



III

THE five sirens of Totsuka were an important social institution ; they 'brightened, and sometimes wrecked, the home', Professor McGonigle would say. But after allowing the usual fifty per cent. discount for Totsuka rumours, it could hardly be claimed that the wreckage had so far been very serious. The three ladies who, with Alba and Inez, made up what a young language officer called 'the joy-group', differed ravishly in their several characteristics. Malvina Bugbird was single, clinging and fluffy ; short and just plump enough to look exciting in a bathing-dress. Professing to be on her way to America via the Ports for the purpose of visiting her sister, who was starring at Hollywood as a parallelopipe in a geometric futurist film based on Canning's *Loves of the Triangles*, she found life in the colony so congenial that she lingered on, month after month. Being one of those people who are always writing, but have not yet published, a novel, she would rather ostentatiously take out a little pocket-book and make notes of conversation or character, and was perpetually on the look-out for 'significant information'. This meant that she would rapidly pick out salient points, and leave all the rest. To decide that a person was an 'introvert' was, in her estimation, to have discovered all there was to know about him. Mr. Roberts was a vorticist, Mr. Tristan Tzara a Dadaist, and so on. To study details like the works or days of any human being was merely otiose ; more, it would have

been fatal to the tabloid method of acquiring general knowledge. Her manner of hooking herself under the arm of any promising male was generally admitted to be delightful, as was her skin, milky, snowy, Nordic, and in summer slightly freckled round the nose.

The Japanese student from whom she was taking lessons in the language discovered an ingenious method of declaring his adoration. Every week he brought her a new canto of an Epic (in Spenserian stanza) in which a beautiful English girl abandoned herself more and more completely, as canto succeeded canto, to the raptures of a liaison with a Japanese youth of noble family. After about six thousand lines the parents remind their son that they are remotely connected with the Imperial House, and that consequently this sort of thing, with foreign devils and all, must not go on. The two lovers immediately plunge down a three-hundred-foot waterfall. At this Malvina became rather alarmed, and discontinued her lessons. She believed in love affairs for the purpose of mental hygiene, and would have liked to have had some mild experience of Japanese gallantry, if it could have been kept within the bounds of common-sense; but when it came to suicide and exotic sentimentalities of that kind—she dropped Mr. Nishitani abruptly and considered how she could strengthen her position with Professor McGonigle, who lent her books and called her a vampire.

The 'format' of Lulu, of Mrs. Miles, was radically different. For one thing, she was the only member of the so-called smart coterie who dared to keep her hair its natural length; uncut, it was a magnificent lump of copper. But had she worn it short, not only would it, she felt sure, have looked like a ring of carrots round a donkey's neck, but it would have also revealed the rather ungraceful flatness at the back of her head. She was tall,

broad-shouldered, and built for speed and action ; but her beauty reminded one of stage favourites of a bygone age—Gertie Millar, Phyllis Dare ; a typically English type, all the more so, perhaps, for the faintest strain of Hebrew blood. She lived remote from the inner world of the highbrows ; in her presence one thought of Henley and Maidenhead ; of a lawn with its parterres of calceolarias and begonias, that flowed greenly, flatly, to the Thames-edge ; of Ascot, Lord's, Deauville and such haunts of the superior or monied Briton. She was one of those objects of luxury which lend grace to capitalism, but which, a few generations on, will be seen no more. She dressed perfectly and expensively ; there lay, one felt with a pleasurable thrill, some concealed channel of wickedness, of brigandage, deep within her. Surely there was danger in the sardonic gleaming of her eyes ? Divergent opinions vexed the colony ; the minority report led such as credited it to expect a domestic explosion in the Miles ménage at any time ; but the majority dossier included several stories which, though improbable, were far more in keeping with her true character. It was said that she had publicly embraced a curate who was in tears after a reprimand from his bishop because his alb was too short ; and that to the headmaster, D.D. of Silchester, she had replied, 'Not to-day, George, I'm afraid,' whereupon he had rolled sobbing on the floor and mingled his whiskers with the bearskin hearthrug. The fable continued that she had then patted his bald head and told him to try and be a man for once, and that he, remembering all the boys he had birched for indecorous behaviour in the dormitory, and an impending vacancy on the Bench, pulled himself together and, hastily removing all traces of his recent emotion, quitted the house with a firm step. Thanks to her tactfulness on that tragic afternoon, he was now one

of the broadest-church and most radiant bishops who ever sat in the Lords.

Finally it was whispered that she had actually converted the editor of the *Uranian Review* (Mr. Gordon Gomperz, now assisting the Japanese Mombusho to reorganise their Higher Boys Schools on an English Public School model that should include corporal punishment, and strange to say, a confirmed misogynist) to an interest in the opposite sex ; which, the soberer spirits declared, was an *a priori* impossibility. Green young newcomers, and even seasoned veterans, misinterpreting the tales about her flightiness—for the historical sense that discerns fact from myth was granted to few—rushed hopefully in to conquer, and to find her provokingly inexpugnable. A woman who looked like that, who spoke with a velvety drawl that in itself seemed an innuendo, had no business to love her husband and conserve her virtue, they would indignantly protest. What was she playing at, that was what they wanted to know ? She stood them drinks when it was her turn, listened with unusual interest to their anecdotes and confessions, could tell on occasion a very fair risqué story ; damn it all, a woman who does that sort of thing has no business to turn one down as soon as one gets a little bit fresh. The fact of the matter was that she was remarkably like what her brother would have been had she had one ; and her strong affection for men was such as one really nice boy would feel for another. If Mr. Sheepshanks had a feminine cell somewhere on his person, she certainly included a masculine one. This possibility accounted in some measure for the slightly farcical element which she introduced into relations with her admirers, and which the more touchy, after they had made fools of themselves, were disposed to resent. Nevertheless, she quickly distinguished the tough from

the tender-minded, and regulated her conduct accordingly. Just at the moment she was well prepared for an offensive which Mr. Podler, belonging avowedly to the former category, was threatening to launch.

Last came the spectacular Undine Vocadlo, who, at the present phase of her startling career, was teaching semi-classical dancing to the children of rich merchants; stumpy little Japanese girls with short brown legs would, at her request, drape themselves in chitons or pepla, the whiteness of which accentuated their café-au-lait complexions, and would labour with the most praiseworthy diligence, but no suppleness of limb, at the choreography of 'Diana pursuing the Nymphs', a ballet which was to be staged that summer at the Kiku Hotel auditorium, before a throng of astounded relatives. Though not precisely what the poet Nichols calls 'a virgin fierce, on vans of gold', she was vivid, fiery and stimulating, and went at once to one's head. Her nickname of Ethyl Ester was not inappropriate. She threw herself neck and crop at 'progressive ideas', which ranged from psycho-analysis and Malthusianism to necromancy and Bolshevism, practices which not merely kept her usefully and happily occupied in the intervals between her love affairs and her professional duties, but enormously enhanced her reputation among the Modernist Japanese who were taking indiscriminately to all the latest substitutes for religion, like ducks to water. She had first appeared in public at the age of fifteen as a parachutist, but after one attempt had taken to the safer pursuits of motor-cycle racing and free love. Shortly after her arrival in Japan she met Mrs. Furtwaengler, ever on the look-out for someone who would be likely to entertain and uplift. Undine sized her up pretty accurately, and decided to allow her the glory of introducing her to the local society. Mrs. Furtwaengler on

her part was completely bamboozled by this flashy young cosmopolitan, who plied her with theories about dance-rhythms and their effect on the soul. They were both missionaries, she exclaimed; one preached salvation through high thinking, the other through high kicking. The delightful thing was that one could say anything to Mrs. Furtwaengler, provided that one put it solemnly and spiritually enough. And the Totsuka Ladies' Club, of which she was secretary—or at least the Evangelical section of it—took their tone from her. And so when Undine proposed to make her début at the club Thursday afternoons by lecturing on Birth Control and the Spiritual Life, Mrs. 'Eff' jumped at the chance of providing something for her flock which, while it was sensational and rather shocking, offered so admirably the excuse of Social Service. At first one or two of the more reactionary committee women demurred, but finally consented, merely stipulating that the proceedings should be opened with prayer and conclude with a suitable hymn. This proved to be the most uproariously successful session in the annals of the club: the room was packed; Undine, and her illustrative lantern slides, a revelation that lingered long in the memory.

Her success with the women was, however, only of short duration. Many took offence at the extreme publicity of her love affairs. On principle, she took care that nothing of her passionate histories should be concealed, and genuinely partook of that frank, expansive nature that must confess its emotions and have them approved and sympathised with. Very soon the evangelical party completely dropped her; but having triumphantly achieved notoriety, and finding them intolerably dull and stupid, she was altogether pleased. The less dowdy women, a very fair number, forgave her indiscretions and remained willingly under the charm of

her immense vitality, her naïve trustfulness and her personal beauty. Her brilliant but coarse black hair and her rather wide and high cheekbones had incited Miss Moira Walker, who disapproved of her, to aver that she was a Chinese half-caste, and that her mother had been a Shanghai coolie-amah. However that might have been, her mongoloid skull and great Indian eyes, burning with a dark fire, lent to her beauty that strangeness which was to Pater an essential of romance, and to her admirers a lure that would tempt them to commit any absurdity. Embarking on one of the tempestuous affairs which were the breath of life to her, and which must, if they were to be perfect, include tears and savage quarrels, they would practically disappear for a time from the ordinary world, absorbed as they were in the worship of this most amazing young person; but before long they would return to their usual environment, dazed and perplexed, like men newly escaped from a cavern, or as though there had been a nasty ground-swell on the Paphian voyage, and curiously reticent about their experiences. But from hints that were dropped from time to time a distressing and fairly coherent account of the 'course' might be constructed. It appeared that she was altogether too eccentric, too exacting. Her lovers must submit to a thousand annoyances; they were expected to practice, if she felt in the mood for it, 'Zen' meditation, or eat Dr. Whistlechurch's Pranic Chaff and Charcoal cookies, or hear gladly the torrential outpourings of rubbish that she called philosophy, or, worst of all, scantily clad, to perform humiliating contortions in the gymnasium, as Pan or Apollo, before a giggling brown mob of school-children. In a muscular mood, she would make them the subjects of her daring experiments in ju-jitsu. Sometimes, even, they felt very strongly that they were expected to quarrel or even fight

a duel with a rival. Undine's flamboyant romanticism demanded jealousies and strong men struggling to contain themselves ; she had never felt so happy as when two aspirants to her favours had left Charing Cross (she was then sixteen) by the boat train in order to fight on Calais sands. She never saw them again, it is true, nor did she ever learn that they agreed to ' wash-out ' the duel, while they were being sea-sick on the boat, and went on to Paris where, elated by their reconciliation, they had ' a perfectly bright blue time of it '.

A difficult girl to get along with ; yet there was perpetually someone or other raving at her chalk-white but translucent skin, her mop of glistening hair, full of indigo shadows.

Tristram Sheepshanks, on a visit to Mr. Podler for the purpose of inspecting his Ukiyoye prints, found the conversation sliding from the Courtesans of the great and golden Japanese decadence to the celebrated women of the colony. ' I like to have a good talk about women,' blurted Podler, ' it's the only dalliance a respectable bachelor can have '.

' It's a marvel to me, my dear Podler, how you or anyone can stand all this celibacy. I'm not what they call highly sexed myself, but I know I could never stand a lonely life. It's not so much the crude fact as the secondary or tertiary phenomenon of sex that I can't do without. Companionship of the kind men can't give, a little flattery—one likes to have someone at home to show off to, though I don't get much of that—still, I like to feel I could. And then again, there's the mere presence of a woman about the house. Unless you don't care for these things you must be living a life of real privation '.

' From what you say I ought to be in a very bad way, because I'm not really a bachelor ', Mr. Podler expanded.

‘ I’ve got a wife, you know, but she’s quite impossible and we’ve separated ’.

‘ Not really ! ’

‘ Oh yes. So you see, I’ve tasted the sweets of married bliss—damned little of that, by the way—and ought to miss it all the more. Well, to be quite candid, I don’t. Chastity’s a habit like non-smoking after you’ve given up smoking. Sometimes the craving comes back, of course, especially in spring ; curse Nature, always reminding one one’s not a man yet ’.

‘ But surely as long as our bodies remain as they are we can’t expect . . . ’

‘ We can expect, if we can’t change ourselves ; and we can contribute that expectation toward the total force of Creative Evolution. To propagate by surgery, bottle babies and so on, is a clumsy anticipation ; but by determining to propagate less horridly and disturbingly we shall hasten the generation in which these things happen as a natural development. Love’ll have nothing to do with sex in those days ’.

‘ Then I suppose women will cease to be beautiful—no more Ukiyoye prints or their equivalent ? ’

‘ Couldn’t say ; possibly, probably they will. Anyhow beauty will change ; there’ll be quite a different series of stimuli to rouse us to deep experience ’.

‘ But to come back to the more immediate matter of your temptations. Is there anyone here you find especially tempting ? I must say I feel it would be good for you if you very occasionally yielded. Now I know you pretty well I notice you get rather on edge sometimes ’.

‘ Climate, my dear man, climate. You’ll get like that after you’ve been through half a dozen Japanese summers ; all water-vapour and no oxygen, that’s what they are. No, I haven’t found anyone particularly

tempting ; though that young devil, Lulu Baynes, would like me to make an ass of myself with her, I know.' How he enjoyed saying this ! ' But anyhow, pro-vice-consuls can't afford to hang round other people's wives. As for yielding, honestly I don't feel any inclination that way'.

Mrs. Podler had paid one of her rare visits to him about six months previously, when she had spent an afternoon at Totsuka on her way from San Francisco to the Gobi Desert. She was one of those enterprising female explorers who receive and revel in the worship of the British public, as intrepid in the press and society as she was upon the hump of a dromedary, combining the advertising genius of a Callisthenes with the veracity of a pseudo-Mandeville. She never felt truly happy, however, unless she was making herself uncomfortable in the Andes or Thibet. The Thibetans, fortunately, regarded her as a goddess or thaumaturge because she had, in the presence of a select gathering, taken a cold bath and emerged none the worse. As she declared in her ' Chats with the Living Buddha ', ' it beat St. Paul and the viper to a frazzle'.

Mr. Podler had discovered long ago that he was not the proper husband for a woman of the lion-tamer type, nor of one who left about with no misgiving, even, alas ! with callous indifference, letters addressed to her by his best friend, accusing her of having forsaken him for an unknown person called Roy ; and had not the slightest wish to plumb either the mysteries of the desert or the intricate depths of her heart. He believed in enjoying the comforts of capitalist civilisation while one had them ; it wouldn't be for long. His many Catholic relations, however, opposed a divorce, and he had to make himself as comfortable as he could without, and succeeded pretty well, as long as he felt that there was a thousand miles or so between himself and Mrs. Podler. So when she

tripped into his office one afternoon to inform him that her pet baboon, Ronnie, whom she clearly considered infinitely superior to him, was lodged for the time being in his sitting-room, and to taunt him with being a moral doormat, he received her with as dignified a restraint as he could assume ; and as soon as she left for the primal nursery of the dinosaur he breathed both a sigh of relief and a prayer that she would never return.

