtatious widow. The cicada that cries only at dawn and sunset lifted its violin-like note in plangent staccato, as at mid-heaven long-coiled wisps as of orange chiffon paled.

'I'd like you to sing at our lepers' concert so much. Could you, do you think?'

He regarded her dubiously. Alba's mood changed almost with a click as she comprehended him.

'All right, I'll behave perfectly, if that's what you mean; don't worry'. She laughed. 'Something pious,

I suppose. "Oh, for the wings——" Mendelssohn is pretty gummy; how'd that do?'

'Capital, capital, dear lady, capital.'

'I suppose you've heard', McGonigle interrupted, 'that as soon as a Soviet's established at home, every-one'll be forbidden to use that expression'.

'Oh, what shall we do to him—bury his head in the sand, tiresome old ostrich? Sorry my boyee, it hurts you more than it hurts me, but it must be done, I fear'.

Bear-fighting ensued. 'Now then, you two, less of it' . . . 'That's the way, correct him soundly' . . . 'You'll get a swift kick in the stomach in a minute, young feller-me-lad' . . . 'Ha-haa! he who laughs last laughs last!' McGonigle succeeded in eluding his captors and snatched Mr. Kurrie-Lewer's beer.

Peace being restored,

'By the way, if you've quite finished', Alba said coolly, 'that Furtwaengler woman won't sing, I take it?'

'No fear. Old S.W.' (this was the soubriquet of Sir Birinus) 'is helping to engineer the show. When he's about she takes cover. You remember when the Prince of Utopia—oh, that *charming* Prince—came here on a flying visit, Mrs. Furtwaengler went about saying that her ancestors went over in the *Mayflower*—which, as her maiden name was Hoffsommer, is highly improbable—and that she had a right to be received in audience—whatever that means; I suppose she thinks the Prince is a sort of Pope—to be received in audience by the ruler of her ancient people, and so forth. Well, she burst in to the Counsellor's dining-room while he was having lunch, plumped down on her knees, and said she wouldn't get up till he gave an invitation to the party they were getting up for the Prince. They say what he did give her was a jolly good kick on . . . anyhow, he chucked her out'.

‘ No doubt about it, my dear man ; she had to stand all through divine service at the Union Church next day, and tha’s a fac’ ’.

‘ Brp, brp ! ’ coughed Mr. Kurrie-Lewer. ‘ Well, dear folks, I’m afraid I must be going ; back to the treadmill, back to the treadmill’. He was due that night at a gathering of the ‘ lads ’ at Mr. Takamatsu’s ; he finished his beer, and sauntered off into the gloaming.

‘ There goes one of the last members of a dying race’. Mr. McGonigle watched his gradual occultation. ‘ It’s sad to think that hearty men’ll soon be extinct. Everybody seems to have been hearty in the first half of the nineteenth century ; they guzzled and drank and gobbled at one another like turkey-cocks. Where shall we look in these days to find a Caingey Thornton, a Major Bagstock, or a Captain Cuttwater ? Who drinks porter or eats masses of beefsteak with raw onion soused in cold water, and fat porridge like Jack Spraggon ? Nobody, unless he’s keen on getting the gout and a duodenal ulcer or two. Does anyone think for a moment that ex-officers of the great war will meet together over their pints of port and say explosively, “ By gad, sir ! it was hot work at Festubert, damme if it wasn’t. Men were men in those days, sir ! ” No, of course not. They’ll discuss disarmament and Empathy, while they swallow tabloids. Why, even our friend Kurrie-Lewer’s merely hearty so as to camouflage his highly refined and sensitive soul’.

Podler intervened. ‘ Well, what about you, McGonigle ? You’re the heartiest man in Totsuka and you know it’.

‘ Yes, but I do it consciously in the attempt to prolong the life of a fine old tradition. You can imagine how painful it is for me to observe old army men taking to spiritualism and philosophy instead of keeping a “ little

lady" in town. Thackeray lamented the decay of the *joie de vivre* that he observed in young bucks like Tom and Jerry; what he was really lamenting was the beginning of the end of masculinity. After the nineties the intermediate sex has proved too much for us; men are becoming more and more womanish. Look at Cyprian Dornoch, author of *The Elephant-Grey Communion*; his face is that of a young girl of forty-seven, and he is said to wear bloomers when he goes on walking tours. Neurosis has ceased to be a disease. It's a proprium of man'.

'I detest your new young men', cried Alba. 'Men ought to be men and women ought to be women'.

Sighing, Mr. McGonigle rose. 'Ah, well, such is life. We live in decadent days, do not we—decadent days. So long, see you to-morrow. Be good while Uncle's away'. The twilight engulfed him.

'What nonsense he talks', said Alba indignantly. 'I don't think men are a bit worse than they were. There always were freaks who didn't care for girls. But as a whole men aren't a bit decadent, though I think they're changing. Change is a healthy sign. When one's sick of the monotony of the same thing one should listen to Nature prompting one to seek change for the salvation of soul and body. That's what I say. Besides, men are changing in the right direction. They're getting more spiritual, more romantic, less selfish on the whole—at least they don't merely regard woman as a kind of extra pillow de luxe, but recognise that they haven't the idealism that makes women superior'.

She got up and stretched herself. 'I shall have to be going soon, too. Come as far as the gate'.

The shadow of the woods now lay brown and inert, as though swooning about them. The wind had died down according to custom with the fading of the light,

but the breakers, more oppressively leaden than ever, still exploded, smashing with a huge pomphology into dazzling frothy planes. At a faint throb of summer lightning heaven seemed to wince as though stung with a lash.

‘I think it may rain to-morrow’, muttered Podler as they wandered among the pine-boles tormented into every demoniac attitude of which the acrobatic Japanese pine is capable.

‘Let it come down!’ It was as though Mrs. Bracegirdle had acted the murderer in Macbeth: the ominous darkness added a hollowness to her enunciation. In the depth of the coppice gloom weighed upon them like the belly of some night-monster, a succube, a stryx, glutted to bursting point. Air, earth and trees whispered together of a sudden, although the wind had long stilled. The ground shuddered as if at the impact of some wandering star.

‘Heavens! An earthquake! They always make me so nervous, even the little ones’. Alba turned to him to be reassured. Her scented body, now freshly acrid after the exertions of the afternoon, leant so near that its sweetened half-animal perfume—musk and civet—rose into his nostrils. He felt the pressure of her breasts against him; a burning hand caught and seared his bare fore-arm. He could just discern that her lips were slightly apart, but that her eyes, two phosphorescent slits almost closed, continued to watch him.

The blood mounted to Mr. Podler’s head, and poured scaldingly over his skull. With an unpleasant racing of the heart he stooped to kiss Alba who by this time had managed somehow to get herself entangled in his arms. For the first time in his life he was carried away out of his emotional depth, into channels of experience and of impulses that seemed to be greater than and distinct from

himself. Indeed, it was the first time that a woman had displayed for him an enthusiasm as violent as that of which Alba now gave proof in the volcanic heat of her kisses. Even while embracing her, he generalised that stupid women are the most passionate because their libido doesn't all run to brain-activity. There was no doubt about her passion ; it was as much as he could cope with. Lulu—frigid, conceited flirt ! a good thing things were as they were—a special Providence, after all. Alba was intended for him, and teleology was justified. So argued the rational while the sensuous being of Mr. Podler, led prisoner in a rose-red chain, welcomed its new servitude.

Alba whispered hoarsely, ' It had to be ! I wanted you ever since I first saw you, and you wanted me, too, though I don't think you knew it '.

' Oh yes, I did ', lied Mr. Podler, infusing what was after all real passion into his voice. He quite believed what he said as soon as he had said it, so vivid was the reality of the present, in itself an epoch of experience. He forgot completely that twelve hours ago he had been perfectly ready to negotiate with any offer that occurred ; with woman as an universal, with (to quote Ensign Pullborough's often-heard phrase of censure) ' anything in a skirt '. Alleviation rather than, in its more ethereal sense, love, had been his object in this feverish latter stage. But now everything was adjusted ; Papageno had got his Papagena and all would be well.

' I think not ; not wholly at least. But it was that that made you tell me about my husband—you were unconsciously hostile to him and wanted to separate me from him ; and though your conscious self didn't intend to tell me, it came out. But there wasn't any need ; I was yours already. You want me badly, don't you ? Say you do. I can feel your heart beating like anything '.

‘Of course I do. I simply adore you. What are we going to do about it?’

‘Kiss me . . . I feel I could worship you. I never felt like that about any other man’.

Podler was flattered, though he felt that this talk about worshipping was somehow a little uncomfortable.

During the long silence that followed Mr. Podler kissed her with ever increasing ardour; it would not be long before she surrendered to him unconditionally and irrevocably.

‘Alba, don’t go yet!’ He was troubled and very husky, but the anticipation of conquest, and the triumph of having at last experienced it, predominated; man, the subduer, exerting his right and capturing the female . . . the Sabines . . . marriage by capture. . . .

But with a quick and wholly unexpected movement Alba broke away from him. The theatrical, aphoristic look that even now appalled him came into her face. She was clearly going to try one of her stunts.

‘No, my dear, no! Don’t let our love be degraded. Let’s make a Temple of it, an ideal thing, the most splendid love that ever existed. A Temple where we can worship our Ideal!’

Podler had not the slightest use for temples or ideals. By this time thoroughly roused, he could perceive but one goal before him—consummation. But though furious at her sudden tack and at her ruining this poignant hour with her dreadful mawkish clichés, he had enough sense to realise that if he disagreed with her at the moment it would be fatal. He must humour her and talk the same kind of nonsense.

‘Very well, my dear girl; what you say is my law; I obey you absolutely’.

Alba clasped her hands. ‘Ah, it’s too wonderful. To think that we shall be the supreme lovers of the world!’



It will be a true union such as the body can never know'.

Their arms round each other, they approached the garden gate and the moment of parting. Once more she kissed him, this time with perceptibly finer spirituality.

'Darling, you will live to thank me for this'.

Podler thought not as he stood, boiling with resentment, face to face with the mysteries of night, full of curious ghosts clustering like bats in the trees. In that state of congestion and perplexity which now paralysed his initiative, he was unable to think even articulately, much less give vent to his ire in words. But he had by this time proceeded beyond speech and action to a point not so far removed from absolute sensation; if he had only succeeded in opening, as it were, the safety valve of fluent expression, he might have found relief in the following rhapsody. But he lacked familiarity with and the habit of studying the older masters of prose, where such grief as his is eloquently presented.

'Ah, wretched man, ah, miserable me! What shall I do and whither shall I fly? Of what crime, and how heinous, can I be guilty, that there should visit me so merciless a retribution? Not Sisyph his boulder, not Tantalus his vain banquet, could vie in torment with the goad of these my desires, exalted but to be cast down the more precipitously, encouraged but that I might savour with more keenness the bitter cup of frustration. O ye gods, have ye ordain'd for every malady a medicine, for every sore a salve, leaving only love remediless? Did ye deem no man so mad as to be entangled in such fleshly nets as now encumber me? Alas, divine Charities, daughters of Aeglé, ye can avail me nothing! No flower, Thalia, may gladden the doleful desert within me; nor hast thou, Aglaia, any jocund ray wherewith to pierce the fuliginous mantle of my despair. Ah, my

Alba, would thou wert less foolish and I more fortunate ; either would I were out of this mad mood, or we were both of one mind. That a man, flouting that chaste votaress, Good Sense, should thus abase himself before the crotchets of a painted wanton ! Never more will I, so help me Jove, solicit the favours or lend ear to the litany of womankind that keepeth fast ; after dinner she had been kind ; *auferet pecunias ? At habet in coelis.* Postpone the hour of her earthly sustenance, and she dines with the angels. To such an end did Sathanas, in the guise of Horace Walpole, seduce the foolish nymph Romance, begetting upon her the blowzy trull Sentimentality.

‘ But your table is your sole exorcist ; conscience, that jejune Larve, flits shrieking to Avernus from sallets, olios, electuaries, from quail and shell-fish, from diverse condiments and generous spicings. “ An heated stomach engendreth desire ; not Aetna, not Vesuvius his mount, are consumed with such ardours as are young thews drencht in wine ”. So saith Jerome. Ah, purple wave of Pontack and Rosa-Solis, whence Aphrodite rose, how dear hath thine ebb cost thy navigator, prest for the government of his gilded poop to Cytherea ! When Folly, like the Panther that hath a sweet smell but a devouring mind, greets me with a moral face, whereto will her masking yield if not to wine ? The tortoise, having tasted the viper, sucketh Origanum and is quickly revived.

‘ Or let the woman that laboureth under the burden of conscience rather keep house among her chattels, and be bent to the rule of wedlock, than embrace lawlessness with misgiving. What shall I say of one that, approaching me as Messalina, takes her leave in the semblance of Lucrece ? Truly the ass hath fled, leaving me no trophy but the lion’s fell. Bear ye witness, ye gods,

that I sought with no stratagem to undo some country vestal, or one that should lead apes in hell. Unsoliciting, I was wooed ; secure, expunged by the Greek fire of woman's wantonness. O Erinnyes ! Shall the city that hath capitulated be permitted to starve ? What then ? If there be heat in Phlegethon, prick-shafts of fire in Olympus' arsenal, such coy cruelty shall not go un-avenged. Grant me, thou whose divine bolts did consume in her imprudence the presumptuous daughter of Cadmus, that I may bear the torch, fan the glede, and as thy chosen instrument visit upon the head of a light matron her grave impiety'.

With such exclamations might Podler have relieved the tension in his brain had he found it possible to utter a sound ; but perhaps, on the whole, it was fortunate that he could not, since within a measurable distance, Mr. Sheepshanks, Mr. Fargo and Undine Vocado sat together to enjoy the northerly wind that had suddenly arisen, bearing with it an immense mass of blue-black vapour. But the gods evidently heard his mute appeal, for they immediately rent the firmament across with a blade of angry violet, and the jovial thunder, crashing from space to space, frightened Mr. Podler, who had failed to notice the rapid approach of the storm, almost out of his wits. The gods, moreover, had decreed that this company should meet in the glare of the electric light, in which one has to behave oneself and conceal traces of emotion ; and caused so violent a rain to descend that the ground smoked with the spindrift of exploded drops, and the human beings, caught without umbrellas, bolted for the hotel lounge as hard as they could go, Undine's long and agile legs landing her there fifty seconds ahead of the more ponderous and cardiac men. Thus it was that Podler found himself next to the one person whom he particularly wished to avoid—Mr.

Sheepshanks, with drops upon his beard, giggling as he wiped his trouser-legs with a handkerchief, and calling for sherry and bitters.

The sight of him roused in Podler's breast a fresh apprehension. Supposing Alba in some hysterical paroxysm of remorse confessed to her husband that she and Podler were lovers? Supposing a story got about that, swollen to scandalous proportions by the inventive talent of the community, should blast his career? If the faintest rumour of irregularity reached the ears of Sir Birinus, the mills of bureaucracy might grind slowly, but they would certainly reduce him to the pulp of an unpromoted and disappointed man. If the brilliant Assistant Secretary, Conrad Meare, had been mulcted of his chance for a C.B. simply because he had married his typist, how much more should a philanderer with other people's property die the death? An unpleasant qualm griped him as he reflected that he had placed himself at the mercy of an untrustworthy woman, utterly devoid of the slightest sense of responsibility. For the next few days it would be necessary to watch every change of expression on Tristram's face; and this would be a difficult job, seeing that the habitual mask of gentle melancholy was but seldom removed.

'Won't you', piped Mr. Sheepshanks, 'share my umbrella as far as the house, and borrow it after that?'

To be requested to accept a favour at the hands of the man whom one intends to deceive is typical of the gods, whose sense of humour is grim but crude. Bracing himself for an arm-in-arm promenade with the man he wished to forget for his peace of mind, he answered, 'Thanks so much; awfully good of you—er, very well; let's brave the elements together'.