



VI

IT was perhaps a pity that Mr. Podler, like most men when they are surcharged with emotions that lack a proper outlet, should have taken his crosses with such deadly seriousness, and have jumped to the conclusion that all was lost immediately on perceiving the default of Madame Cavara, and the contiguity of Sheepshanks and Mrs. Miles. In these strenuous days ladies are not so lightly won as all that; 'men', as Kingsley so helpfully wrote, 'must work'.

M. Fabre certainly cherished designs for the subjugation of Inez, but, though deeply versed in the arts of the amorist, he had not the psychological subtlety to foresee all the vagaries in which a highly strung woman, given to hyper-aesthesia and fits of weeping, might indulge. M. Fabre was used, it is true, to the more ordinary types of moods and misgivings, which he dealt with by rule—the administration of Quinquina Dubonnet; and invariably secreted a bottle of this tonic liquid in his car. But beyond that limit he had not the imagination to proceed. When that afternoon, radiant in scarlet and nigger-brown, fragrant as a vast rose-tinted orchid in whose veins there ran a distillation of cyclamen, she had skipped into his car and told him to drive her to the devil, the world became immediately saturated with a golden glamour.

They passed slowly up the main street of the town, in which a more or less sacred festival was taking place. The country people gaped round stalls and booths,

examining the attractive rubbish on sale ; lengths of gaudy, flowered, cotton stuff, globe-fish lanterns, cheap lacquer ware, little shrines of pinewood and brass. Outside a larger pavilion, where a man was hiccapping lugubriously on a trombone, sat a disconsolate row of monkeys with their faces painted to look like geishas or daimyos under the Shogunate—and remarkably like they looked. The crowd assembled before the monkeys' theatre were decorated with balloons ; even the babies on their mothers' backs clutched the frail cotton of one of these hydrogen-filled bubbles that stretched up stiffly from their attachment. Inez was charmed, and ordered M. Fabre to pull up so that she might purchase a cheap shrine, which she secured at four times its value.

At about five they drew up again at a rustic tea-house near a grove of hemp palms and giant camellias. They drank green tea and a little Quinquina and nibbled at salt biscuits flavoured with seaweed, to the sound of carp, snorting and plashing in a little pond, the rockier margin of which was jewelled with pearly funkias and the gross blue balloons of platycodon. He pressed her pale, fragile hand, which neither returned the pressure nor recoiled, a tactful compromise at this early stage. She appeared tender, delightfully bemused as they drew out of this little paradise of rest on the old Tokaido road. When the shadows began to lengthen and change their harsh diurnal black for dimmer blue-mauves and violets, they were climbing through the low, woody hills about Fujisawa. It was not long before they perceived a cross-crowned bell gable, that stood sharp and black against the West, now throbbing in all the gilt and sanguine of the sun's death agony. Without warning a melancholy little bell scattered with forlorn accent the notes that signalled some act of adoration ; a plaintive, an humble sound, touching only the hearts of the exiled faithful in

a strange land. Topping the hill they found themselves alongside the convent of the Flaming Heart, whose bleak, high-pitched roofs looked somehow menacing, and chillingly unsuited to the voluptuous character of the scenery. But before them lay a vista of such glory that, M. Fabre having stopped his engine, the pair wandered on to a space of cut bamboo scrub where the pines and crypto-merias fell away. The volcanic hills, murrey, indigo and sage-green, tossed before them, ridge behind ridge, each becoming in gradual remoteness fainter and more ethereal, till at last a phantom of the palest, the most unearthly flame, towered the peerless cone of Mount Fuji.

'Perfect', sighed M. Fabre, 'just like the five sen picture postcards'. After a few seconds of worship, during which, he had no doubt, the romantic scene was working its spell, he turned with a true thrill of emotion, to embrace Inez, but was astonished to find that she had stolen from his side. Perhaps Fuji was for her by this time 'over-done'; anyhow, she had completely disappeared through the rising tide of gloom. Was she inviting him to a more sequestered place among the trees? At length he perceived in the shadow of a tragic little copse the gaunt geometry that betokened a Crucifixion. The suffering figure, weathered to leprous hues and carven in the emaciated style of the old South German masters, might be actually decaying before the spirit was fled. There, crouched before it, sinister in the mournful remnant of the day, the now dubiously scarlet and black form of Inez.

M. Fabre felt as vexed as embarrassed, and quite convinced the Quinquina would by no means solve the present difficulty—on the contrary, indeed! In a minute or two she came to him sorrowfully with traces of tears about her great, somnambulescent eyes.

‘ Please let me go for a little while ; I really must visit Mère Paphnucie and all the dear nuns. It’s a long time since I saw them last, and I’ve been meaning to ever since Christmas. I shan’t be gone long ’.

M. Fabre gesticulated his resignation. She rang at a forbidding door and was immediately swallowed up. There was always a welcome for Inez Cavara at this convent, on which she had bestowed a gorgeous reliquary, obtained somehow (the accounts were various) from a disintegrating Baroque plaster cathedral on the edge of her native tobacco and coffee plantations, to enclose the great toe-nail, all that remained of the ardent and now blessed Concepcion de la Vega who, during the sixteenth century persecutions in Kyushu, had received, while being massaged to death before a colossal statue of Kwannon, goddess of mercy, great comfort from the vision of a flaming heart, much to the disgust of the Shogun, who was present in person at the ceremony, and ordered the immediate execution of the blind masseurs for not having done their job properly.

M. Fabre lit a cigarette and contemplated, with some misgivings, the recession of the twilight. After greeting and gossip there would be no doubt an interval for devotions. He wished that at these Inez might preserve her Latin conciseness of idiom. To beguile this pious hour he sipped a little at the Quinquina bottle, still three-quarters full. The uncertain shapes of the trees, the silent roof-ridge of the building began, little by little, silvery, to assume a precision that could signify but one thing—moonrise. A huge clay-coloured bird—or butterfly, was it?—flapped, gauzily phosphorescent, with monstrous and extravagant gestures against the convent wall. Had a nun died suddenly, and was this her soul, newly emerged and lepidopterous, essaying its first clumsy flight ?

On closer inspection he recognised it for a human hand with part of a sleeve thrust through a hatch and brandishing a bluish envelope. As he took it the hand disappeared with a click. He read by the screaming white bars of his head-lights that Inez would be deeply obliged if he would call at the convent gate after Mass to-morrow and motor her to her husband at Totsuka.

Savagely vexed, he leapt into the patient Citroën and stamped with such fury on the clutch-pedal that, shooting forward, it emitted as it were a howl of pain. A bright cylinder traced only a fragment of its trajectory, smashing against the wall of the nunnery with an angry hiss. It was an empty Quinquina bottle; in crystal cascades the moon-reflecting shivers of glass fell earthward; a few dark drops—it might have been blood—trickled down the sewage-grey tile surface, still warm from the sun.

It was fortunate that, in his morose and alcoholic state, he met no obstacle on his way. After roaring some few miles through the wan and scented night, he came to a hot spring resort on the foot-hills of a mountain system. The air was cool and smelt of conifers and wood smoke. The cheerful lights of a Japanese-style inn beckoned him—a charming house amid plumes of bamboo, with azaleas, lilies, a gold-fish pond and stone lanterns in its courtyard. He had stayed there several times before when on similar escapades, and had looked forward to accepting the favours of Inez in the clean familiar room with its black-lacquered kimono stand. It was famous for the excellence of its grilled trout from the stream that tumbled hoarsely past the foot of the precipice upon which the village was perched.

Entering, he was greeted, though with ceremonious prostrations, as an old friend, the proprietress com-

menting slyly on the fact that he came for once alone. He removed his clothing and put on a Japanese wrapper, carrying on all the time a lively conversation with the serving maid, O-Kiku-san, who delivered roguish and reminiscent glances from her long eyes. In yukata and straw sandals he slip-slopped in the direction of a strong odour of rotten eggs, and plunged into a tank of steaming and exhilarating sulphuretted water. Next door, a whole family bathing together were screaming at the top of their voices, so he stole to the partition, which was little more than five feet high, and peeped over. It was a pretty and primitive sight, and contributed something toward the mending of his spirits.

The brook trout was first-rate, the saké—green, steaming and aromatic—ininitely comfortable after all these recent hardships. He became so enlivened that when the impudently pretty O-Kiku-san glided in for a last solicitous glance at and possibly a joke with her august charge, he caught her lightly by the collar of her kimono. With great presence of mind she turned out the electric light.

The next day found him in so equable a frame of mind that he not only motored Inez to Totsuka, but brought her and her husband safely back to Osaka. M. Fabre was long past the stage of brooding over a repulse; if he craved for female society he might be relied on to procure it in some form or other, and he was not debarred from prompt action by a fastidious taste.

Thus it came to pass that Mr. Podler and Mr. Takamatsu, through no fault of their own, suffered a grievous deception.

Now to examine the compromising circumstances wherein Lulu and Mr. Sheepshanks were discovered. Mr. Priapus L. Fargo, the uncrowned king of the Patagonian Republic, to whose influence and intimacy

with other leading American bankers we owe the surprising alacrity with which the Patagonian Government settled down after the tenth revolution, and not only made up for past defaults in the payment of External Bond interest, but punctually disbursed their seven per cent. half-yearly, was a financial giant, but in matters of art a little child. He could scarcely distinguish between the elder and the younger Vandervelde, and had already purchased from a giggling dealer at Nikko a great number of Japanese pornographic prints that left nothing to the imagination, but which, the good shop-keeper emphatically maintained, came straight from the hand of Harunobu. He intended to decorate with them the walls of his Baptist home in Oregon which, his Patagonian labours past, he was now setting up. He would have a rich decorative olla podrida ; the dubious prints should mingle with some really excellent work of Koyetsu's that he despised as being rather 'sissy', screens and lacquers of stags at war in the rutting season, or of white hares drumming in the steel-blue moonlight, and some antique European stuff of which only the nucleus had so far been collected. It was to be the pleasant task of Mr. Sheepshanks to warn him, over grey mullet and wild ducks in aspic, that the *boniment* of Nikko curio-sellers was, like two-thirds of their genuine antiques, specially manufactured for the benefit of the moneyed 'round-the-world' tourist parties who, practically every month would come, one after the other, gaping and goggling, with a constant refrain of, 'Say now, ain't that just too cunning?' at express speed, round the beauty spots of Japan. He went on to confess himself doubtful whether even the liberal and anti-Puritan taste of Oregon would altogether approve of a too prominent exposure of the 'fifty different lovin's' on the walls of his mansion, and intimated that there

were cases that could not be sanctioned by the tyro's adage, 'Whatever is Japanese is right'.

Mr. Fargo, who had been thoroughly awed by Mrs. Miles's description of Tristram as an authority of European fame, drank in every word. Hitherto he had believed everything that came from the Orient to be fraught with unassailable, even magical, artistic virtues, as his knowledge of that region had been derived mainly from the tourist advertisements in the *Atlantic Monthly*: 'Do you feel the lure of the mysterious East? Japan is calling you, the land of Art and Romance. The Dollar Line will transport you to this earthly paradise', etc. And he remembered years ago having seen the gorgeous temple treasures at a store that one of the pioneer Baptist missionaries had opened on his return from Japan, where he had picked them up for the merest trifles from needy priests whose hetaerae would not live on nothing, and who were as yet unacquainted with the commercial 'smartness' of the foreigner. But by the end of an exquisite dinner he felt thoroughly shaken, and deciding that if he committed himself to the guidance of Mr. Sheepshanks he would be less likely to make aesthetic *faux pas*, begged him to accept the post of adviser and agent in dealings with both hemispheres, and to name his own terms. By the time the meal was ended, Mr. Fargo had complacently swallowed as well every bait that had been offered him, and fell into a pleasant sleep. Alba took her port wine like a man, and shortly afterwards betrayed strong symptoms of a desire to sing, so Mr. Miles, who was, strange to say, a very fair pianist of the parish organ school, accompanied her to the next room in order to support her massive voice.

Thus it was that Sheepshanks and Mrs. Miles found themselves thrown together. 'Aaaaagnus deceii',

yelled Alba from the adjoining room, while Mr. Miles crashed gloomily in the bass.

‘ Oh, for heaven’s sake, let’s get out of this racket and chance the mosquitoes ’. Lulu put both hands to her ears and dived through the low door on to the verandah ; Tristram, too, evacuated a position enfiladed from the left by Mr. Fargo’s snoring, and from the right by the cyclone of sound that Alba, who had chosen an unusually rowdy Mass by Karg-Elert or Rheinberger, or someone of that kind, was raising with Mr. Miles, like a couple of warlocks.

Alba’s taste was unreasoning and capricious, and guided largely by the desire to be able to talk about music that most people had never heard of. So, leaving the safe and comparatively orthodox havens offered by the great masters and more reputable moderns like Ravel, Schonberg, Malipiero, Satie and the like—or even John Ireland with his homely English lyricism—she pursued all that was obscure and unbalanced in music ; Rutland Boughton, Emmanuel Moor, Vincent D’Indy, Jongen, Max Reger—people whose work is heard once and hurriedly forgotten ; such were the more staid figures in her gallery of eccentric dullness.

Mrs. Miles led the way to that *chaise longue* beneath the lantern, and disposed herself exactly as observed by the two roysterers from Mr. Kurrie-Lewer’s.

‘ Now then, Tristram, let’s have a little serious talk for a change. I see there’s something going on in that head of yours. What have you been thinking about lately ? I love to hear you holding forth ’.

‘ What you mean is that you love to feel that you’re attractive enough to draw me out. Well, you are, and you know that perfectly well. Let’s see, what have I been thinking about lately ? Oh, rather gloomy things, love, life and death ’.

Tristram preferred talking 'philosophically', as he liked to think, before a female rather than a male audience; women were more sympathetic and didn't interrupt. Besides, they were women. But Alba would never stand any nonsense of that sort, and had a way of shutting him up with a click if he began speculating aloud.

'By the way', shooting coyly off at a tangent, 'don't you ever have moods of violent craving for a good piece of Welsh mutton? Why is it that the Japanese abhor the flesh of the sheep, and cheese? Sometimes at night when I'm trying to get to sleep I imagine an English market-town inn at lunch-time; roast lamb—' ('quae to-hollis peccahahahata', shouted the open squares of the windows, citron-pale with religious eroticism) 'with red currant jelly, or cold with mint sauce and a salad of green leaves, things we daren't eat in this sewage-irrigated country?.'

'Is this what you brought me out here to tell me?'

'Wait a minute—followed by Cheshire cheese and a glass of liqueur beer; think of the washy pseudo-German lager we have to put up with here. You see I have to confess everything to you. The next thing is that I've just got to the stage in my life when I'm frightened at death and old age. Up to thirty-five the ordinary and animal lures held out by life capture one so completely that one has no time to spare for thoughts of pulvis et umbra. But after thirty-five or thirty-seven the bogies begin to loom up. . . .'

'Before that for women, my dear. I'm thirty-two, I don't mind telling you, and I've had the blue devils badly. Last year I realised my son was fourteen and it made me feel pretty bad; I was almost annoyed with him for daring to grow like that. It's an old saying that

women often go wrong between thirty and thirty-five ; they're frightened into it'.

'How to cure the fright, that's the problem. T. S. Eliot in one of his poems cynically marks three stages in life ; birth, copulation and death. The transition from stage 1 to stage 2 is easy enough, but the main difficulty in life is to pass creditably from stage 2 to stage 3 ; and stage 3 begins as soon as thanatophobia appears—the first pangs of the long final travail. I hope you don't mind my talking like that, and won't say I've got a nasty mind'.

'Oh, don't worry about me ; I've no use for pure-minded young things. Go on'.

'Well, there are the traditional aids of religion and philosophy. Religion, a rubbish-heap of worn-out folk-lore and magic, plus an opportunist moral code, plus anaesthetic drugs in the form of promises of a life to come, which still deaden the shock of the present life and death for some people ; personally, I can't stomach them, and besides, I think one ought, if one has any pluck at all, to face the last operation—decay—without an anaesthetic'.

Lulu sighed and closed her eyes languorously.

'Then philosophy ; what is the matter with it ? It is earthbound, human—all-too-human. Bergson, of course ; but there are others more divorced from sentiment who, nevertheless, remain in bondage to the flesh. No philosopher has ever yet given us pure abstract thought, for this reason. The characteristic, the individual, is a matter of physical mechanism, of endocrine chemistry. Those substances that produce, or are ready to produce, sexual excitement, have the most conspicuous effects. I admire the conclusions of Mr. Russell or Mr. Benda or Mr. Hulme ; but, reading them, I find that in both form and content there is that

which shows how necessarily limited they are as mortals, confined and pestered in the pinfold of mortality. Philosophy is therefore almost as broken a reed as religion. We must conquer death by something more than resignation. Surely one day someone must be able to isolate the chemical combination that causes, or is consciousness. This monkey-gland business is but a crude tentative in the search; one day we shall be injecting immortality with a syringe.

‘But no, I don’t think so. Nature, our enemy, will have won the unequal contest long before that, long before man, having put away the childish doctrine of the survival of the soul after the body, has applied himself to the chemical salvation of the soul within the body. These ideas are old; Milton disbelieved in the former, Bacon had theories on the latter; yet to-day we’re lagging behind the grand old seventeenth century.

‘We are being betrayed to our death by a trinity in unity; lust, fear and anger, and so turn the weapon of chemistry from a creative to a destructive use. That is what comes of trusting Nature, of Rousseauism, of reliance on the Luck which governs the universe. There may be cunning too, but it is a foredoomed, a puny force. If the *whole* of creation is really governed by Cunning, or by a deity, then the deity is either a cretin, or only a child as yet. Man is a ‘dud’ experiment, ready to be scrapped; and so he will either gradually destroy himself in great wars, or pass down from degeneration to degeneration of obscene portents, to the point at which he becomes extinct.

‘What then remains to make life worth living? I reject both the customary aids to stage 3, and the animal bribes of stage 2. There remains, perhaps, romantic or sublimated love. I love my wife in this manner; I examine my passions too much to be really passionate,

with the result that she doesn't get from me the excitement that she requires, and so takes to the bottle. And on my side, I can't make love the sole reason for my existence; it doesn't fill the horizon. What else remains? The desire for expression and for knowledge, which latter Aristotle rashly attributes to all men. Beauty is merely a form of knowledge which is desirable for its own sake. I need expression, but less so than the artist—for I am but the artist's pimp. Wisdom was for me the nearest approximation to permanent moorings for the hulk of life; but of late I have come to wonder if even this, considering the circumstances, is worth while, "for I must die, there is no remedy". I expect you must have felt more or less precisely the same dissatisfaction'.

Lulu was not, at any rate, feeling it at the moment; at peace with the world, she slept, her pretty mouth wider open than it should be, her bosom moving rhythmically.

'Oh, what's the good of talking to you?' With some little petulance, Tristram leant forward and shook her gently by the shoulder.

'Do wake up; you'll be eaten alive with mosquitoes'.

Her first instinct on waking was to appear as though she had never been asleep, and so she began to agitate her fan rather feebly. It was at this moment that Mr. Takamatsu caught sight of her.

'I'm sorry', Sheepshanks continued, 'I'm afraid I bored you'.

'Not a bit. I'm simply hateful. I must have been a little drunk, and it's so comfortable out here. As a matter of fact, I was thrilled at what you said. No, I know you don't believe a word I say; but I was'.

'Oh, that's quite all right. You don't imagine I'm annoyed, do you?'

‘ Well, come to tea to-morrow and I’ll prescribe for your complaint ; I know what the matter with you is.’

A loud whoop added extempore to the end of a Stabat Mater galvanised not only them but Mr. Fargo, who leapt up in a confused frenzy exclaiming, ‘ My ! If I haven’t missed the boat for Se-addle ! ’

Mrs. Sheepshanks always sang with a large tumbler of whisky-tansan on the piano top.

‘ I think ’, said Lulu, rising, ‘ it’s about time you took dear Alba home.’

